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*The Eternal
Return of Myth:
Myth updating in
contemporary literature*

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*A Special Issue in The Eternal Return of Myth: Myth updating in
Contemporary Literature*

Guest - Editors
Ana González-Rivas Fernández
&
Antonella Lipscomb



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**This issue felicitates the 75th Anniversary of
Prof. Ananta Charan Sukla, the Founding Editor
of the Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics
Born November, 1942**

Felicitations

Professor Ananta Sukla has worked tirelessly to bring forth scholarship, particularly interdisciplinary scholarship, to the academic world on an international level. He is not only professional but also kind, considerate, and compassionate. It has been an honor and privilege for me to work with him and participate as a contributing scholar for some of his many projects.

Deborah Fillerup Weigel, PhD
(The University of New Mexico)

Roger Scruton once remarked that the defence of humane education requires the defence of philosophy, but that philosophy can only be defended if it has aesthetics at its heart. For his exemplary contribution to sustaining the richness and extending the reach of aesthetic inquiry, Ananta Sukla deserves our respect and gratitude. On the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, and in recognition of a long and distinguished career, I am happy to send my warmest congratulations.

John E. MacKinnon, PhD
(Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada)

The world of Comparative Literary Studies and Aesthetics remains indebted to Prof. Ananta Sukla for his huge contributions to the disciplines. Among his many projects, in 1978 Prof. Sukla established *The Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, in collaboration with René Wellek, Harold Osborne, Mircea Eliade, John Fisher, Monroe Beardsley, John Hoppers, or Meyer Abrams among other founding figures. This biannual publication is one of the oldest ongoing journals on Comparative Literature. My wish is that the journal continues to grow and enlighten people all over the world under Prof. Sukla's careful supervision.

Asunción López-Varela, PhD
(President of the European Society of
Comparative Literature ESCL-SELC)

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OBITUARY

Prof. Denis Dutton

(9 February 1944 – 28 December 2010)

Founder Editor of *Philosophy and Literature*

University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Prof. Ralph Cohen

(1918 – 2017)

Founder Editor of *New Literary History*

University of Virginia, USA

Introduction

ANA GONZÁLEZ-RIVAS FERNÁNDEZ
ANTONELLA LIPSCOMB

Since the moment we are born, our lives are shaped by an eternal return. The passing of the seasons, growing of vegetables, and the constant succession of birth and death are some of the definite proofs that we live in an ever-lasting cyclical state. Even mistakes are repeated once and again since, as is commonly known, man is the only animal who trips twice over the same stone.

The eternal return is a double-edged sword: it can be perceived as a blessing that ensures Persephone's meeting with her mother and the earth's annual blossom; but it can also turn into an extremely cruel punishment, a stone that comes down again and again regardless of the efforts invested into rolling it up to the top of a hill, as Sisyphus knows well. Nietzsche, in turn, proposes us to see the eternal return as a challenge and the only awareness that ultimately leads to a real liberation of the human being:

The heaviest weight. - What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence - even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine.' If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, 'Do you want this again and innumerable times again?' would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for no thing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (Nietzsche, *The Gaia Science*, 1887, 273-274)

The eternal return still both fascinates and baffles scholars from all over the world, who witness how the myth acquires multiple forms as new narrative modes appear. As a response to this phenomenon, all the articles collected in this volume try to analyse the various implications of the eternal return in modern times, covering the perspective of different nationalities as well as the expression it takes in different disciplines.

In her article “Myth, Creativity and Repressions in Modern Literature: Refigurations from Ancient Greek Myth”, Lorna Hardwick reflects on the plasticity of the myth as manifested in works such as Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad* (2005) and Derek Walcott’s *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* (1993). As Hardwick pinpoints, these new versions of the ancient myths of Penelope and Odysseus, respectively, reveal certain elements that remained concealed in the Greek texts, namely Penelope’s guilt or the perspective of the maidens, victims of Odysseus’ rage. Other works, such as Tony Harrison’s film poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, emerge as examples of new memoryism, that resorts to myth as a tool to explore the darkest chapters of human History –in this case, the World War I. Finally, Simon Armitage’s *Mister Hercules: After Euripides* (2000) provides a paramount example of how the addition of new material contributes to the modern recreations of the myths, where the translation of the emotions prevails over the faithful recreation of the storyline.

Emotion also dominates another 20th century fiction, namely Flannery O’Connor’s novel *The Violent Bear it Away*, as Ángel Ruiz Pérez suggests in his article by comparing Achilles’ wrath, as is described in Homer’s *Iliad*, and the emotional rage Francis Marion Tarwater is filled with. In his article, “The Anger of Achilles in *The Iliad* and of Francis Marion Tarwater in Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away*”, Ruiz Pérez examines how the two characters have to face a conflict and deal with the resentment it provokes in them. He shows the parallels existing not only in the emotional reaction but also in the different relations the characters establish in their social circle. The conclusions of this comparison finally lead to the possibility that Voegelin’s work *The World of Polis* (second volume of *Order and History*) has been a mediating text between the *Iliad* and O’Connor’s novel.

In his article “Ariadne, Theseus, and the circumambulation of the mythic self”, Leon Burnett analyses the concept of the eternal return or return to origins and shows how it can be understood in various ways: from re-enactment of a ritual, re-telling of a literary work, re-presentation in the world of art, or recurrence in nature of a primordial event. A reflection that leads Burnett to Jung’s idea of “circumambulation of the self”, as opposed to a linear evolution of the self. Taking the examples of Henrik Ibsen’s play *Peer Gynt*, Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach” and Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Burnett shows how self-knowledge involves renunciation, recapitulation, recognition and that only at the end of this voyage can one find self-realization. This 19th century heritage and its references to the sea as a destructive but necessary element for self-realization are also present in Felipe Fernández-Arnesto’s *Civilizations* or T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. An ambivalence that brings Burnett to the myth of

Ariadne and Theseus in T.S. Eliot's early poetry or De Chirico's paintings, where the sea acquires different meanings and time is suspended. Ariadne's myth becomes the epitome of a modernist preoccupation as it comes close to representing the mythic self.

Following now with French 20th Century Literature, Metka Zupancic analyzes in her article "Literature, Mythology, Orphism: 'language as God' in the French *Nouveau Roman*", how this 20th century French literary movement is deeply rooted in mythology, particularly in mythological ways of thinking. By taking Claude Simon as an example, she explains how he directly or indirectly reactivates the Orphic myth, where language becomes the absolute, the "god" that guides his writing and places words at the centre of the writing process. Despite his reluctance to admit any reference to myths and symbols in his novel *The Flanders Road* (1960) Simon admits that many of his themes are "generated" by a series of mythical intertextual references. *Triptych* (1973), for example, links Eros and Thanatos, eroticism and death in all three narratives of the novel; *Georgics* (1981) establishes strong intertextual links with Virgil's eponymous masterpiece with Orpheus as the major structural factor that helps create multiple intertextual and interdisciplinary links inside the text. These references to myth might be seen as a sign of "return" to tradition, to the reconstruction and continuity of mythical figures in the writings of the New Novelists.

As the title of her article suggest, "The Eternal Return Interrupted: the evolution of the myth of Cythera until today", Brigitte Lejuez explores the ways in which the literary myth of Cythera in French literature illustrates the notion of the eternal return but at the same time and paradoxically subverts and distorts the cyclical recurrences of sacred times and heroic deeds. She explains the difference between ancient myths and literary myths: while they both share the notion of a "return" with endless variants, literary myth distances itself from ancient myths through the author's subversion of the original text, resulting in an act of defiance towards the reader. This is illustrated by the myth of Cythera, torn between the desire of the eternal return and the impossibility to achieve it in modern times. Starting with Watteau's *Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera* (1717), moving then to Gérard de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* (1851) and Baudelaire's "Un Voyage à Cythère", Le Juez shows how the myth of Cythera progressively acquires different interpretations: from a journey to an ephemeral paradise to the distressing realization of a lost paradise. Victor Hugo and Théodore de Banville share a desolated image of the island, where innocence and paradise give place to human exploitation and destruction. More subversive is the version of the myth by Jeanne Hyvrard in *Les Prunes de Cythère*. Here the author draws a parallel between the mythical Cythera and the Antillean island of Martinique where life and beauty are replaced by death. A perception that overturns the notion of eternal return or implies rather that the myth can only relive through one's imagination.

Turning now to music, Francisco Molina Moreno explores the myth of the origin and destiny of the universe and mankind in the work of the Russian composer

and pianist Aleksandr Skrjabin, in particular in the first version of his Preparatory Act. In his article, “Aleksandr Skrjabin, the Russian Orpheus”, Molina Moreno shows how the artist also returns to the myth of Orpheus and his magical music. A “personal mythology”, as Molina Moreno suggests, that involves the intervention of a prophet whose sacrifice brings a liberating truth to mankind. This liberation is no other than the Preparatory Act, an artwork capable of leading mankind and the entire universe to a purifying ecstasy and ethereal state of being. Whether under the traits of Orpheus or another mythical hero, what Skrjabin seeks to achieve through his artwork is a superhuman feat.

In her article “Ulysses’ journey and Homer’s *Odyssey*: an Eternal Return”, Martina Treu shows how Homer’s *Odyssey* is another perfect example of the eternal return of Greek myths in contemporary literature and culture, as references to the myth can be found today in books, fine arts, theatres, the Internet. A wide range of meanings that encourages free adaptations of the original myth. Valerio Massimo Manfredi’s best seller, *Il mio nome è Nessuno*, or Miyazaki’s famous manga *Nausicaa*, and the opera *Outis*, by Luciano Berio, are a few examples. Blockbuster films and TV series include *Ulisse* by Mario Camerini (1954), *Nostos* by Franco Piavoli (1989), *Ulysses’s Gaze*, by Theo Angelopoulos (1995), *O Brother where art thou?* (2000) by the Cohen brothers, and the Italian *Odissea* by Franco Rossi (1968). Other adaptations of the myth include Sicilian choreographer Roberto Zappala’s production *Naufragio con spettatore*. The core of this article, however, focuses on the revival or return of the Homeric myth as a metaphor of the tragic adventurous journeys faced by immigrants across the Mediterranean. Directors Sergio Maifredi in *Odissea: un racconto mediterraneo* and Michele Losi in *Meeting the Odyssey. An Adventure beyond Arts, Myths, and Everyday Life in Europe* (2013-2016) both choose the sea and water as their main stage. These and other contemporary productions - like Marco Martinelli’s *Rumore di Acque* where Ulysses’s myth and its heroic ending are reversed as it stages the tragic deaths of immigrants and their desperate voyage as they attempt to reach Southern Italy and Sicily – relive the myth by dedicating their work to a “multitude of nobodies”, who lose their lives on the troubled waters of the Mediterranean sea, mixing ancient tragedy with the real stories of contemporary refugees.

Still in the realm of the seventh art, in his article “Reconfiguring the Garden of Eden: suspended temporality in Jim Jarmush’s *Only Lovers Left Alive*”, Christos Angelis makes an in-depth analysis of the American film director’s interpretation of the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve are presented as two vampires who are confined to the “eternal now” of the Paradise. Angelis’ article focuses mainly on an especially relevant mythical element: temporality and its limits – a parameter that is obviously essential in the myth of the undead. As in many classical works of Gothic fiction, immortality appears as a punishment, a curse the characters cannot get rid of. Adam’s and Eve’s expulsion from the Paradise introduce them to a new dimension framed by time, change, and destruction, a context that ends with the eternal return to which the characters were condemned.

Penelope Foteini Kolovou's article "Penelope weaving the (f)e-mail: texting and sexting" explores the return of a classical myth in the light of new technology as a modern Penelope texts her messages to her beloved Odysseus, replacing her loom with a laptop. Focusing on the poetical collection "Odysseus: somehow" (2013) by Koula Adaloglou, Kolovou analyses the different voices of Penelope's different selves through the texts, SMS, notes Penelope writes on her laptop or secret diary as the motif of weaving can be interpreted as a self-making metaphor. What Kolovou also suggests by examining the sexual/textual politics that lie in the poetics of her texts is that Penelope's writing activity is an example of contemporary literary sexting, a textual weaving tainted with sexual undertones where the protagonist oscillates between autonomy, emancipation and independence from Odysseus and her emotional and physical dependence on his love and affection. An updated return of the original myth that replaces the treatment of Penelope as a passive weaver of a mortifying shroud, to an active heroine who unveils her self through her textual relationship with Odysseus.

Finally, taking the point of view of Comparative Literature and the Constructivist Rhetoric, Sara Molpeceres shows how the zombie myth has been recently shaped within modern imagery. Her article, "The zombie: a new myth in the making. A political and social metaphor", constitutes an insightful analysis of a wide corpus of literary and film works, which evinces how, slowly getting away from its Haitian origins, the image of the zombie has ended up working at the service of a political and economic discourse of the modern world. From the earliest examples of pulp fiction to the most recent movies, the zombie myth has been enriched with new mythemes (e.g., the viral contamination, the zombie's ravenous hunger) that have stimulated a social interpretation of this character: for instance, Molpeceres recalls that some references to the zombies were used in a metaphorical way in the "Prepper movement" or in the 2016 USA elections where Trump and Clinton ran for president. As Molpeceres proves in her article, the zombie myth has become a symbol of some dangers of the modern world, such as the rampant consumerism of the capitalist system, and in many cases stands for a call for a social revolution.

Finally, Elisabeth S. Weagel examines the story of Cinderella, which exists in almost every culture and has been told and retold for hundreds of years. Even with a rise in criticism of the tale since the 1970s, it is one that the world and its many cultures cannot seem to let go of—we keep returning to it as if it is a reflection or presentiment of our identities. By examining it through a cinematic lens, Weagel looks at how repeated elements such as Cinderella's relationship with her deceased mother and/or fairy godmother reveal the heart of the tale and its message. While contrarians have decried the story for teaching girls to live passive lives, Weagel finds instead a rich female community made up of Cinderella, her deceased mother, and a female divine figure (either her fairy godmother or other magical figure) that redefines intra-female relationships and female spirituality. The pattern of return to the tale, then, is not indicative of some misdirected fantasy, but of an unnamed recognition that informs our sense of self.

As all the articles in this volume seem to suggest, the eternal return is both our blessing and our misfortune, our strength and our weakness. Human fate is shaped by the eternal return, and, whether we want it or not, it seems our true happiness relies on the full acceptance of this fact. Since the dawn of humankind, myths from all over the world have re-enacted the different forms of this eternal return, as illustrated in nature, heroes or marvellous lands; the same applies to writers, painters, and artists in general, fascinated all of them by the cyclical pattern that surrounds us. The present volume offers examples drawn from American, English, French, Italian, Greek, and Russian literature, as well as from cinema, music, comic-books, and politics. Poets, novelists, playwrights, composers and film-makers have given a new twist to myths that emerge once and again, always renewed and adapted to modern times. Neither can new technology nor new media resist the alluring and evocative nature of ancient myths. These stories, old as time, make us connect with our most intimate essence, an inner self that has remained the same throughout the centuries. And this is probably the key to their success: their capacity to reshape the permanent and to fix the ephemeral. As editors of this collection of articles, we hope and wish that they help to shed more light on the complex issue of the eternal return, or at least invite the reader to rethink some of the themes that have remained both delightful and mysterious for ages.

Ana González-Rivas Fernández is lecturer in English Studies at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. She holds a PhD in Philology, and first degrees in both Classics and English (Complutense University of Madrid). She has conducted research stays at Oxford University, Harvard University, Baylor University, Open University and Universidad Nacional de Tucumán. Her main interests relate to Gothic literature, Comparative literature, Classical Tradition, Reception Studies, Myth Criticism, and Cultural Transferences. In her articles she has explored the works of authors such as Mary Shelley, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Robert Maturin, Edgar Allan Poe, M. R. James, Edward Bulwer-Lytton or the Pre-Raphaelites, among others. She has published the e-book *El mundo clásico desde la mirada femenina: Margaret Fuller, Mary Shelley and George Eliot* (2008), and she is the co-editor of the book *Fantasmas, aparecidos y muertos sin descanso* (2014). Her doctoral dissertation, *La literatura gótica y la literatura grecolatina: encuentros complejos*, has been published online by the Complutense University of Madrid.
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Preface: The Myth of the Eternal Return

JOSÉ MANUEL LOSADA

Basically, time is a physical magnitude suitable for measuring the duration of events or the separation of objects. That said, in occidental culture time is characterized by a linear projection (past – present – future) – an aspect profoundly steeped in Judaeo-Christian thinking; this projection also characterizes space at microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. From this – in general terms and accounting for exceptions – we envisage our space and our time as unique, irreversible: nothing that has happened will again; the importance that we give our time and space comes out of their irreversibility.

On this point, the majority of cosmologies show their particular differences with respect to that of our Western civilization. For the most part in Asian, African and indigenous American cosmologies, the time and space of the cosmos are marked by a circular projection, at both microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. Following on from this general conception, any space and any time are not unique; they will come again. By positing that something that has come to pass will again come to pass, the myth of the Eternal Return contradicts the principle of irreversibility.

In view of this disparity in the perception of the passing of time, Cultural Mythcriticism can provide a number of illuminating hints regarding the Eternal Return – every myth invokes an absolute cosmogony or eschatology.

1. Eliade: “the end of the world has already taken place”

This categorical statement from the historian of religion accurately reflects the imagined world of primitive societies, for whom the birth and death of the universe are incessant. These societies do not conceive of the passing of life and epochs as separate, yoked to a continuous profane time like our own, rather as regulated – following a transhistorical model – by a series of archetypes that give all of their metaphysical value to human existence. From this pre-Socratic perspective, every *ad quem* is only apparent, as is any value given to the objects of the exterior world: all of these objects fundamentally depend on their participation in a transcendental reality. A vulgar stone may, by virtue of its symbolic value, or its origin (celestial or marine), acquire a sacred character (a meteorite, a pearl). The same applies to human acts. Nourishment or marriage are not mere physical operations, rather they reproduce a primordial act, repeat a mythical example: the communion with nature or another human being; properly speaking, archaic peoples knew not any act that had not been lived previously by another with whom they established a transhistorical and, in a certain sense, sacred communion.

Let us take the case of the flood. All cosmic cataclysms tell of the destruction of the world and the annihilation of humanity, save for a few survivors: the end of one humanity and the appearance of another. From this eschatology, a virgin earth emerges, the symbol of a cosmogony, which leads to another eschatology and so on. This knowledge of universal happening would disappear without representation: New Year's rituals in Semitic civilizations pour libations that symbolize the coming of life-giving rains and, above all, the recreation of the world. But we must be careful not to limit ourselves to a material interpretation. These ceremonies go far beyond a merely physical sense; they symbolize another metaphysics and cosmos: the flood signifies the end of a world branded by evil, the victory over the flood as an "incarnation of chaos" and the emergence of a new world.

2. *Kalachakra*, the wheel of time

In Jainist cosmology (Jainism is an ancient religion of India, which today has around 5 million followers) both the universe and time lack beginning and end. From the three parts into which the universe is divided (upper, middle and lower), the time of our part is represented through a wheel (*Kalachakra*) which turns ceaselessly, divided into two aeons (series or half-rotations), one descending (*avasarpī*) and another ascending (*utsarpī*); each half-rotation contains six epochs or eras (*ara*). The ascendant series is characterized by the progressive character of the duration of its epochs, the happiness and prosperity of humanity, their longevity and size, their goodness and virtue. The descendant series is characterized as exactly the opposite. Thus, we now live in the fifth stage, which begun in 522 AD, which will last 21,000 years, without spiritual guide and with an abundance of evil, while in the sixth stage the totally depraved humans will barely measure a metre and a half, and will only live 20 years. When the sixth stage or *ara* of this descending aeon or *avasarpī* concludes, our universe will wake up in the first *ara*, at the beginning of the ascending aeon or *utsarpī*. In ethico-chronological terms: when the stage following our own descends – because of human wickedness and the destruction of nature – to the point of being almost unbearable, the ascending series will begin, and so on *in æternum*. The Hindu conception of time coincides, basically, with that of Jainism, as well as Mayan cosmologies.

In these cultures, in general, cosmogonic chronology and eschatology is circular and, as a consequence, infinite, eternal: ceaselessly turning and returning. Gods are symbolic personifications of the laws that govern the flow of life forces; that is to say, they appear with those forces and with them they disappear. To put it another way, the gods are not eternal. To put it yet more starkly: we are before the authentic Eternal Return.

3. Persephone: the return of the seasons

Greek mythology share, for the most part, this circular representation. The myth of Persephone is of great utility in the study of its cosmogonic and eschatological implications. The most illuminating and emotive telling of this myth is provided by the anonymously authored *Hymn to Demeter* (7th century BC). Persephone relaxes in the company of friends and nymphs in a meadow carpeted with flowers in Nyssa (Cappadocia). Distracted whilst cutting a daffodil, Pluto abducts her and drags her

down into the Underworld. We all know the sequence of events: the waywardness of her mother, Demeter; the visit to Eleusis; frustration with the rituals carried out on Prince Demophoön; the construction of the temple in honour of the goddess; the barren earth; Zeus sending Hermes to the Underworld; the rescue of young Persephone and the final compromise: she will spend six months in Hades, six on the surface. No sooner does Demeter accept the deal than the Earth begins to cover itself with flowers and leaves once more.

The hymn to Demeter has been interpreted by numerous anthropologists as a personification of the crop cycle, a seed which spends various winter months interred beneath the ground before coming back to life. Many others have criticised, not without reason, the simplifications presented by this reading. What is clear is that the chronology of any mythical cycle, in addition to lending itself to multiple interpretations, can provide a key to the myth of the Eternal Return.

Catabasis and anabasis present themselves as multi-faceted and every voyage into the Underworld (from our world to that one, and the return) irresistibly invites a perception of repetition: from one voyage our imagination makes many; the descent and ascent become themselves “repetitive”. The reason for this imaginative process is highlighted in the circular movement – anabasis and catabasis form a cycle – circular by definition, and similar to the *Kalachakra*, the wheel of Jainism.

4. Nietzsche: “the greatest burden”

Numerous works of philosophy and literature can be related to the Eternal Return (Gnosticism, neo-Platonism, occultism, illuminism), but none have achieved such success as Nietzsche’s cosmological conception, first articulated in *The Gay Science* and subsequently developed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Here it becomes evident that the Eternal Return is the philosophy of indifference. We return to the absolutely relative worlds of the Asian and indigenous American cosmologies: if everything is equivalent, everything is indifferent: the heavens, Earth, gods, human kingdoms, animal, vegetable or inert. Everything is futile, not only from a philosophical perspective, but also from a moral one, “beyond good and evil”.

For Zarathustra, all of the eternities and every instant converge. Before this revelation, it is necessary to adopt a negative attitude (to rebel against this disquieting absurdity), or a positive one (embrace the will to triumph over time, make the agonizing “what happened” a “as I wanted it”). The prophet takes the Eternal Return as the utmost truth.

In his argument, Nietzsche rejected decisively any rectilinear, historical culture, not only the Christian (where time is determined by a succession that is clearly differentiated: creation, fall, redemption), but also whatever other that proposes a completely transformed future (Marxist, technological or capitalist). This Nietzschean critique is the critique of the modern epoch from the position of subjective liberty. Modernity, established following the Enlightenment, appears overburdened with historical knowledge. Against the compensatory illusion of historicist memory, Nietzsche proposes exploding the rational façade of modernity.

Put forward with mythological aspects, but in by any means mythical, Nietzschean thought is, on principle, anti-transcendental. Time ceases to be the physical

scale we use to measure things, and converts itself into a pure cyclical movement, without beginning or end, in an absolute negation of whatever metaphysical structure of the world. That said, if time is marked only by eternal revolution, equally all things are in time, in a repetitive succession that evens them out between each other: everything is equal to everything else and, thus, everything is nothing. Nihilism and indifference become identified with each other.

With respect to the indigenous American and Asian cosmologies, Nietzsche shares the circularity of time: in a broader sense, we can say that he adds his doctrine of the Eternal Return to them. But two differences impede us in speaking of myth in the philosopher's work. In the first place, there is no absolute event here; his relativism is nihilistic. Second, there exists only a will here, that of the man who either wants or rejects all possible events. It is not like this in Asian and indigenous American cosmologies, impregnated as they are with the absolute nature of all events and infiltrated with a doctrine of salvation, of the liberation of the soul from all material bonds. Distinct from Nietzschean thought, Asian and indigenous American cosmologies are open to transcendence and, consequently, their literatures are amenable to mythocritical analysis.

There is nothing more paradoxical than concluding a preface about the Eternal Return. Rather, it is incumbent on us to present a survey. In the first instance, it is necessary to ask what induces this cyclical perception of the universe, common to so many cosmologies in every epoch and latitude: the desire to master the future; the terror the inexorable passing of time inspires – the principal vector of existential emptiness (*horror vacui*); or, the impression left in our imaginations by the continual repetition of events? Humans are beings of routine.

Secondly, s/he is also a being who is eager for knowledge. Along these lines, it is important to know why the Eternal Return is indissociable from other myths appertaining to knowledge: catabasis (Persephone, Orpheus, Theseus, Eneas) and numerous prophecies reveal (*Ultima Thule, Apocalypse, Chilam Balam of Chumayel*), in their own way, what has happened and what will. Probing other cultures and ourselves, we are beings of habit who crave understanding of our enigmatic world.

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Myth, Creativity and Repressions in Modern Literature: Refigurations from Ancient Greek Myth

LORNA HARDWICK

Abstract

The persistence of ancient Greek myth in the arts and cultural politics has, paradoxically, been energised by the capacity of myth to inspire and accommodate change. The malleability of mythological narratives has been a rich source of creativity and also an index of changes in horizons of imagination and understanding. This both permits and nuances the notion of 'Return' in cultural history. The essay explores distinctive features of these processes through selected modern case studies that map how myth can be adapted in different literary and performance genres, including new media. The first example compares and contrasts approaches by Margaret Atwood and Derek Walcott to the hanging of the maids in Homer's *Odyssey*. The second case study analyses the nexus between myth and history in Tony Harrison's film poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon*. The third example discusses the adaption of the Heracles story in Greek myth and tragedy for a modern radio and live theatre work by Simon Armitage. Aesthetic and socio-political forces interact, revealing how the re-imagination that is part of the formation of cultural memory can repress and erase as well as adapting. Thus the continuing Return to the Greek narratives not only renews their cultural force but also transforms it.

Keywords

Adaptation. Memory. Myth. Repression. Re-imagining.

1. Myth and its histories

In both ancient and more modern cultures myth has had a central role in the creative arts and in ways of thinking about the world. Greek and Roman myth has functioned as an ever-present but malleable and even protean source of narratives and iconic figures, as a touchstone for comparisons, allegories and analogies, and as a nexus between the distant and the familiar and between perspectives on the past and the present. This sustainability of myth has been assured and enhanced by its plasticity, which ensures that refigurations of myth are crucial to the notion of 'Return' that is the

core concept in this collection of essays. The persistence and changes carried by myth both mark cultural horizons and map their shifts. Myth acts as a conduit, moving across and between the borders of fiction, imagination, religious practices and social norms. In Greek and Roman antiquity itself, myth was reworked and used in a variety of different ways. Creative engagement with myth spanned literature and visual culture as well as taking a central role in religion and highlighting threads in philosophy, science and politics. Different versions of particular myths moved in and out of prominence. Refigurations of myth signalled shifts and conflicts in ways of looking at the world. Research data on myth in antiquity provides an infrastructure that also sheds light on modern receptions. In this discussion I use the term “myth” flexibly to include not only the genealogies of the Greek and Roman gods and the narratives associated with them but also the non-historical stories that formed the major part of oral culture’s deployment of myth, for example in the Epic Cycle and the Homeric poems. An essential resource is the online *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, edited by Rosemary Wright and hosted by the University of Patras.¹ This dictionary includes alternative versions of myths in Greek and Roman sources. In her Preface to the *Dictionary* Wright comments that:

Different versions of the narratives and genealogies in this material are endemic to the study of the subject, since variations were preserved in the tradition of oral culture and then adapted to the interests of family and city propaganda, the literary contexts of drama and poetry, the evolution of ritual and the expansion of knowledge of the physical and human aspects of the inhabited world... and not only do we have the narratives preserved but also the ancient attempts to probe and interpret them through allegory, personification and euhemerism (an ancient form of reductionism), linked often with a healthy scepticism. (Wright 2012)

Sensitivity to the deployment and adaptation of myth in modern contexts involves “reading” modern sources which in their turn read ancient authors who were themselves reading myth.² I will explore this multi-layered dynamic through three short case studies. These examples represent different responses in different genres and media but I bring them into contact with each other through a linking theme – how they select from different aspects and alternative versions of the ancient myths and how as a result they shed light on issues of repression and on diverse ways of engaging with themes that are “difficult” or contentious.

2. Repression, erasure and reimagining: Margaret Atwood, Derek Walcott and the twentieth-century *topos* of the serving maids in Homer’s *Odyssey*

Repression of aspects of the ancient myths and of the narratives they generate has increasingly been a focus of recent research and provides one way into identifying and analysing shifts in cultural perspectives. A good example of a controversial trope that sheds light on such discussions is the hanging of the maids by Telemachus in Homer’s *Odyssey* 20. 436-479. They were killed after they had been forced to clean the

house that was bloodied with the bodies of the suitors who had clustered round Penelope during Odysseus' absence. The suitors abused the conventions of *xenia* (hospitality), gorging themselves on food and wine and misusing the slaves as servants and as sex objects. The suitors were slaughtered by Odysseus on his return to Ithaca and the female slaves paid with their lives for their (enforced) relationships with the suitors:

[Telemachus says:] "I refuse to grant these girls
a clean death, since they poured down shame on me
and Mother, when they lay beside the suitors"....
the narrative then continues with a simile:
"as doves or thrushes spread their wings to fly
home to their nests, but someone sets a trap -
they crash into a net, a bitter bedtime:
just so the girls, their heads all in a row,
were strung up with the noose around their necks
to make their death an agony. They gasped,
feet twitching for a while, but not for long".

(Hom. *Od.*20. 462-474. Translated by Wilson 2017, 494)

In the twentieth century this episode in Homer attained the status of a *topos* in feminist consciousness.³ Derek Walcott's *Stage Version of the Odyssey* (1993) adapted that episode, possibly because of its association with the sexual slavery embedded in slave histories in the USA and Caribbean, and instead focused on Penelope's outrage when the slaughter of the suitors turns the house into "an abattoir" (Walcott 1998, 153, Act 11 scene vi). Walcott portrayed Penelope as forbidding the hanging of her maid, his treatment of the episode brings together the histories of slavery and of gender.⁴ Walcott's revision involved partial repression of the Homeric episode. That decision may result from his view that attacking a tradition merely lends it authority and thus perpetuates it:

In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters...The tough aesthetic of the new World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognise it as a creative or culpable force.
(Walcott 1998, 35)⁵

Other late twentieth-century responses to the Homeric *topos* of the hanging of the maids range from complete erasure, as in Peter Oswald's dramatization of the *Odyssey* (Oswald 1998) which omits both the slaughter of the suitors and the hanging of the maids, to Margaret Atwood's creation of an alternative narrative in *The Penelopiad* (Atwood 2007). This alternative narrative retained the hanging but explored through song and dance the maids' perspectives on the suitors and Penelope, as well

as Penelope's eventual sense of guilt. In allowing herself to be sent back to the upper room she had been silently complicit in the killing of the maids, a killing of which Odysseus' trusted serving woman Eurycleia had been a leading proponent.⁶ In the final scenes of Atwood's play the maids call on the Furies to bring them justice:

O Angry Ones, O Furies, you are our last hope!

We implore you to inflict punishment and exact vengeance on our behalf!

Be our defenders, we who had none in life! (Atwood 2007, Scene 30, 78)

Atwood's play-text engages with the challenge of giving a voice to those who were disregarded and left no trace in the sources. Her dramatisation of the maids as invokers of the Furies as agents of vengeance presents the other side of the coin of Walcott's distrust of literatures of revenge. In this discussion I take the issues surrounding repression one step further to probe the interactions between re-imaginings, triggers of readers' and spectators' awareness and understanding of both the world(s) of antiquity and their own. Atwood's "Author's Introduction" to the published text of *The Penelopeiad* opens with a comment on her creative dramatization that is also a challenge to the reader/spectator: "the play you hold in your hands is an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo" (Atwood 2007, v). Echo as a mythological figure who resurfaces in modern literature does not offer a pale imitation, rather can answer back and initiate and explore other reverberations. The echoes invoked by Atwood can also be read as foreshadowings, soundings that shape in the future how the past is heard. Ancient selection and rearrangement from myth serves to map fields of conflict and change in antiquity. It also informs the analogue approaches identified by Wright. In their turn, modern authors deploy allusions and analogues in order to turn the lens on repressions in their own cultural histories and reflect on these. James Porter has written in a recent study of the aesthetics of Walter Pater of the possibilities of a "new, expanded sense of time, temporality and experience" in which a two-way process of understanding, backwards and forwards illuminates antiquity as much as it does modernity but also highlights changes: "for antiquity changes with every interpretation of it, as does the meaning and character of the present moment in which antiquity is 'received', which is to say produced anew and seemingly for the first time" (Porter 2017, 151). Myth, inherently both transplantable and pliable, is a catalyst in that process. Myth can be energised through different genres and media and modern narratives can take as their springboards images and associations rather than (or as well as) more overt intertextual forms.

3. Tony Harrison's film poem: *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992)

Tony Harrison's film poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon* was first shown on television in the UK on BBC 2, 3 October 1992 (published text, Harrison 1992). It is important for two of the main themes of this essay: firstly because it exemplifies the plasticity of myth in terms of medium and secondly because it shows how, in a new aesthetic and technological context, Harrison uses myth as springboard for examining the dark side of myth and of history, thus exploiting different aspects of cultural memory in ways

that directly and indirectly challenge repressions. His techniques are associative rather than intertextual, drawing on viewers' and readers' knowledge of the image of the Gorgon and its associations rather than on their detailed familiarity with its treatment by ancient authors.

3.1. The myth

In ancient mythology, the Gorgons were emblematic of female monsters. There were three sisters, Stheno (*Strength*), Euryale (*Far-sprinting*) and Medusa (*Ruling*).⁷ The iconography shows oriental influences.⁸ Their heads were covered with writhing snakes, they had boar-like tusks, bronze hands and gold wings. Most important of all, the very sight of these grisly visages was said to petrify humans, turning them literally to stone. Of the sisters, only Medusa was mortal and in an initiation myth she was killed by Perseus, who had been sent by the king of Seriphos on a mission to bring back Medusa's head. The task was supposed to result in his death but Perseus was helped by Athene and Hermes. Wearing a cap of darkness which made him invisible, he found the Gorgons asleep and by averting his gaze and only looking at their reflections in Athena's polished-bronze shield he succeeded in cutting off Medusa's head. She was pregnant (by Poseidon) and the twins she was carrying leapt from her severed neck. One of these was Pegasus, the winged horse. Perseus escaped with Medusa's head and according to Pindar Athena invented the music of the *aulos* from the sounds of the lament of her sisters (Pindar, *Pythian* 12.6-27). Perseus was then able to use Medusa's head to turn to stone the enemy who had sent him on the mission.

The initiation myth narrative has two further turns that are important for Harrison's poem. The first is that Perseus gave the Gorgon's head to Athena, who put it at the centre of her *aegis* (a goatskin cape fringed with snakes) and on her shield as a threat to her enemies. Thus the image of Medusa became a significant one in ancient art and could be used to symbolise either threats or defence. The second important turn is that Athena gave some of Medusa's blood to Asclepius, the god of healing. According to whether the blood came from the right side or the left side of Medusa, it could be used either to kill or to revive.⁹ It was even claimed by the Argives that the head was buried in their *agora* and averted evil.¹⁰ This duality, when combined with the malleability of myth in general, was deployed by Harrison to use an image of horror as a means of bringing about a kind of healing, in this case recognition of the flaws and inadequacies involved in the forgetting or erasure of more recent narratives in European history.

Harrison's exploitation of the myriad resonances of the myth creates in its turn a double perspective on what has been called "new memoryism". The term provides a literary counterpart to the notion of "new traditions" which was coined by social historians to conceptualise ways in which new social practices that provided social "glue" in changing situations could be explained and legitimised by being given an "ancestry" in previous practices and traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The concept of new memoryism has been used to describe ways in which new writing uses

classical material. Authors (ancient and modern) and readers who are familiar with earlier material join a kind of co-authorship, creating new narratives and ways of looking at the world that are anchored in a shared (albeit constructed) memory of the classical and/or mythological past.¹¹ They in their turn extend this co-authorship of the past by bringing in a new cohort of readers to join a mythological narrative that functions as part of a continuously evolving text.

As a heuristic tool for approaching Harrison's film poem, new memoryism is one useful category but needs further refinement to bring out its full richness. Harrison is using the Gorgon as an image, drawing on its general familiarity to create certain expectations in the reader about how those who gaze where they should not are turned to stone. It is in the infrastructure of the poem, its formal elements and the other visual images that he deploys, that he extends the implications of the traditional associations of the image so that one 'memory' triggers another that relates to a different time and place. In initially "freezing" the viewer the image of the Gorgon brings about a clarity of vision, a vision that juxtaposes the deadly poison of the sometimes forgotten cruelties of modern European history with the kind of healing that results from a recognition and understanding of the past.

Harrison's choice of epigraphs to his poem is revealing. The first epigraph is taken from the essay by Simone Weil – *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* (1939): "To the same degree, though in different fashion those who use force and those who endure it are turned to stone".¹² The second epigraph is from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872): "Art forces us to gaze into the horror of existence, yet without being turned to stone by the vision".¹³ Harrison's poem itself has two dominant threads. The first is the mapping of the journeys of the statue of the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine (1798-1856), which was taken to the island of Corfu in 1892 by Elizabeth, Empress of Austria who greatly admired his work.¹⁴ After the Empress was assassinated her palace on the island was taken over by the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, who ejected the statue which was eventually rehoused in Toulon. Heine stands both as an emblem of dissident poetry and of persecution of Jews and his statue is given a voice as the narrator/commentator in Harrison's poem. The Kaiser provides the link between Heine's statue and the Gorgon, since he claimed that while he was in Corfu he set in train the excavation of the fifth-century BCE pediment which included a giant Gorgon. The Gorgon was a favoured decorative motif of the Empress:

And this almost charming Gorgon stares
From wardrobe doors and boudoir chairs,
But unwittingly they laid the track
That brought the grimmer Gorgon back. (Harrison 1992, 67)

Harrison brings together the threads of domestication and its masking of underlying ferocity, revealing the Gorgon as a metaphor for the destruction that the Kaiser, with others, brought on Europe in the First World War leading to the long

shadow that war cast on Germany and all the nations of Europe in the rest of the twentieth century.

Harrison's poetics fuse demotic and erudite. He deploys rhyming couplets, a verse form that sounds "popular" with some of the oral and aural qualities of the music hall and yet also has epic and satirical resonances, echoing eighteenth-century writers in English such as Pope. While Europe prepared for the outbreak of war in 1914, Harrison shows the Kaiser:

There in the trench to supervise
The unearthing of the Gorgon's eyes
The patient kaiser, piece by piece,
prepares the Gorgon for release
the Gorgon he let out to glower
above us all with baleful power. (Harrison 1992, 70-71)

The ironic double-entendres of those lines modulate into a visceral image of the effects:

The *barbitos*, the ancient lyre,
Since the Kaiser's day, is restrung with barbed wire
Bard's hands bleed when they play
The score that fits an era's scream, the blood, the suffering and the loss.
The twentieth century theme
Is played on barbed wire *barbitos*. (Harrison 1992, 71)

The word-play on *barbitos* and the barbed wire that is the emblem both of the trenches of the First World War and of the concentration camps of the holocaust and gulags that it presaged also harks back to the laments of the Gorgon sisters at the death of Medusa. The catastrophic events of twentieth-century history are also metaphors for the crushing of the human spirit.¹⁵

The Gorgon worshippers unroll
The barbed wire gulags round the soul...
Each leader on his monstrous plinth
Waves us back into the labyrinth
Out of the meander and the maze
Straight back into the Gorgon's gaze. (Harrison 1992, 72)

3.2. Myth and medium

In exploring those issues via the medium of film poem, Harrison creates an artistic paradox, in which the medium of film, with its moving images and its technical capacity to use twenty-four frames a second, was a means of focusing on "still" works of visual art and symbols such as arrow motifs on pavements (Harrison 1992, 72, marginal "film direction" accompanying the lines "The Gorgon's henchmen try to force/History on a straighter course"). His use of film provides a distinctive insight on his long-term interest in statues and sculpture as frames for understanding the

interactions between aesthetic and political culture. In his later film-poem *Prometheus* (1998), Harrison would make the transport of a statue of Prometheus, the mythical bringer of fire to humankind, a central image in his reflections on the destruction through industrialisation and global pollution of communities from the north of England to Germany and eastern Europe (see Harrison 1998, vii). In *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, a statue of the German poet Heine takes on the role of narrator, providing a meta-poetic and meta-historical reflection on subsequent events and their multiple resonances. The history of the statue symbolises the attempted destruction by anti-semitism (culminating in the Holocaust) of the fabric of European culture. The work of Heine, especially through his use of the couplet verse form, also represent a seminal influence on Harrison's own poetics (Hall in Harrison 2017, 17). The symbiosis of words and images in the film poem not only forges an aesthetic but also choreographs in the senses and minds of viewers and listeners the macabre dance of the suffering of the twentieth century. The poem ends with a warning:

The Gorgon who's been running riot
through the century now seems quiet,
but supposing one who's watched her ways
were to warn you that the Gorgon's gaze
remains unburied in your day... (Harrison 1992, 74)

Despite the apparent closure implicit in the rhyming couplet form, the poem ends on an imperfect cadence, with an allusion to the (first) Gulf War using visual images of the eyeless dead in that conflict, the Gorgon's eyes as "tank wheel size" and a plea for Europe to be "open-eyed" (Harrison 1992, 75).

In *The Gaze of the Gorgon* Harrison exploits the flexibility of the ancient myth and the images associated with it in the modern medium of the film poem. This enables a combination of still and moving images and verbal dexterity to thread associative rather than intertextual threads through the whole poem. He banishes the threat that viewers and readers will be turned to stone if they face the image by following Perseus and mediating the face of the Gorgon. Perseus did this by using Athene's shield as a mirror; Harrison does it by positioning the viewer in front of the screen. Thus there is no hiding place for viewers and readers. In experiencing the force of the aesthetic and humanistic power of the film poem they must acknowledge the repressions and erasures that it uncovers and restores.

4. Recovering and reimagining myth through drama

My next case study sketches the career of a mythical narrative that has been mediated by drama. The foundation myth is that of Heracles. The term "foundation myth" has (at least) two senses. The first is used in the study of ancient cults especially those associated with the alliance between a mythological hero and a particular city that was represented by the foundation of a cult. However, the term can also be extended to indicate the origins of a particular mythological history. I use it in the second sense here (although analogies with the first sense may become apparent).

The purpose of this section of the essay is to track a double mediation of the Heracles myth – firstly in Greek drama, and secondly in the response made by a modern playwright to that myth in its fifth-century Athenian dramatic enactment.

4.1. The Heracles myths

Heracles¹⁶ was said to have been born in Thebes, the son of Zeus and Alcmene, the wife of Amphitryon (who was in turn a grandson of Perseus).¹⁷ Zeus was supposed to have seduced Alcmene by appearing to her in the guise of her husband. She gave birth to twins, of which Heracles was the son of Zeus and Iphicles the son of her husband. Although his name is thought to signify “glory of Hera”, Hera – as the divine wife of Zeus – was unsurprisingly hostile to Heracles and was said in the myths to have initiated many of the ordeals of his life. In the narratives, Heracles was portrayed as the greatest of the Greek heroes, so great that after his death he was rewarded for his exploits with immortality among the gods. Homer portrays him before that apotheosis as an uneasy and terrifying shade in the Underworld:

Around his ghost the dead souls shrieked like birds
all panic struck....He glowered terribly,
poised for a shot. Around his chest was strapped
a terrifying baldric made of gold...
I hope the craftsman who designed this scene
Will never make another work like this.

(Hom. *Od.* 11. 604-14, translated by Wilson 2017, 300-301)

Visual images of Heracles therefore have something in common with the terrifying portrayals of Medusa but the range of stories associated with him is considerably more varied (March 1998, 192-197). The best known are the narratives of his (probably) Twelve Labours. These were tasks inflicted on him by Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns. Heracles had been sent to serve the king by the Delphic oracle as expiation for killing his children and his wife, Megara, while suffering from insanity inflicted by Hera. On completion of his Labours the promise was that he would be made immortal. However, this did not come about immediately. He first went to Calydon and married Deianira, the king's daughter. He eventually died by burning on Mount Oeta, having retreated there in agony following inadvertent poisoning by a robe given him by Deianira in a vain hope to regain his love.¹⁸ Because of his strength and violent achievements Heracles became the object of many hero cults. Historical evidence for these includes archaeological material from the site of his supposed death (Price and Kearns 2003, 251-3). The hero cults indicate the porous border between myth and religious practice in the culture of the Greeks and also point to the resonance of the Heracles myths for the values and practices associated with the idea of the hero.

4.2. The Heracles myths in Greek tragedy

This nexus between myth and values and the ambivalence of Heracles' status as a symbol not only for strength but also for gluttony, drunkenness and sexual excess, provided fertile ground for the fifth-century dramatists – comic as well as

tragic. He has been described as “of all the characters in myth the one most flexible in Athenian drama” (Walton 1997, xx) and it is the flexible use of the myth by Euripides that sets in train the modern reception by Armitage. In Euripides’ *Heracles*, the hero is married to Megara, with whom he has three sons. Euripides restructures the mythical narrative into two parts. In the first part of the play Heracles’ family is threatened by a usurper. Heracles returns from his Labours in the nick of time, dispatches the usurper and is accorded a hymn of praise for saving his family and vindicating divine justice. Then in the second part of the play madness strikes and without warning Heracles murders his family, annihilating domestic and moral order and throwing into contention the supposed attributes of the martial hero. In reordering the mythological biography of Heracles and suppressing both the heroising and the apotheosis of Heracles, Euripides provides a counter-narrative that exposes and problematizes the norms that are depicted in the first half of the play.

4.3. Simon Armitage’s modern tragedy: *Mister Hercules: after Euripides*

Armitage’s play *Mister Hercule: after Euripides* was commissioned by the West Yorkshire Playhouse in the United Kingdom (published text 2000).¹⁹ It provides an interesting example of “stage to page” rather than the more usual “page to stage”. Armitage recognises that the text was the result of considerable experiment and changes made in the rehearsal process. Armitage used and adapted the dramatic structure and theatrical conventions of Athenian tragedy both to the WYP stage and to his own rewriting of Euripides’ version of the myth.²⁰ His published text contains significant para-material in which he comments on these issues. He opens by setting out direct questions:

What do we mean by hero? What is the greatest atrocity a man can commit?
Who can apportion blame to the workings of the human mind, and who has
the power to forgive? These are the questions that face any reworking of
the Heracles fable. (Armitage 2000, vii)

Armitage goes on to comment on the bewildering and sudden transformation of action and tone in the Euripides’ play (“shocking and strange”) and comments that “the audience is left in the same mood as Heracles himself, puzzling over an extreme act of brutality against loved ones, the cause and effect of which demand explanation and resolution” (Armitage 2000, viii). He observes that, while the play’s formal structure may be classical (and he attached particular importance to the Chorus), its contemporary relevance is striking (“its issues no less pressing than they were four hundred years before the birth of Christ”, Armitage 2000, viii). This relevance presents opportunities and challenges in translation and Armitage emphasises that his priority was to “translate” sentiment and setting rather than to replicate language “it is probably more useful to think that the play has not only been interpreted from Ancient Greek into English but that it has been inferred across time” (Armitage 2000, viii). He judges that because Heracles is a mythological figure who never actually existed there are no problems around veracity or authenticity or reverence or in taking latitude with the

myth. Significantly, however, Armitage retained Greek tragedy's convention that the murders were to be described rather than to be seen on stage. The scope left to the spectators to imagine what had occurred offstage enhanced Armitage's conception has occurred a play in which "it is as if the whole human history has occurred within the lifespan of one family. Atomic weapons and spears are spoken of in the same sentence, quantum physics and spinning wheels considered in the same thought" (Armitage 2000, ix-x). This eclecticism works in several different ways to assist the "inferring across time" to which Armitage refers. He removes the details of names and genealogies but retains verbal allusions. This allows him to shift the focus to the deprivations and catastrophes of war and its aftermaths that unite ancient and modern contexts and experiences. The play offers a commentary on the post-traumatic stress disorders that have been increasingly recognised in war-veterans. This is an aspect of Heracles' psyche that is explicitly taken up in Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender*, a version of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, in which the Heracles' figure is cast as The General.

The distinctive features of Armitage's version of Heracles' madness narrative are that it deals not just with the exceptional flexibility of the myth but also draws on its adaptation and reception in a particular play of Euripides. Unlike the oral tradition behind mythical variations the play does present an established text. Thus there is a double layer of transmission and adaptation, through which Armitage cuts to bear directly on the "dark side" of Heracles' career and the wider issue of the nexus between the adulation of violence in one context and the horror it inspires in another.

5. Coda

The exploration in this essay opens up some questions that also need to be pursued in other areas of research. In discussing media I focused only on those of the film poem and the staged drama, both of which yielded published texts. In addition, the relationship between myth and fiction has recently attracted considerable attention (McConnell and Hall 2016 and for the repression theme within that, Hardwick 2016)²¹. Recently published fiction such as Colum Toibin's *House of Names* (2017), an account of the events dramatized by Aeschylus in his trilogy *The Oresteia*, will certainly generate further insights. It seems to me that there are two conclusions developed in this essay that need to be tested in further research. The first is the duality of perspective involved in considering how repression and retrieval functions in literary and dramatic rewriting of myth. One perspective looks at aspects of the myth that are selected, reshaped and invented. Another perspective looks at how the rewriting opens up or in its turn represses questions that are vital in the receiving context. When those perspectives collide, they can provide startling insights into both ancient and modern. The second aspect that I would like to explore in the future results from and is enabled by the first. It involves what I call (for want of a better term) a reverse ethnography. Scholars of ethnography excavate the lost people, the lost voices, the lost world-views in societies built on erasure and repression (whether of colonised people or

suppressed classes or genders). Revisiting and re-imagining Greek myth and the historical contexts in which it has been received and adapted may help to retrieve the lost voices of the past. However, most notably, it also enables the lens to be focused on the rewriters and reimaginings and thus on the repressions and taboos that they seek to remedy, those they perpetrate and those they invent. That focus helps to retrieve the lost voices of the more recent past and those of the present that we do not easily hear, or may not want to hear. In encountering a mythology that is not their own and seeking to relate to it in a way that does make it their own, the works by Margaret Atwood, Derek Walcott, Tony Harrison and Simon Armitage shed light on those reversals, testifying to the unique capacity of the arts to bring together aesthetics and cultural politics in ways that heighten receptivity to both the past and the present.²² Return to the ancient myths that have persisted across time and place involves a *nostos* that has been and will continue to be signposted by adaptations, repressions and re-imaginings.

Notes

1. For additional material on Greek and Roman myth, see March (1998) and Price and Kearns (2003).
2. For the significance for world literature of receptions of classical myth across linguistic and cultural boundaries see McConnell and Hall, eds. (2016, especially 1-11).
3. Emily Wilson in the Translator's Note to her translation of the *Odyssey* points out that most classicist translators used derogatory language ("whores", "sluts") to suggest that the women were being punished for moral outrage in which their sexual history justified their deaths, whereas the Greek signals a different kind of sexism, based on the notion that women are objects – property that can be destroyed once defiled because of the "dishonour" caused to their "owners" (Wilson 2017, 91).
4. For detailed discussion of the dramaturgy and Walcott's desire to recognise the force of history without becoming its prisoner, see Hardwick (2000, 118-125) and Hardwick (2007a, 63-66), which partially revises the judgement made in the earlier publication. Documentation of the stage production, including reviews, can be accessed at <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/greekplays>. Data base ID 845.
5. Elsewhere, in a reflection on his long poem *Omeros* (1990), Walcott has described such disruptions of the conventions of historical temporality as "complete erasure" (Walcott 1997, 237) but in his stage play the encounter between myth, epic poem and histories of enslavement and gender enable him to write the story differently rather than to erase it.
6. Scene 29(76- 9) portrays the difference in language and attitudes to the maids between Eurycleia ("the ones who'd been rude") and Penelope ("the ones who'd been raped"). Atwood had already, in her 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, depicted so-called delinquent women hung in a line in a rope ceremony (a Salvaging) which was overseen by women who, like Eurycleia in Walcott's play are called "Aunts".
7. For ancient sources relating to the myth, see especially Homer (*Iliad* 5.738-42); Hesiod (*Theogony* 270-81); Apollodorus (2.4.3 and 3.10.3); Ovid (*Metamorphosis* 4.614-20, 770-803).

8. For discussion of Mesopotamian sources, see Price and Kearns (2003, 231).
9. Gorgons sometimes appear with an apotropaic function in archaic temple pediments.
10. See Homer *Iliad* (11.36-7); *Odyssey* (11.634-5); Euripides (*Helen* 1315-6).
11. Discussed in relation to epic poetry and modern media in Greenwood (2017 forthcoming). Greenwood draws on the insights of Middleton (2005), who pointed out how in a span of 11 Whitbread Prize for Poetry awards (1990-2000) winners included classically-orientated work by Michael Longley, Tony Harrison, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes. Harrison won the award in 1992 for *Gaze of the Gorgon*.
12. Weil lived from 1909 to 1943. The essay was first published in French in 1940 and in English translation in 1945.
13. Harrison's third epigraph is a quote alluding to the ignorance of European literature attributed to the US General Norman Schwartzkopf by cultural commentator Kurt Vonnegut.
14. Heine was born in Dusseldorf and died in Paris. He was a distant relative of Karl Marx. His lyric poetry was set to music in lieder by Schumann and Schubert. That element is also a motif in Harrison's film poem. Heine's work and memorials to him were attacked by the Nazis in Germany from the 1920s onwards.
15. The awful conjunction between the materiality of trenches and their symbolic force in the history of human suffering did not stop with the First World War. In the first Gulf War heavy equipment was used by coalition troops to move sand and 'fill in' the trenches occupied by Iraqi soldiers. Harrison opens a window on to that conflict in the final section of *The Gaze of the Gorgon*. In other poems in the collection he draws on the Gorgon tradition for verbal pictures, grotesque visual images that recreate the masks of the incinerated dead ("A Cold Coming", Harrison 1992, 48-54).
16. The Hercules Project, based at the University of Leeds, UK, charts and explains the significance in western culture of the classical hero Hercules from late antiquity via the Renaissance to the present day (www.herculesproject.leeds.ac.uk).
17. Ancient sources for Heracles' ancestry and Labours include Apollodorus 2.4.8-7.8; Diodorus Siculus (4.9-39); Vergil (*Aeneid* 8.175-279); Propertius (4.9). There are also many references in Pausanias. Heracles was a frequent figure on painted pottery, especially associated with his accoutrements of lionskin, club and bows and arrows. The main appearances of Heracles in tragedy are: Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (in which Heracles has the function of a *deus ex machina*), *Women of Trachis* and Euripides' *Heracles*, *Children of Heracles* and *Alceste*. Heracles also figures in Aristophanes' comedy *Birds* and was the title character of a satyr play.
18. The magic potion given to Deianira by the centaur Nessus, from whose attempted rape Heracles' had rescued her. Deianira's part in the narrative was used by Sophocles as the basis for *Women of Trachis*, which in its turn was an ante-text for Martin Crimp's 2004 play *Cruel and Tender: after Sophocles' Trachiniae* (see Hardwick 2013b for discussion of the relationship between the two plays).
19. Documentation of the performances at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2001, including reviews, can be accessed online at: <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/greekplays>. Data base ID 2584.

20. Adaptation of classical material to modern media and contexts is a feature of Armitage's creativity, for example in his Homer's *Odyssey*, 2006, commissioned for BBC Radio and his *The Last Days of Troy* (2014), which dramatized episodes from Homer's *Iliad* and Vergil's *Aeneid* and was commissioned for staging at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester.
21. I discuss in more depth the relationship between receptions of classical texts, repression and taboo in Hardwick (2017, forthcoming).
22. I discuss the theoretical implications of this heightened receptivity in Hardwick (2018, forthcoming).

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The anger of Achilles in The *Iliad* and of Francis Marion Tarwater in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*

ÁNGEL RUIZ PÉREZ

Abstract

Achilles' anger in the *Iliad* acts as a catalyzer in the war's outcome and also helps characterize Achilles himself, frustrated because, in spite of being a goddess' son, he suffers a destiny of death. This article draws a comparison between Achilles' wrath and the anger that fuels Tarwater in *The Violent Bear It Away*, Flannery O'Connor's last novel. As with the protagonist of the *Iliad*, Tarwater's rebellion to prove that he is in total control over his own life eventually jeopardizes the order of the world around him.

Keywords

Homer, *Iliad*, Flannery O'Connor, Anger, Achilles, Tarwater.

1. Introduction

The main aim of this article is to contribute to an understanding of the anger that characterizes Francis Marion Tarwater, the protagonist of *The Violent Bear It Away*, Flannery O'Connor's second and final novel. The element of comparison used will be the same defining anger in Achilles, which we see from the very opening verse of the *Iliad*. In principle, the two works do not seem to share any significant points of contact, but a comparison between their respective protagonists shows that similarities do indeed exist, to the extent that both find themselves faced with others who are presented as models and as rivals, with anger defining them in the complex situation of having to choose either assimilation to such models and expectations or breaking free from them. In a way, Tarwater enacts, in a sort of eternal return, the conflict Achilles had to face as a young man for his liberty and status in the world. Flannery O'Connor was a novelist, a Catholic in the Bible Belt South but the conflict is essentially the same, as we shall see.

Although O'Connor claimed to have had no classical training, she did read Homer, at least the Robert Fitzgerald's 1961 translation of the *Odyssey* (O'Connor 1979, 530). All the quotations in this article will be drawn from her friend Robert Fitzgerald's 1974 version of the *Iliad*, made ten years after her death, although it seems very

unlikely that she was aware of it. She was particularly influenced by the interpretation of the Austrian philosopher Eric Voegelin, to which I will return towards the end of this article.

I will begin by noting the structural similarities of the two works on the narrative level, before considering the implications of anger in particular, then finally turning to the family interactions between characters in the management of their anger.

2. *The violent bear it away and the Iliad, related structures*

In the *Iliad* Achilles suffers the absence of his father Peleus and has to reaffirm himself before Agamemnon, King of the Greeks, which provokes the hero's anger. Priam, father of his archenemy Hector, will be the one who makes Achilles put aside his anger, forcing him to discover compassion in the face of his own sorrow. In O'Connor's novel, Francis Marion Tarwater vacillates between fulfilling the last will of his great uncle Mason, a self-styled prophet, and staying with his uncle Rayber. Mason kidnapped Rayber when he was six in order to make him a prophet, although by the age of 14 he had rejected religion, retreating to an ascetic life guided by empiricism and oriented towards the rigorous control of his emotions and affections.

Tarwater was the son of Rayber's sister and was born shortly after a car accident as a result of which the latter and his grandparents (Mason's sister and her husband) died. Rayber had wanted to raise him, but Mason, the elderly prophet, kidnapped the baby just prior to his mother's death, baptizing him and staying with him in an unknown place in the woods of Powderhead until his own death, preparing the young Tarwater for his calling as a prophet and charging him with his eventual burial, as well as with the baptism of Rayber's own son, a child of reduced mental capacities called Bishop. The novel focuses on the situation of Tarwater from the moment of Mason's death, and on the question of whether he will respect Mason's final orders.

Both Tarwater and Achilles have to decide on the meaning of their own lives. From the beginning of the novel, the possible calling of Tarwater to become a prophet is repeated by his uncle Mason, but from the outset the boy also seeks to affirm his own freedom above all else. From the start he has an independent personality, as well as considering himself superior to his uncle ("The boy, who had ideas of his own, listened with an impatient conviction that he would not make any mistakes himself when the time came and the Lord called him", O'Connor 1988, 332). Tarwater admires the grandiose and terrible image of a prophet that he has created for himself, based on the example of Mason and on the Old Testament prophets, but pays no attention to Mason when he speaks of "the sweat and stink of the cross, of being born again to die, and of spending eternity eating the bread of life" (O'Connor 1988, 334).

The interior conflict arises in him upon the death of his uncle, since he neither values the prize of the "bread of life" nor is he certain about his calling to be a prophet, which he wants to prove by means of his own affirmation and also through the stamp of a divine calling, which he expects will come about in spectacular fashion. For this reason he does not consider it his mission to baptize the backwards child of his uncle Rayber or to bury his uncle Mason. Like Achilles, he wants to operate on his own terms. As Srigley explains in Tarwater's case it is not so much a matter of an existential

problem, or that within himself he doubts the existence of God, but rather of getting in control of his own life against the two rivals, his uncles, both of very strong characters. In the end, it is about he himself knowing “who he is in relation to God and how that knowledge will affect his life and action” (Srigley 2004, 106). He has seen Mason’s struggle to control Rayber, and observes how Rayber’s rigorous asceticism is at risk through the impetuous love for his son Bishop (Srigley 2004, 181 n. 25). That love for his son would leave him at the mercy of his love for all reality, and ultimately at God’s mercy, for which Mason has prepared Tarwater yet which he finally rejects. On the other hand, Mason has taught Tarwater to fear and despise Rayber’s attempts to control them by means of psychological investigation. As a result of this, he perceives dangers everywhere, which may explain his utter lack of empathy for others. The question, then, is whether he will “bear away” through violence any control of himself, or if he will turn it on himself to baptize Bishop, recognizing his value before God. Tarwater trying to drown the young child, Srigley concludes (2004, 112-14), is his best attempt to be the master of his future life, but he gets defeated, as he utters the words of the baptism in that very moment he is drowning the child. For Ciuba (2012, 70), “Tarwater seeks not so much to escape being a prophet but to realize his vocation in a less shameful and more violent way”, yet without success.

When Mason reminds him that he escaped the control of Rayber, Tarwater feels moved: he has learned about freedom from him, but not what sustains it. As Mason explains to him:

“You were born into bondage and baptized into freedom, into the death of the Lord, into the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Then the child would feel a sullenness creeping over him, a slow warm rising resentment that this freedom had to be connected with Jesus and that Jesus had to be the Lord. (*O’Connor 1988, 342*)

According to Huelin (2012, 125) there is a problem in Tarwater, compared to Mason: “Mason holds to a positive conception of freedom, that is, freedom to be renewed in Jesus Christ, Tarwater thinks of freedom entirely in negative terms: free from outside interference in his choices, free from obligations, and thus free to be one’s son”. For Bieber Lake (2010, 30), in a comparison with O’Connor and James Baldwin, the former’s “highest value is not autonomy. For her, freedom comes through fulfillment, and fulfillment comes through recognition of one’s true state before God, a recognition that must be revealed”: this is what the novel manages to explore in all its narrative possibilities in the case of Tarwater.

3. The political problem of human relations

In the *Iliad*, Achilles jeopardizes “political” order of the Greek side and risks the destruction of the army, all this through his refusal to fight due to a personal confrontation with King Agamemnon over a woman, Chryseis, a slave. Also in the case of Tarwater, the fight is one for control, a fight he begins by setting fire to his own house. What he wants is to rid himself of an obstacle to his own aims, in his case the mission of baptizing the child, as his objective is to live alone and isolated in the forest

without contact with anyone, in an impossible utopian freedom with no ties. For Achilles, the dispute arises with King Agamemnon due to a question of honour (of precedence and *status*, seen in itself in the division of the spoils of war), but at the root of this is the question of the value of life in the face of the reality of death, as he says to his mother Thetis:

As my life came from you, though it is brief,
honour at last from Zeus who storms in heaven
I call my due. He gives me precious little.
See how the lord of the great plains, Agamemnon,
humiliated me! He has my prize
by his own whim, for himself! (*Il.* 1.352-6. Translated by R. Fitzgerald)

The first thing that Tarwater confronts, and which he perceives as the first obstacle to the rest of his life, is to bury his uncle, and it is here that he begins an interior conversation with a stranger -and at the same time someone very close- who encourages him to rebel, reminding him that the estate is going to be inherited by his uncle Rayber. This conversation prompts the following response: "I own it, Tarwater said, because I'm here and can't nobody get me off. If any schoolteacher comes to claim the property, I'll kill him" (O'Connor 1988, 337). Ownership guarantees a safe space for both Achilles (his slave Chryseis) and Tarwater over other potential owners, Agamemnon and Rayber.

The practical difficulties of the burial (his uncle Mason was very bulky, the soil very hard), and considerations as to what is or is not suitable to do, go hand in hand with the ritual value of a recognition of the reality of the afterlife, and with it the hope for resurrection and the reaffirmation of faith in Christ. In an evidently non-Christian context, the characters of the *Iliad* all share the belief in the importance of the funerary honouring of the corpses, but Achilles is the only one who acts against this with respect to the corpse of his enemy, Hector, something that the latter foresaw, fearing that if he died at the hands of Achilles his body would be eaten by dogs. There is an echo in how Tarwater tells Rayber about the unburied body: "If it's anything left of him, the buzzards wouldn't have it and the bones the dogs'll carry off" (O'Connor 1988, 387).

Here, then, we have the first clear parallel: neither Tarwater nor Achilles respect the funerary rites of the dead. Achilles is consumed by anger, which demands of him a revenge never satisfied by the death of Patroclus at the hands of Hector. This anger, destructive in nature, also brings with it the death of many others, as foretold in the first two verses of the epic poem:

Anger be now your song, immortal one,
Achilles' anger, doomed and ruinous,
that caused the Achaeans loss on bitter loss
and crowded brave souls into the undergloom
(*Il.* 1.1-2. Translated by R. Fitzgerald).

To Tarwater the duty of burying Mason, which he tries to fulfil but soon renounces, finally becomes the challenge to prove that what lies behind death does not affect him. He burns down the house so as to burn the corpse which lies within it, in an act of rebellion that throughout the novel will be replicated in episodes of growing violence. The fact is that neither Achilles nor Tarwater have the least interest in the political or social implications of their actions: Achilles contemplates impassively the defeat of his side, and does nothing until he is affected personally by the death of his friend Patroclus, and even then he seeks only personal revenge against Hector. In O'Connor's novel, Tarwater, who has lived his entire life isolated in a forest with his uncle, continually shows his inability to communicate (the scene in which we see his ignorance of a telephone is especially brilliant) and the only thing he seeks is to escape the orders of his uncle and to return to the solitude of the woods, all by himself. The anger serves both protagonists as a means of further isolating them, not of communion with others. It is clear in both cases that the key element concerns their duties with respect of the dead. Especially significant is a conversation in which Mason reminds his nephew:

"The world was made for the dead. Think of all the dead there are," he said, and then as if he had conceived the answer for all the insolence in the world, he said, "There's a million times more dead than living and the dead are dead a million times longer than the living are alive," and he released him with a laugh. (O'Connor 1988, 339)

The first chapter of the novel ends with a conversation between Tarwater and Meeks, a copper flue salesman, which helps to reinforce the idea that nobody owes the dead anything:

"You don't owe the dead anything," Tarwater said in a loud voice, speaking for almost the first time since he had got in the car.

"Nor they you," said the stranger. "And that's the way it ought to be in this world—*nobody owing nobody nothing*." (O'Connor 1988, 362; my italics)

In the end, the problem also concerns duties to the divinity. In the novel, the divine presence is hinted by means of the light of the stars. At the beginning of the third chapter, while waiting to go into Rayber's house, Tarwater "did not look up at the sky but he was unpleasantly aware of the stars. They seemed to be holes in his skull through which some distant unmoving light was watching him. It was as if he were alone in the presence of an immense silent eye" (O'Connor 1988, 385). All this might be explained as Tarwater's purely subjective impression ("as if"), but it is also the case that from the point of view of the narrator the presence and mention of the sun highlighting the action has a clear sense of transcendence.

The presence of the divine is far more explicit in the *Iliad*. The gods intervene, but not to oppose Achilles' anger, given that he has the support of Zeus himself. Zeus has his own particular objectives in doing so, apart from showing his appreciation for Achilles' mother Thetis, herself a goddess. The term for "anger" (*menis*) used to

describe what affects Achilles in the *Iliad* is typically applied only to the gods, and as such carries cosmic implications, as Muellner (1996) has discussed.

Analyses too focused on the psychological seem far removed from Homer's art, something which can also be said in broad terms of *The Violent Bear It Away*. By considering the anger of these characters, we are not focusing so much on the expression of an inner frustration, but more on the external perception of the frustration at a desired outcome which is not fulfilled. Muellner (1996, 50-51) takes Aristarchus' definition of *menis* as "long-lasting rancor", noting that it "is not a word for a hostile emotion arising in one individual against some other individual", but that it goes against the social, cosmic order. It has social consequences, in that it supposes the breakdown of that which guarantees coexistence, beginning with the system of the distribution of awards, the exchange of wealth and also of honours. In addition, Achilles is the first victim of this anger, and "suffers from the loss of ties to the wider world but also in that he is thereby harming his own self" (1996, 138), the same as will happen to Tarwater.

4. Characterization of internalised anger in both characters: resentment

The fact that there is no clear psychological orientation in either of the works does not imply that Tarwater's anger involves no resentment. In terms of his future fate, his anger arises from the reality of death, viewed as part of life's inevitable end, when this is understood as a free space without limits of the "I". The same can be seen of Achilles: as the son of a goddess and a mortal, he could have achieved immortality, as happened to others in the same situation, such as Dionysus and Heracles, as well as the children of Zeus, but to him this is forbidden. His fate is either death now (in this case with the counterpart of an undying fame) or death years later; but death it is in either case (*Il.* 9.401-16).

What Tarwater perceives in Mason, apart from this certainty of life in real freedom that transpires, is the hunger that Mason has for Christ and which he, Tarwater, does not understand: "The boy would have a hideous vision of himself sitting forever with his great-uncle on a green bank, full and sick, staring at a broken fish and a multiplied loaf" (O'Connor 1988, 369). He does not perceive this hunger, but fears it as something that will ensue even though not desired, through something greater than what is represented in something that is hidden in his blood. For this reason he avoids thinking about it.

Tarwater desires a divine calling uncontaminated by earthly things, not the kind of eternal communion which his uncle talks about. Thus, even as he tries to dig the tomb, he reaffirms himself in his freedom to act: "'Now I can do anything I want to,' he said, softening the stranger's voice so that he could stand it'" (O'Connor 1988, 345). And it is the voice of the stranger which is tinted with anger:

As Tarwater slashed at the ground with the shovel, the stranger's voice *took on a kind of restrained fury* and he kept repeating, you got to bury him whole and completely by hand and that schoolteacher would burn him in a minute. (O'Connor 1988, 345; my italics)

As a trait of character Tarwater shares this anger with his uncle Mason, particularly enraged when he recalled the time that he spent in the city with Rayber. And that same anger is felt by Tarwater the first time he meets Bishop, as if suffering from childish jealousy (“Suddenly a tremendous indignation seized Tarwater” O’Connor 1988, 350), prompting him to tell Bishop that he had been the first in the house, falling into a rage which will grow until Mason removes him from the scene in order to baptize the child, -something which Rayber impedes- but which precipitates the announcement that Tarwater will in fact be the one who performs the baptism. The highpoint of the anger will come when Francis drowns Bishop, as a release from the weight of the responsibility of baptizing him, with which he expects to seal his future in absolute freedom and solitude.

Meeks, the salesman who takes him to town, considers him “just enough off in the head and just ignorant enough to be a very hard worker” (O’Connor 1988, 365). Such strangeness of character and lack of social skills is greatly at odds with Achilles, the son of a goddess and an outstanding character in all respects. But what does indeed unite them is stubbornness, a persistence in defending the absence of ties or limits, a state to which they both aspire, although there hangs above both of them a fate which they reject. “Mason said to Tarwater: ‘Go warn the children of God,’ saith the Lord, ‘of the terrible speed of justice.’ Who will be left? Who will be left when the Lord’s mercy strikes?” (O’Connor 1988, 368). This is repeated at the end of the novel, when Tarwater, having been raped, returns to Powderhead and everything comes to a state of completion:

He threw himself to the ground and with his face against the dirt of the grave, he heard the command. GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY. The words were as silent as seeds opening one at a time in his blood. (O’Connor 1988, 478)

There is a difference between what Mason prophesied and what Tarwater hears at the end. This latter is the order that he has been anticipating with fear throughout the novel (apart from that of baptizing Bishop, with which he complies only reluctantly) in which the “speed of justice” is associated with the fact that God will respond with mercy in the end (“when the Lord’s mercy strikes”), but which is a single mandate, but this time with the emphasis on mercy: “TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY”.

These are hard and intense expressions, in which the threat is first perceived, but is finally united with the love of God as the father of mercy. It is this mercy that Tarwater recognizes in the end. It is Buford, a black character, who serves as the trigger for mercy, as was also the case in O’Connor’s *The artificial nigger* (1955).

The case of Achilles is similar: through his suffering he prepares, albeit unconsciously, for that moment when an old man, Priam, touches him in order to bid of him the piety to conduct a burial, that of his son Hector. Achilles had sought to desecrate Hector’s body, although without success, because the gods have prevented such an outcome. Thus, the victim requests of the executioner –reminding him of his absent father– an act of mercy, as it were. Here resides the greatness of the *Iliad*: at the end of the poem the cycle is completed and anger gives way to serenity:

Achilles

be reverent toward the great gods! and take
pity on me, remember your own father.
Think me more pityful by far, since I
have brought myself to do what no man else
has done before –to lift to my lips the hand
of one who killed my son.

Now in Achilles

the evocation of his father stirred
new longing, and an ache of grief. He lifted
the old man's hand and gently put him by.
Then both were overborne as they remembered:
the old king huddled at Achilles' feet
wept, and wept for Hector, killer of men,
while great Achilles wept for his own father
as for Patroclus once again, and sobbing
filled the room. (*Il.* 24.503-12. Translated by R. Fitzgerald)

Muellner (1996, 133-68) explains at length that Achilles's anger is an expression of friendship (*philotes*) for his group over the rest. At the end of the *Iliad*, what finally calms his anger is the act of stepping out from the confines of friendship *philotes* (φιλότης) for his group, in identifying with Priam (1996, 174).

Through the course of O'Connor's novel, anger dominates as the engine of evil, until it turns on Tarwater himself. It is an anger that he shares with his uncles, in those complex relationships between them that are continuously repeated. For example, when Mason baptized the baby, Tarwater, at a moment in which Rayber had left the cradle unattended, shows a reaction of an insulting joy, while that of Rayber is first one of being deceived, then of anger:

Not even angry at first, just hacked.

Old Tarwater had said, "He's been born again and there ain't a thing you can do about it" and then he had seen the rage rise in the nephew's face and had seen him try to conceal it. (O'Connor 1988, 375)

And the confrontation continues with a heated argument in which the two strong personalities are set against each other, until Rayber makes a gesture of commiseration with a calmed voice and an air of forced understanding: "reached across the table and put his hand on the old man's wrist in to gesture of pity" (O'Connor 1988, 379). It is precisely the opposite of the case of Bishop approaching and touching Tarwater before he drowns him, which marks the start of the latter's final process of conversion, as Priam's act of touching Achilles marks the end of his anger. It is impossible not to recall a similar gesture in a short story by Flannery O'Connor, that of the grandmother with the Misfit in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955).

Later on, when Rayber recalls how at 14 he went to see Mason, his anger is described very graphically: "his fists clenched, trying to shout, trying to make his

adolescent fury come out in clear sensible words. He had only stood there shrilling, 'You're crazy, you're crazy, you're a liar, you have a head full of crap, you belong in a nut house!'" (O'Connor 1988, 430). It is an anger associated with resentment, in considering that Mason, rather than saving him, has destroyed his life.

In the case of Tarwater, his anger arises above all in respect of Bishop and the responsibility of baptising him: "Nothing irritated the boy so much as this" (O'Connor 1988, 379). It is again a question of the control he seeks over his own actions. This scene forms part of a long flashback ending in a return to the present in which Tarwater is with Meeks, at the moment when for the first time in his life Tarwater sees and uses a telephone. He calls Rayber's house, but establishes a connection with Bishop, in silence, but "not a silence that seemed to be empty". When he realises who is at the other end of the phone, the moment is described like this: "The heavy breathing began again as if in answer. It was a kind of bubbling noise, the kind of noise someone would make who was struggling to breathe in water". In ending the call, Tarwater is absorbed, "as if he had received a revelation he could not yet decipher" (O'Connor 1988, 383). It is a subtle anticipation of the subsequent baptism by immersion.

Bishop is everyone's victim, a character who is mute, silent, and in principle passive. In Chapter 6 we find the only example of anger in him, when his father Rayber recalls the moment when he tried to drown him, "The face under the water was wrathfully contorted, twisted by some primeval rage to save itself" (O'Connor 1988, 418-9). This might seem a perfectly natural reaction, arising from his instinct for survival, yet it does not happen later on when Tarwater attempts the same thing. Indeed, in this case there is an express action by Bishop of touching him and, as the narrator explains, of guiding him towards the water: "the child in the boat stood up, caught him around the neck and climbed into his back" (O'Connor 1988, 462). It illustrates that Bishop wants and needs to be baptised.

In all this there is a running rivalry which unleashes anger. Ciuba (2007, 126) has addressed this using Girard's theories of mimetic desire (1977, 152), in which he implicitly equates Tarwater with Achilles, explaining that "Tarwater seeks what Homer terms *kudos*, the glory of the demigod that comes from victory in competition". Thus, Ciuba argues that it is a form of glory sought at the cost of others and with the aim of keeping it forever. The boy may seem like an anti-prophet, but he is immersed in the same kind of violence as that of his great-uncle: "Driven by mimetic desire to violence, Tarwater would out-Elijah Elijah" (Ciuba 2007, 126).

In addition, his escape to the city can be seen as having its basis in his desire for Rayber's recognition of his rebellion against Mason, which in this regard is Tarwater's model. We are presented, thus, with a triangle in which one of the elements wants to beat another through comparing himself to the third. When Tarwater tells Rayber that he has burned the body of his uncle, the latter's joy makes Tarwater react ("The boy's face darkened. His expression hardened until it was a fortress wall to keep his thoughts from being exposed", O'Connor 1988, 388), something that Rayber is oblivious to, lost in dreams of his idealised image of Tarwater. But then Bishop enters

and his presence makes Tarwater tense, leading him to ball his fists. At this moment comes the revelation that he will have to baptize Bishop:

Then the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. He did not look into the eyes of any fiery beast or see a burning bush. He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable. (O'Connor 1988, 388-9)

He immediately tries to avoid it, but:

Suddenly he knew that the child *recognized* him, that the old man himself had primed him from on high that here was the forced servant of God come to see that he was born again. The little boy was sticking out his hand to touch him. (O'Connor 1988, 389)

Tarwater's reaction to Bishop's attempt to touch him is to strike the child. Rayber tries to mediate, and says he will get used to Bishop, but Tarwater does not give way:

"No!" the boy shouted. It was like a shout that had been waiting, straining to burst out. "I won't get used to him! I won't have anything to do with him!" He clenched his fist and lifted it. "I won't have anything to do with him!" he shouted and the words were clear and positive and defiant like a challenge hurled in the face of his silent adversary. (O'Connor 1988, 390)

Tarwater's anger is clearly in negation, now directly so, of the divine order (or that which he perceives as divine) to fulfil a mission that he does not like, partly because he doesn't see it as fitting his expectations, and partly because he perceives in Bishop something which he doesn't understand and which unnerves him. This is the key, according to Johansen (2012, 109), who draws here on the "figures d'affliction" of Simone Weil, according to which Bishop is an "enfleshed icon on which Rayber's and Tarwater's eyes are riveted and their responses to affliction depend. Bishop becomes the novel's fulcrum on which refusal to obedience or the desire to obey hinge".

But in Tarwater, Rayber sees a repetition of himself, yet one with the guilty eyes of the theology student who left the boy's mother pregnant: "The face before him was his own, but the eyes were not his own. They were the student's eyes, singed with guilt" (O'Connor 1988, 392). In the next chapter, when Rayber follows him at night, the attitude is the same: "Rayber saw only the hat, *intransigently ground* upon his head, *fierce-looking* even in the dim light. It had the boy's own *defiant quality*, as if its shape had been formed over the years by his personality" (O'Connor 1988, 405, my italics). Tarwater is impervious to his uncle's attempts to establish contact, which produces in the latter "an almost uncontrollable fury" (O'Connor 1988, 393). When Tarwater recognizes the photograph of Rayber's wife and makes derogatory remarks about her, "irritation mounted in him" (O'Connor 1988, 394). It is the same anger that the old man Mason provoked in him: "the same familiar fantastic anger, out of all

proportion to its cause, that his uncle had always been able to stir in him” (O’Connor 1988, 394).

The tension between the two of them is the same as the one that exists between Mason and Rayber. When Rayber tries to apply his psychological schemes to make Tarwater consider his anger as a result of his guilt of having abandoned the body of Mason, offering himself to occupy Mason’s place as a paternal figure, that produces a violent reaction in Tarwater. Rayber also attributed his own anger and affliction to a genetic problem, a family inheritance, thus something carried in the blood:

The affliction was in the family. It lay hidden in the line of blood that touched them, flowing from some ancient source, some desert prophet or pole-sitter, until, its power unabated, it appeared in the old man and him and, he surmised, in the boy. Those it touched were condemned to fight it constantly or be ruled by it. The old man had been ruled by it. He, at the cost of a full life, staved it off. What the boy would do hung in the balance. (O’Connor 1988, 402)

Rayber’s anger is parallel to that of Tarwater, of a future Tarwater who would have denied everything and lived in that self-imposed asceticism in which Rayber lives, and which arises from the division within him between “a violent and a rational self” (O’Connor 1988, 417). In his case it manifests itself especially during the discourse of the girl preacher, in which he wants to be recognized as an innocent victim before Christ, the Savior who survived the massacre of the innocents.

Tarwater’s anger reaches its highpoint when he is able to look into the eyes of Bishop: “The hostility in it seemed contained and directed toward some planned goal” (O’Connor 1988, 447). The stranger who converses in his mind has already encouraged him to drown Bishop, insinuating that he will only end the obsession with the child by killing him. A short time before doing so, the last confrontation with Rayber was such that he “felt such a fury that for the moment all his strength left him. Go, he wanted to shout. Get your damn impudent face out of my sight! Go to hell! Go baptize the whole world!” (O’Connor 1988, 448). Rayber promises Tarwater salvation in rationality and explains that they have a common compulsion, something that Tarwater rejects, because he is sure that he can find release from it whenever he wants. It is then that he takes Bishop in a boat. After sleeping a while, Rayber awakes to realise that Tarwater has simultaneously baptised and drowned the child.

A little later, when a truck driver takes Tarwater far away, the latter recounts his wishes for life: “‘There’s nothing where I’m going but the stall,’ he began again, ‘because the house is burnt up but that’s the way I want it. I don’t want nothing of his. Now it’s all mine’” (O’Connor 1988, 458).

The anger that he hopes to have dominated by violence will find him once more, this time in the brutal rape he suffers, in which he discovers the presence and effects of evil in himself. It will be, as we have already said, the contemplation of Mason’s tomb, the achievement of Buford, which will definitively release his anger, the wave of which will carry him to the city to preach God’s mercy, one which burns at great speed.

As Srigley explains, the image of Tarwater's growing hunger culminates in the eschatological banquet that is revealed at this moment, in which "he arrives at a place of communion rather than isolation" (Srigley 2012, 210). O'Connor herself explained this in a letter: "[t]here are two main symbols in the book –water and the bread that Christ is. The whole action of the novel is Tarwater's selfish will against all the little lake (the baptismal font) and the bread stand for. This book is a very minor hymn to the Eucharist" (O'Connor 1979, 387). And Kroeker (2012, 138) adds: "The paradoxical ways in which freedom to act is linked to the prophetic vocation and the messianic meaning of the claim that 'Jesus is the bread of life' constitute the spiritual trial and existential crisis Tarwater undergoes in the novel".

5. Voegelin as a collaborator in Achilles's vision as a referent for Tarwater

O'Connor admired Voegelin (on this topic, Palmieri's revision is very valuable) and enjoyed *The World of the Polis*, the second volume of *Order and History*, having read it in January of 1959, as she explained in a letter at the time (O'Connor 1979, 316). In her copy of the book she underlined just one phrase: "... and the hero in the Homeric sense can be defined as the man in whose actions a more-than-human order of being becomes manifest" (1957, 104).

Voegelin's characterization of Achilles in the *Iliad* (1957, 88-91) is not specifically referred to in the notes she made on the dustjacket, nor did she underline anything in those pages. However, it is not difficult to see how it might have served as a template for the character of Tarwater or, since she was already well into writing the novel by then, it might have had a considerable influence on the final formulation of his character.

In Achilles there is, prior to anger, a void:

The specific wrath that precipitates the events of the *Iliad* must be distinguished from the void, the blankness of which it is a manifestation. this void in Achilles disturbs the formation of the normal social relations from his boyhood. His own father who knows the child well sends him to war with admonitions to curb his 'proudhearted spirit' and to keep him out of 'mischiefmaking strife'; honor will be gained rather by 'gentlemindedness [philophrosyne]' (IX, 254-56). (Voegelin 1957, 88)

And Achilles' internal struggles are described in these terms:

The nature and source of this isolating iciness [from his comrades] is, then, more closely circumscribed by scraps of self-analysis when Achilles reflects on the alternatives of action in face of his fate. The meaning of the divine revelation as a personal obsession can be discerned perhaps most clearly in the fact that Achilles is the only one among the princes who toys with the idea of leaving the war and returning home. Odd as this may sound, Achilles is afraid of death to the point of openly considering the possibility of desertion. He is ardently in love with life. (...) The gods have created him a warrior; he lives truly in battle, and his sulking wrath is most painful to maintain while joyous slaughter goes on without him. (...) Achilles is bound to the war, and can never return, because he is a

warrior (perhaps even killer would not be too strong a word) who would fit into the order at home even less that into the order of the army. (Voegelin 1957, 88-89)

However, anger can also help Achilles attain another level of order:

Functioning within an established order, the *cholos*, as an emotion, will supply the force that will resist injustice and restore just order. (...) The proper functioning of *cholos*, thus, is essential to the maintenance of order. (...) The *cholos* of Achilles (...) is not a finite reaction against a finite threat (...); it is rather an outburst of the deep-seated anxiety that has grown in him through preoccupation with his fate; it is caused by an emotional short-circuit between the diminution of his honor and the anticipation of his death". (Voegelin 1957, 90)

It is the death of his friend Patroclus that finally makes him recover order, when he sees his alter ego dead:

he returns to the reality of life in community; and the decisive symptom of this return is the readiness to shoulder its obligations even at the risk of death. (...) And finally, perhaps the most subtle trait, he is now even willing to acquire imperishable renown by his deeds in the common run of his obligations as an Achaean warrior-he will no longer try to cheat fate by triumph in life." (Voegelin 1957, 92)

All this, I believe, is reflected in Tarwater, whether by coincidence or because, to a greater or lesser extent, Voegelin's original reading and characterisation of Achilles was indeed reflected in the protagonist of the novel. The coincidences in their characters are indeed notable, in the difficult orientation which both men seek for their lives, and especially in the incidences of their anger, with evident social consequences, most clearly in their refusal to perform funerary rites on the dead and their paralysing inaction, but also with respect to the similar way in which they both escape this anger, thanks to a simple demonstration of human intimacy, the mere act of touching the hand.

6. Conclusions

I think it is possible to affirm now that there is a clear parallelism between Achilles, a young Greek warrior, and Tarwater, a backwoods young prophet-to-be. One can consider how fruitful the connections can be in a mythical paradigm where the notion of eternal return of basic human problems revolves. But also there are indications, particularly from the books of Eric Voegelin, that there is a genealogical connection between Homer and the last novel by Flannery O'Connor.

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Ariadne, Theseus, and the Circumambulation of the Mythic Self

LEON BURNETT

Abstract

This article examines a series of literary works in which the idea of return is linked to a sense of the eternal as an expression of the mythic self. The first three examples, which are taken from texts in different genres from the second half of the nineteenth century, show signs of an incipient mythopoeia. Following this introduction to the topic, attention is turned to works that appeared in the first half of the twentieth century, especially those that belong to its second decade. One critical moment in the Cretan myth of Ariadne is singled out for close analysis as an illustration of the modernist preoccupation with—and the continuing vitality of—myths from ancient Greece. In this case study, the focus is on the interaction between sea and shore as having the force of a liminal charge in which the sacred emerges from the profane.

Keywords

Ariadne, Lord Jim, T. S. Eliot, de Chirico, personal myth, sea journey.

1. The Return to Origins

Myth, as an aspect of the archaic mind, is intrinsic to all cultures. It exercises invisible control in matters of the imagination and offers a counterbalance to the rationalism that is claimed on behalf of secular institutions. Its order is a symbolic order which is self-renewing. Narratives of myth tend to operate at the level, not of cognition, but of recognition. They respond less to the linear imperative of progress than to a reflexive demand for a return to origins.

The return to origins, the eternal return, may be understood in various ways. It is a recapitulation in which each re-enactment in ritual, each re-telling in a literary work, each re-presentation in the world of art is at the same time a confirmation of a fundamental belief and a renewal of a sacred bond. Besides recapitulations that are the products of human agency, the repetition of a primordial event may take the form of a natural occurrence. The appearance of the rainbow in the sky, for example, is, in the words of God, “the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations” (Genesis 9, 12, KJV). A recurrence in nature is indicative of a correlative impetus in the supernatural world and *vice versa*. In Greek mythology wind is the prerogative of the god Aeolus, as Odysseus

found to his cost on his homeward journey after his crew's indiscretion in allowing all the winds to escape from the bag that the deity had donated.

The belief may be fanciful, as with Aeolus, and serve the purpose of entertainment or it may take on a religious meaning and strike at the heart of a civilisation as in the Biblical story of the flood and its aftermath. Yet, trivial or terrifying, it establishes a tie between the present and the primordial through a fusion of the natural and the supernatural. To adopt Mircea Eliade's distinction, it proposes a *sacred* rather than a *profane* dispensation. In his formulation, "one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of a different quality, a 'sacred' Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable" (Eliade 1975, 18).

Myth offers an alternative to a scientific or rational account. Carl Jung regarded the aim of psychic development, in which myth plays a fundamental role, as one of arriving at a rounded awareness of the self through a process of individuation. According to Jung, "the self is the principle and archetype of orientation and meaning" (Jung 1975, 224). The self is situated at the centre of one's being and all of life's experiences return one inevitably to that centre. In a passage that suggested the title for this article, he wrote: "There is no linear evolution; there is only a circumambulation of the self" (Jung 1975, 222).

Jung approached myth from a psychoanalytical perspective and held the view that one's personal myth served the purpose of giving a direction to life, for good or for bad. His personal myth was constellated from memories, dreams and reflections. It grew as much out of fantasies as out of mythologies. The psychoanalytical concept of a personal myth shares many qualities with its literary equivalent, to which W. B. Yeats refers in his short poem "A Coat":

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eyes
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it,
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked. (Yeats 1965, 142)

Like Jung, Yeats acknowledges that a return to the "naked" self is essential for creative, that is to say authentic, development. It is only the stubborn and the self-deluded who believe in and insist upon a linear path through life. "There is no linear evolution; there is only a circumambulation of the self".

The supernatural is anchored in the natural and it draws upon the visible world for the enunciation of mysteries that involve gods and goddesses, hybrid monsters and semi-divine heroes and heroines. One of its most fertile domains is the sea and the sea voyage, for it is through the medium of water that flux and reflux are most closely associated with the individual as humanity loses contact with *terra firma*.

2. The Nineteenth-century Heritage

The contrast between determined directness and an adaptive avoidance of what seems to be a rational path is illustrated in the encounter between the protagonist in Act II of Henrik Ibsen's play, *Peer Gynt*, and the folklore figure of the Bøyg:

PEER Who are you? Answer!

VOICE (*in the darkness*) Myself.

PEER Stand aside!

VOICE Go round about, Peer. For the fells here are wide.

PEER (*tries another route, but runs into something*) Who are you?

VOICE Myself. Can you say the like? (Ibsen 2007, ll. 1077-79)

The juxtaposition of self-identity and circumambulation—in the Bøyg's repeated response to the question "Who are you?" with the declarative "Myself" [Migselv] and in his injunction to "Go round about" [Gåudenom]—serves to chart the territory that the hero is to explore in the course of the play. Self-knowledge calls for renunciation, recapitulation, and recognition before the threshold of awareness may eventually be crossed. Often, as in Ibsen's drama, the process is represented as a journey.

In the course of his picaresque life, Peer Gynt undertakes several voyages and meets many fantastic creatures that range from troll to sphinx to the spectre of death itself. In the second scene of the final act, his boat capsizes and he comes face to face with his destiny in the guise of the "Strange Passenger". Death spares him, despite his act of cowardice in letting the ship's cook drown, simply because, in the ironic words of his supernatural interlocutor, one does not die in the middle of Act Five.

The end of the journey is self-realisation. Its trajectory is recursive, returning upon itself, like the sea in its encounter with the land at full tide. Matthew Arnold, in his poem "Dover Beach" refers to

the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in. (Arnold 1954, 191-92)

For the Victorian poet, listening to the repetitive and melancholic sound, the moment calls up an image:

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery. (Arnold 1954, 191-92)

The feeling of oppression gives rise to a conviction that, if the "note of sadness" is "eternal", an inalienable aspect of the human condition, then, by that very token, it stretches back to antiquity to unite the lyrical speaker with the Greek tragedian, the purveyor of myths, in a mutual awareness of "human misery". The loss of certitude in the present age is by no means diminished, but the burden is mitigated by its being

shared. It is, moreover, not merely shared. There is also in this companionship of spirits an ebb and flow, which takes Arnold back to a reflective Sophocles and returns him to his own era to face the “confused alarms of struggle and flight,/ Where ignorant armies clash by night”.

The examples from Ibsen and Arnold take us to the brink of mythology. Herman Melville confronts it directly in *Moby Dick*. In Chapter LVII, his narrator, Ishmael, asks the reader to consider “the subtleness of the sea”.

Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began. (Melville 1954, 241)

Anticipating the Jungian idea that the self is located at the centre, with the concomitant equation of the sea and the unconscious as constitutive of circumambient, archetypal fantasies, Ishmael proceeds to invite the reader to entertain a “strange analogy”:

Consider all this; and then turn to the green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life. (Melville 1954, 241)

His recommendation, or rather his injunction, is prompted by a sense of self-preservation: “God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!” It is not a piece of advice that he follows himself, nor is it the bold recommendation of the advocate of individuation, for whom a return to the naked self from the “eternal war” offers a path to salvation.

3. The Enchafèd Flood

The nineteenth-century works adduced above—*Peer Gynt*, “Dover Beach”, *Moby Dick*—all include references to the sea and sea-crossings. The emphases in the various genres are quite different, but in each case the sea is made to stand for the destructive element that is necessary for subsequent self-realisation. It has to be subsequent, for, as *Peer Gynt* exclaims while the storm rages, just before his encounter with the “Strange Passenger”, “You’re never really yourself when afloat” (Ibsen 2007, l. 3161).

Toward the end of the Victorian era, as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth and Sigmund Freud was at work preparing his *Interpretation of Dreams* for publication, Joseph Conrad placed before the reading public a penetrating fictional exploration of the character of the romantic dreamer. His novel *Lord Jim* is as adroit in its own way as Freud’s seminal study in the observations it has to offer on the modern

psyche, amongst the most celebrated of which is the ungrammatical utterance of the German lepidopterist, Stein, who advises Marlow, the first-person narrator, on the only way to cure inveterate romanticism (and, by implication, to know oneself):

“Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns—*nichtwahr*? ... No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up”. (Conrad 2002, 134)

Conrad may or may not have had Arnold’s poem in mind, when writing Chapter Twenty of his novel, but it is to be noted that Stein’s recommendation draws upon the same vocabulary and imagery as “Dover Beach”. In his poem, Arnold alluded to “the world, which seems/ To lie before us like a land of dreams”. He represented that world as a “darkling plain” lacking in “certitude” and “help for pain”. Stein, whose very name recalls the “pebbles” and “naked shingles” of Arnold’s poem, speaks of “the world pain” (Conrad 2002, 133):

hisdeep-set eyesseemed to pierce through me, but his twitching lips uttered no word, and the austere exaltation of a certitude seen in the dusk vanished from his face. [...] He sat down and, with both elbows on the desk, rubbed his forehead. ‘And yet it is true—it is true. In the destructive element immerse.’ ... He spoke in a subdued tone, without looking at me, one hand on each side of his face. ‘That was the way. To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream—and so—*ewig—usque ad finem* ...’ The whisper of his conviction seemed to open before me a vast and uncertain expanse, as of a crepuscular horizon on a plain at dawn—or was it, perchance, at the coming of the night? [...] Yet for all that the great plain on which men wander amongst graves and pitfalls remained very desolate under the impalpable poesy of its crepuscular light, overshadowed in the centre, circled with a bright edge as if surrounded by an abyss full of flames. (Conrad 2002, 134–35)

Beyond the repeated reference to dream, to loss of certitude, and to the darkling plain, the overriding tenor in this crepuscular scene is that of a recurrent sadness which partakes of eternity: “‘To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream—and so—*ewig—usque ad finem* ...’”. Each memory of the past and each telling of an adventure is a recovery of an originating event, a return to a source, and every revival has its roots in myth.

In *Civilizations*, Felipe Fernández-Armesto (2000, 356) writes: “Seas attract and repel, inhibit and inspire. [...]. They are seen as life-threatening and life supplying”. Walter Otto reinforces this view when he observes that “To the mythopoeic mind, water is the element in which the primal mysteries of all life dwell. Birth and death, past, present, and future intertwine their dances here. [...] With water come vitality, re-invigoration, and nourishment to flood through all creation” (Otto 1965,

161). A mythic understanding recognizes the sea as ambivalent: inviting and assisting, but also unpredictable and destructive. The mythopoeic mind populates the sea with gods and sea nymphs (or mermaids, as they are known in other cultures), which attract and annihilate.

T. S. Eliot, in the third of his *Four Quartets*, states that “The sea has many voices,/ Many gods and many voices”. He calls the sea the “land’s edge”. The land is “the granite/ Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses/ Its hints of earlier and other creation” (Eliot 1977, 184). The “land’s edge”, the coastline where the sea meets the land, is a threshold, where the fluid and the firm come into contact with each other. It has the character of liminal space, where changes are prone to occur and nothing may be taken for granted. Eliot refers to the sea as tossing “Its hints of earlier and other creation” onto the beach. The sea is a primeval force, which has retained the power to wreak havoc on the shore when it is roused. This is shown not only in works of literature, but in our everyday vocabulary as well. Nouns normally indicative of solidity (beach, ground, and strand) become synonyms for danger and alarm when transformed into verbs. Thus, we speak, for example, of a disoriented whale becoming beached, a capsized ship running aground ... or an Ariadne stranded.

4. The Myth of Ariadne and Theseus

In the Cretan myth Ariadne and Theseus are united in their sea crossing, but the sea has a different meaning for each of them. Theseus’s journey is part of a *nostos*, or homecoming, as he sails from Athens and back again, via Crete and Naxos. Ariadne’s voyage, in contrast, is a flight from Crete to Naxos, where she is abandoned. Theseus is driven by the thought of return—and that is true also of his entry into the labyrinth, whereas Ariadne’s resolve has a forward momentum to it, a marine elopement that ends on an alien strand. Hers is essentially an island mentality; his is a metropolitan one. While the sea affords a means of onward travel for Theseus, it presents an insuperable obstacle to Ariadne, alone on Naxos. In “The Marriage of Peleus and Thetis” (Catullus 2017, 64: 185-87), she entertains the idea of returning to Crete only to proclaim her plight, surrounded by the truculent sea, as one of desolation: “nullafugaeratio, nullaspes: omniamuta,/ omnia sunt deserta, ostentant omnia letum” [no means of flight, no hope: all is silent/ all is deserted/ all is a manifestation of death].

Theseus, a culture hero, is perpetually on the move; Ariadne, the object of his desire, is always contained. Yet hers is not the stereotypical gender role of confinement. She is not the damsel in distress waiting to be liberated, like Andromeda, for example. The topos, in fact, is reversed. It is her ball of thread that saves Theseus who then leaves her to her fate far from home. When succour comes, it does so unexpectedly in the form of a god, yet there is no happy conclusion or, at least, not before further trials and transformations. Ariadne is to enjoy no lasting happiness on earth. She has first to be transfigured before she can take her place symbolically in the sky as a constellation.

Theseus is a man and Dionysus is a god. It is with this distinction in mind that we should assess their respective roles in Ariadne’s story. As a mortal, Theseus has a biography, that is to say his life is made up of a series of episodes that constitute his

mythological identity. We know that he volunteered to be one of the Athenians sent to Crete as an annual tribute to the Minotaur, that when he parted from his father Aegeus his boat carried a black sail which he promised to exchange for a white one should he return triumphant, that he defeated the bull-man in the labyrinth and found his way out with the aid of a ball of thread given to him by Ariadne, that he took her with him when he left the island, but abandoned her on Naxos before completing his journey to Athens, and that he forgot to change the black sail for a white one so that his father, at the sight of the original sail, threw himself off the cliff in despair and died. In all this, there is clarity in the narrative. As his life follows its path, a marked sequence of events occurs. There is, of course, also parallelism and patterning: the unwinding and rewinding of life's thread in the passage through the labyrinth and in the larger context of the *nostos*, or the deception of Ariadne as Theseus sails away from Naxos and the deception of Aegeus as he returns to Athens, both of which are attributed to forgetfulness. These recapitulations, however, are only perceptible against the mainstay of a linear narrative.

Linearity does not apply to Dionysus. Dionysus is a god and, as a god, he is not to be measured in terms of a human life-span. The episodes in his myth cannot be tied down to a particular order. He owes his prominence not to any narrative series, but to his image. If Theseus is an embodiment of the culture hero whose primary mode is narrative, Dionysus belongs to the sphere of the divine and is invoked – and appears – as an image, or a mask. He is, as Otto remarks, “there and not there”.¹ His function, above all, is circumambulatory – to attach himself, in his capacity as god, to human beings, imposing upon their lives and deaths an aura of the supernatural, or the mythological, which most characteristically – as with the maenads – takes the form of derangement.

5. Mr Eliot's Ariadne

Eliot makes two references to the mythological name of Ariadne in his early poetry. The first is in the title of a poem of 1911, “Bacchus and Ariadne; 2nd Debate between the Body and Soul”. The poem contains references to “a wave”, “floods of life”, and “winds beyond the world”, but its main point of interest for the present discussion is that Eliot's allusion is to the final phase of the Ariadne myth, after Theseus has abandoned her, and hints at the distinction between the “profane” body and the “sacred” soul in the lines: “I saw that Time began again its slow/ Attrition on a hard resistant face./ Yet to burst out at last, ingenuous and pure/ Surprised, but knowing” (Eliot 1996, 68). The second allusion, in the second stanza of “Sweeney Erect”, is an ironic one, employed in keeping with an approach that the author was later, in a book review, to dub “the mythical method”, a designation that has subsequently enjoyed a certain celebrity.

The “mythical method”, Eliot claimed, was “a step toward making the modern world possible for art” by the manipulation of “a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (Eliot 1923, 483). Despite Eliot's contention, it was hardly a new device in literary construction. Alexander Pope had put it to satirical use

in the eighteenth century in *The Rape of the Lock* and John Keats had recourse to a similar strategy, albeit for a different purpose, in the composition of his odes in the nineteenth century, before Arnold took it up in “Dover Beach”. One may, however, safely conclude with Eliot that it is “*simply* a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot 1923, 483; italics added).

Eliot created a character called Sweeney. Sweeney appears in three early poems—“Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service” (Eliot 1977, 54-55), “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” (Eliot 1977, 56-57), and “Sweeney Erect” (Eliot 1977, 42-43)—before he receives a brief mention in *The Waste Land* and later appears as an unsavoury character in the fragmentary play *Sweeney Agonistes*. “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service” concerns itself with Christianity and concludes with an incongruous, but not inappropriate, two-line reference to Sweeney, “Stirring the water in his bath”. “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” and “Sweeney Erect” juxtapose Sweeney’s sordid world with those of Agamemnon and Ariadne, respectively. Instrumental in establishing a parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity in all three poems is the implicit introduction of the imagery, in the final stanza, of bath water. In “Sweeney Among the Nightingales”, the allusion is made in reference to the murder of Agamemnon, whom Clytemnestra killed as he stepped out of the bath. In “Sweeney Erect”, it is signalled by the entry of Doris, “towelled from the bath”. Sweeney’s association with the bath is consolidated in *The Waste Land*, when he makes his one and only appearance in that poem:

But at my back from time to time I hear
The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.
O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
And on her daughter
They wash their feet in soda water (Eliot 1977, 67)

In the two Sweeney poems that contain classical allusions, bath water is contrasted with sea water. More generally, an artificial and unappealing domestic interior is set off against the background of the natural world: “shrunk seas” in “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” and “snarled and yelping seas” in “Sweeney Erect”. It is, however, more than the world of nature that is evoked. The mythological allusions in these two poems (as indeed the reference to “the unoffending feet” of Christ—the Baptized God—in “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service”) create a supernatural context.

6. Crete reformulated

Two episodes in the myth of Ariadne, in particular, have attracted poets, painters, and sculptors from antiquity to the present day. The first is Theseus in the labyrinth and the second is Ariadne on the shore at Naxos, either asleep or awake. These are the moments in the myth when narrative, as it were, yields primacy to image and, on both occasions, the story moves from life among humans to an encounter with other forms of being: with the Minotaur or the God.

Eliot chose to begin his poem “Sweeney Erect” by addressing the second of these two moments. The first two stanzas read:

Paint me a cavernous waste shore
Cast in the unstilled Cyclades,
Paint me the bold anfractuous rocks
Faced by the snarled and yelping seas.
Display me Aeolus above
Reviewing the insurgent gales
Which tangle Ariadne’s hair
And swell with haste the perjured sails. (Eliot 1977, 42)

This prelude to the account of Sweeney’s amatory activities in a house of low repute takes the form of an injunction to represent a mythological scene pictorially—to paint and display. Its ostensible focus is the natural world. Each line in the opening stanza ends with a word denoting a geographical feature, qualified by one or more adjectives that precede it. The repetition of “Paint me” in the odd lines of the stanza and the near rhyme of “Cast” and “Faced” in the even contribute to the sense of directness. No superfluous detail is supplied and none is sought in the requested depiction. The adjectives lend a particular dynamism to an otherwise bland reference to the rocks, sea, and shore of the Aegean. It is only in the second stanza that the natural scene takes on mythological overtones with the allusions to Aeolus and Ariadne.

It is tempting to correlate what Eliot has to say about the “mythical method” in its exercise of “a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” with Eliade’s remark that “In most cases it is not enough to *know* the origin myth, one must *recite* it; this, in a sense, is a proclamation of one’s knowledge, *displays* it” (Eliade 1975, 17-18; italics in the original). It is precisely *display* that is enjoined in Eliot’s poem, in what amounts to a recitation, in the introduction of Ariadne into the picture.

Scene becomes story. The mere deployment of two names suffices to effect the alteration. Familiarity with the classical tradition, which Eliot assumed his readers had, is, of course, a *sine qua non* for an appreciation of the allusion to the myth of Ariadne who was abandoned deceitfully by Theseus. His hurried and secretive departure amounted to perjury, since he had sworn his love to the Cretan princess. In this picture, Aeolus, the god of the winds, is the active agent and Ariadne the suffering victim. The tangle of her hair, which brings these two mythological figures together, carries a subtle reminder of the ball of thread that had united Theseus and Ariadne in Crete.

This is not the end of the poem’s mythological associations, however, for traces persist in the parenthetical reference to Nausicaa and Polypheme, inhabitants of other Mediterranean islands, whom Odysseus encountered as he came ashore. Then, in the last stanza, Doris, who takes her name from the nymph married to the sea-god Nereus (“Doris, lovely-haired/ Daughter of Oceanus, circling stream”, as Hesiod called her),² makes her appearance, transformed, in the house of the aptly named Mrs. Turner. She enters, swaddled in a towel, “padding on broad feet” and brings “sal volatile/ And a

glass of brandy neat", stronger stimulants than the soda water that administers to the needs of Mrs. Porter in *The Waste Land*. By now, Crete has become a distant memory. The very letters that make up the name of the island have been rearranged to form the epithet that characterises Sweeney: erect.

7. A Pictorial Coda

Eliot's Ariadne is awake and gazes out to sea, but the image of the sleeping Ariadne, as Theseus slipped away, is also one that has caught the imagination of poets and painters alike. It was sufficiently compelling to have had the force of an obsession for the twentieth-century painter, Giorgio de Chirico. From 1912 to 1913, at the start of his so-called metaphysical period, he produced a set of paintings of Ariadne and he returned repeatedly to depictions of the enigmatic figure of the exiled Cretan princess throughout his life, completing as many works on the topic as there are Nereids in the ocean. His self-portrait of 1911 is inscribed with the words "Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigmaest?" (Dottori 2006, 204).³ In Ariadne, he found the ideal analogue of the enigma.

The Cretan princess is represented in the Ariadne series as a statue asleep in the incongruous setting of a modern Italian piazza with a train visible in the background. Critics, following de Chirico's lead, identify a powerful link between enigma and melancholy in the artist's representation of Ariadne, a combination which points ultimately to a preoccupation with self-identity and self-knowledge in which time (or the present) and timelessness (or the mythic) are of central, metaphysical concern. While acknowledging the importance of Nietzsche's conception of the Ariadne myth for de Chirico, Michael Taylor argues that "ultimately the dejected figure of Ariadne transcends its origins in Greek myth and the writings of Nietzsche to become a personal symbol of loneliness, melancholy and mystery for the artist" (O'Hanlan 2012, 72).⁴ Ariadne, in effect, becomes de Chirico's mythic self in the period from 1911 to 1913, establishing the ground for an evolving sense of his own identity as an artist in the early years of the twentieth century.

8. Losing the Thread

Abandoned by Theseus, Ariadne seeks another thread to guide her, but when Dionysus arrives he offers her a crown instead. A thread promises narrative continuity, a way into a story and a way out, but Ariadne's story begins and ends on the land's edge. In the mythic account, we find ourselves in the realm of competing images as the remainder of Ariadne's story becomes more obscure and, in its different variants, contradictory. We are, in effect, unable to read Ariadne's story, since the liminal cannot truly be narrated. We can merely look on. Her story may only be communicated from the outside by external display, as Eliot and de Chirico understood in their different ways. The indispensable medium of narration is time and, in a liminal experience, time is suspended.

Upon the arrival of Dionysus at Naxos, Ariadne's story has become a theophany, a visitation of the god of duality, of life and death. Eliot's "Bacchus and Ariadne" starts with the poet's announcement: "I saw their lives curl upward like a wave/ And

break. And after all it had not broken” (Eliot 1996, 68). Indirectly, Eliot’s reference to the paradoxical, broken-unbroken conjunction of god and mortal acknowledges the union of two lives represented astronomically in the mythological account of the formation of the constellation known as Corona Borealis or the Northern Crown. An earlier English poet had been more explicit, drawing the reader’s attention to the heavenly “display” above the terrestrial sphere, in his injunction to look up at the night sky:

Looke! how the crowne, which Ariadne wore
Upon her yvory forehead, [...]
Being now placed in the firmament,
Through the bright heaven doth her beams display,
And is unto the starres an ornament,
Which round about her move in order excellent.

(Spenser 1893, *The Faerie Queene* Book VI, Canto X, xiii)

In the language of symbolism, Spenser’s circular “ornament” is the antithesis of the linear thread. The end of Ariadne’s story takes us back to its beginning in an eternal return, for the heavenly crown is a refashioning of a diadem that crops up earlier in the myth. The earlier object is given to the Minoan maiden either by Dionysus (as a wedding gift, made by Hephaestus) or by Theseus (who obtained it from Thetis or her sister Amphitrite), depending on which version is followed.⁵ The story of Ariadne, we might conclude, is, like the image of Dionysus (or Bacchus), “there and not there”. Ultimately, it cannot be read, it can only be shown ... in the firmament, circumambulatory.

Notes

1. The mask is “the symbol and the manifestation of that which is simultaneously there and not there: that which is excruciatingly near, that which is completely absent – both in one reality.” (Otto 1965, 91).
2. *Theogony*, ll. 241-42 (Hesiod and Theognis 1973, 30)
3. “And what shall I love if it is not enigma?”
4. O’ Hanlan takes up Taylor’s use of the word “personal” to introduce the Jungian concept of a “personal myth” in her discussion of de Chirico, albeit in relation to the Dioscuri rather than Ariadne.
5. Other permutations also exist. It is even reported in one variant of the myth that it was not a thread that aided Theseus in finding his way out of the labyrinth, but the gems from the crown, shining in the darkness, which lit his exit.

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Literature, Mythology, Orphism: “Language as God” in the French *Nouveau Roman*

METKA ZUPANČIČ

Abstract

European literature of the late twentieth century usually appears as belonging to an atheistic, agnostic, materialistic worldview. In post-World War II France, major literary trends created new ways of thinking and writing that seemingly precluded all metaphysical concerns. The present study focuses on a particular French literary movement called *Le Nouveau Roman* (“The New Novel”). A posteriori critical approach nevertheless shows that novels generated by these authors cannot escape the principles of the eternal return and remain deeply rooted in mythology, particularly in mythological ways of thinking. Directly or indirectly, they reactivate the Orphic myth, and more particularly Orphism as a literary tradition in which language becomes the ultimate, the absolute. With other writers from *Le Nouveau Roman*, Claude Simon (1913-2005), the 1985 Nobel Prize winner, is a typical example of this type of writing and of the aesthetic evolution of a novelist. Simon’s fiction had an enormous impact on contemporary intelligentsia, although it is still considered to be rather hermetic, quite extreme in its deconstruction of the traditional novel. Such a reading of mythical dimensions in *Le Nouveau Roman* is indebted to Mircea Eliade and Gilbert Durand’s studies of myths and the “imaginary,” as well as the analysis of the Orphic myth by Elizabeth Sewall.

Keywords: French New Novel; Claude Simon; structuralism; semiotics; return of mythology; Orphism.

1. Introduction

European literature of the late twentieth century usually appears as belonging to an atheistic, agnostic, and materialistic worldview. Yet, mythological elements that we find in these literary works, with archetypes, symbols, explicit or implicit recourse to ancient traditions and belief systems, are an indelible mark of what many myth scholars identify as the eternal return: of patterns in human psyche linked to creativity that inevitably brings to light the connections with our (mythical) past.

In post-World War II France, major literary trends created new ways of thinking and writing that seemingly precluded all metaphysical concerns. The present study concentrates on a particular French literary movement called *Le Nouveau Roman* (The

New Novel). Inasmuch as this literary movement stems from this same anti-metaphysical attitude, a posterioricritical approach shows that novels generated by the “New Novelists” remain deeply rooted in mythology, particularly in mythological ways of thinking. I link these mainly to Orphic myth, and Orphism as a particular literary tradition, wherein language becomes the ultimate, in other words, the absolute.

As a typical example of this type of writing and of the aesthetic evolution of a novelist, I refer to the 1985 Nobel Prize winner, Claude Simon (1913-2005). With other writers from *Le Nouveau Roman*, in which Simon was particularly prominent in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, his fiction had an enormous impact on contemporary intelligentsia, although it is still considered to be a rather hermetic literary orientation, quite extreme in its deconstruction of the traditional types of writing, especially the novel.

In the early fifties, *Le Nouveau Roman* was generated by the necessity to counter mainstream plot-oriented writing, and particularly philosophical prose such as that of Sartre, in which language, “la parole,” was completely subordinated to a development of particular ideas and to their defense.

The notoriety of *Le Nouveau Roman* was built partly through the cohesion of seven or eight writers united around their publisher, Jérôme Lindon, at *Les Éditions de Minuit*: Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Claude Simon, Robert Pinget, Claude Ollier, Samuel Beckett, and Nathalie Sarraute, as well as Jean Ricardou, who joined the group in the sixties. The activities of the group were warmly welcomed by one of the founders of modern semiology, Roland Barthes, a long-time central critical authority in France.

In his early writings, Barthes defends the new “phenomenological literature” of these writers, promoting the “gaze” of an “objective” narrator. In Robbe-Grillet’s novels, for example, the narrator, a major focal point in traditional novels, has almost disappeared. Furthermore, theories devised mainly from inside the movement by Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, and subsequently Ricardou progressively introduced a new approach to New Novels—an approach that was extremely narratological in nature, as it omitted all psychology or indicators of the writers’ attitudes. Plot, characters, linear development of the story, metaphysical questioning: these were the main targets in *Le Nouveau Roman*’s process of deconstructing the novel.

From the first so-called phenomenological phase, *Le Nouveau Roman* evolved into a profoundly structuralist prose, where all possible extra-textual references were reduced to what Ricardou called “la bataille de la phrase” (“the battle of the phrase”) (1971, 119) in his reading of Claude Simon’s *The Battle at Pharsalus* (*La bataille de Pharsale*, 1969). In the seventies, French semiotics had an impact on the perception of what might be read in *Le Nouveau Roman*: emphasis upon structure gave way to allowing some “meaning”; that is to say, a multiplicity of meanings might be sought in place of a unique, nearly theological “sense.” An awareness of novels’ intertextuality became one of the main orientations in researching these texts.

As an example of how a writer from *Le Nouveau Roman* reacted to the highly intellectual and abstract debates around the fate of contemporary fiction, Claude Simon

followed somewhat reluctantly the limiting structuralist impositions of theoreticians among the novelists from inside the movement. Finally, Simon declared his disapproval of Ricardou's readings of his own novels, especially in the mid-eighties. Simon always referred to himself as "Monsieur Jourdain of the Nouveau Roman" (a reference to Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*), meaning that he was—theoretically—the least educated writer among the group. On receiving the Nobel Prize, in 1985, Simon nevertheless refused categorically that his prose still be interpreted by a strictly structuralist-semiotic grid such as strongly promoted by Ricardou.

Regardless of the many approaches to Simon's novels, a particular feature of his writing did not catch his contemporary readers' eyes, probably because of its own imposing "mythology," with a system of values and codes of reading inside this literary movement. No matter how much these writers were efficient in re-organizing the traditional novel, they could not eradicate the one feature that underlines all literary texts, if they are to be called "literature": the words. Furthermore, no matter how much any metaphysical readings of *Le Nouveau Roman* were discouraged, a particular mythology was at the core of this literary movement: the myth of yet another avant-garde capable of drastically transforming the novel and announcing major changes for the future. In this and other contexts, mythology and myth can be defined as a solid belief system that directs actions and ways of being for all those who adhere to it.

It is quite obvious that this "funding mythology" inside *Le Nouveau Roman* could not be perceived as a "mythology," since that would have meant the end of the endeavors of the group, in the sense that understanding their own way of thinking could have shattered their intellectual constructs. Also, with Barthes's rejection of myths in his *Mythologies* (1957), New Novelists did not think of themselves as constructing a new belief system or mythology. Inside this (unconscious) funding mythology, Simon himself, apparently without a particular intention or awareness of it, called upon the major myths from the Greek and Roman tradition to create his own novels. This fiction can be very generally described as a continuation of the stream-of-consciousness way of writing, but also as a special tribute to a highly developed analogical type of thinking.

Simon's novels generally adhere to a number of major geometrical patterns that guide the construction of the narrative and abound in comparisons and similes. There is hardly an element of this prose that does not open gateways to new perceptions, new crossroads, and new venues in understanding, through a number of connectors: "as if" ("comme si"), "similar to," "such as"; these elements that introduce comparisons are common in all of his novels. A human character is "like" a painting or a sculpture; a description of a concrete historic event is "similar to" a mythical tale from Greece. A contemporary situation can be blown up to gigantic proportions: the cold during the 1940 mobilization period, in Northern France, is linked to the prehistoric ice age. In this regard, Simon's prose, much like that of other modern writers (such as Marcel Proust, and certainly Virginia Woolf), meanders through never-ending sentences (one of the longest covers twenty pages in print), paragraphs that become chapters where images

build upon each other, sometimes completely detaching the narrative from its initial reference. However, Simon's rigorously constructed novels express the writer's deepest commitment to the "god" that inhabits language.

In his facsimile hand-written introduction to *Orionaveugle*,¹ Simon develops his thoughts of how an intrinsic logic, a sort of an absolute, inherent to language, guides his writing and leads him from one dimension to many others, from one sensation or association to an explosion of analogies as wide as the universe. In this regard, Simon's writing inscribes itself in the tradition of all those *poetai*, the "doers through art," who were the followers of the man-as-powerful-as-the-gods, Orpheus, as I will show later.

2. Literature and Mythical Criticism

The sixties in France witnessed an outburst of several different schools of criticism, all more or less influenced by different versions of structuralism. The search for underlying *structures* in literary and social phenomena may have been a secular correlate to what C. G. Jung developed much earlier in his theory of archetypes (Durand 1969 [1999, English translation]).

In France, the prevalent Cartesian tradition always had a counterpart in a school system where Greek and Latin were still emphasized, and where Mediterranean mythology was part of nearly everyone's upbringing. Influenced by Jung, but also by his contemporary Gaston Bachelard, particularly in his *Poetics of Space* (1957 [1964, English translation]), with his typology of elements (earth, fire, et al.), Gilbert Durand joined different French "criticisms" in the sixties with his two critical tools, *mythocritique* and *mythanalyse*. The first deals with myths in a particular context, analyzing their functioning and their interconnectedness from a more or less "immanent" point of view. The second places myths within historical contexts, and observes dominant "energies" in a particular century as identified by one dominant myth. Durand's major shift from the structuralist thought of his day was his perception of structures: he proposed that instead of being empty, they contained *mythical* material. In his *Figures mythiques et visages de l'œuvre*, Durand thus established a strong link between symbols and myths (1979, 87-88).

Durand's theories coincided with the move of French structuralism during the sixties toward a more *semiotic* perception of the material. His theories came to corroborate the positions of the Soviet author who subsequently gained a major place in Western thought, Mikhail Bakhtin, whose philosophy was only introduced to France in the sixties by Tzvetan Todorov and Julia Kristeva. Todorov, in his own evolution of semiotics, particularly in *Theories of the Symbol* (1977 [1982, English translation]), made reference to Bakhtin's term "symbolology"—the necessity, for a literary critic, to assess the symbolic dimensions of a text. In his own criticism, Durand included symbols in his system of mythical analysis, yet ignored thinkers like Bakhtin whose works were only becoming available in French.

Durand considered myths to be "modules of history," or "the ultimate referent by which history may be understood" (1979, 29; 31; my translation). In his opinion,

there is “no discontinuity between the meaningful scenarios of ancient mythologies and the modern construction of cultural discourses” (1979, 11). Furthermore, in Durand’s *mythanalyse*, no epoch can escape a mythical patterning. Hence Hermes, the carrier of communication, exemplifies how important a mythological gaze can be for our times. In the system of thinking that honors symbols, all mythical representations, all mythical models, all symbolic dimensions receive identical treatment. Hermes, closely linked to Orpheus, is at the core of dialogue; as we return to mythical figures to identify contemporary trends in literature and culture, the association of such ideas with Bakhtin’s theory appears quite plausible, considering that it is entirely based upon “dialogical principle” (Todorov 1981). In the same spirit, Michel Serres, in *Hermès I* (1969), insists on the importance of Hermes as a communicator for the twentieth century. Yet, French literary “criticisms,” mostly based on linguistic theories such as structuralism and semiotics, could only partially answer questions pertaining to symbols. In the sixties, French intellectuals in search of a larger perspective on myths were interested in the works of Mircea Eliade, who wrote in French and was very present in Parisian circles. In his own way, Eliade participated in the creation of contemporary mythical criticism.

My reading of mythical dimensions in *Le Nouveau Roman* is very much indebted to the position defended by Eliade in *Myth and Reality* (1963b). He suggests that myth is not to be considered as something unreal, a fable, a position inherited mostly from the Romans. With a progressive rise of rational thinking in Rome, with its climax in nineteenth century (French) positivism, myth started to be perceived as a lie. Neither could Christianity perceive itself as a mythology: hence the refusal of myths by Christians (1963b, 162-64).

In Durand’s mind, myth is the point where we encounter gods and mysteries, whereas for Eliade, myth appears to be the irruption of sacredness in our world. The totality of the world, the Cosmos, can thus be established (1963b, 13 and 18) within a holistic perception and acceptance of the world. To some extent, this way of thinking echoes Lévi-Strauss’s attitude in *Structural Anthropology* (1958) towards myth as the ultimate element of unification, in terms of similar paradigms encountered in a series of different cultures.

Eliade finds himself at the end of a two-thousand-year period that developed a particular attitude toward myths. Our era inherited a mythology that lost its sacredness: a partial process of this loss of connections with the divine afflicted the Greeks, and then played itself out in Roman times. The reason for such disillusionment with mythology comes from the Greeks who found Olympus to be immoral, promoting disharmony and injustice, and could no longer be accepted as truth (1963b, 152-53). Eliade, together with other researchers, does not find it necessary to examine the historical justifications for the transformations in the perception of myths at the beginning of our era. Nevertheless, the loss of sacred nature and function of myths did not abolish the presence of mythology in the collective thought because “Greek religion and mythology, radically secularized and demythicized, survived in European

culture, for the very reason that they had been expressed by literary and artistic masterpieces” (1963b,160). It is possible to imagine with Eliade that from a certain period in Greece, Western cultures have lost their connection with the spiritual realm. This loss is perhaps suggested by Orphic myth, through the poet’s incapacity to bring back to this world a living Eurydice.

Based on authors like Godel, Vernant, Juden, Paulys, and others, we can perhaps imagine that the process of desacralization of myths, which led to our loss of connections with the divine, began around the time of Pythagoras. A mystic and a mathematician, Pythagoras kept the balance between different realms of being. According to Brian Juden (1971), Pythagoras also believed to have established his philosophy as a continuation of Orphism. As bold as it sounds, we may assume that within Pythagoras’s teachings, the *poetai* became mathematicians. With our extremely mathematical, abstract thinking, we might have reached a point that takes us back to Pythagoras: our interest in structures, geometry, mathematics, may well help us reconnect with myths and (following the principle of the eternal return) reassign them a new meaning in arts and particularly in literature.

Le Nouveau Roman, with geometrical forms at the core of the novels, may be perceived as an expression of a Pythagorean stance—between mathematical and symbolic thinking. The emphasis on structures in the sixties and sometimes in the seventies naturally led to myths, especially in the novels by Claude Simon. In this regard, we may consider the novels written by *Le Nouveau Roman* group as an important element in our cultural evolution, and not as a dead-end, hermetic, narcissistic, elitist literary movement.

3. From Language to Myths

Although the New Novelists considered themselves to be materialistic and completely non-religious, their group displays an attitude that is very strongly “religious,” with a single “dogma” imposed upon writers, as well as upon potential readers, especially in terms of Jean Ricardou’s writing. In the eighties, the rejection, by the New Novelists, of Ricardou’s critical impositions limited to formal principles was just as radical as was its acceptance in the sixties. Its dismantling of Ricardou’s authority resembles the breaking away from a form of religion or cult. From the point of view of “religious studies,” a number of social and intellectual associations in contemporary secular society may be linked to some sort of religious behavior, because of the cohesion and the feeling of belonging that they create (Ménard 1999). This would account for the basic human need for transcendence, for belonging to a group that finds meaning in expressions of collective interest (Maffesoli 1991 [1996, English translation]). The New Novelists chose *language* as this particular ground for connecting with each other and for connecting with their readers.

While considering themselves as “scriptors” (a term used to undermine their “role” in the writing process), these authors “humbly” subdued their will and offered their services to language as the ultimate, the unquestionable, the absolute principle guiding all their endeavors. The laws inscribed in language, namely, the formal principles

and structures, were to be revealed through the writing process. The non-anthropomorphic approach to literature (Robbe-Grillet 1963 [1965, English translation]) thus placed words at the center of the writing process (instead of an omniscient creator). As Simon stated in *Orion aveugle*, semantic fields that surround each and every word create possibilities for clusters of meaning, which stimulate writers to explore further analogical connections, with language as a living organism with no particular center.

From this initial utopian belief that the “scriptor” was completely letting the words “do their work,” staying on the outskirts of the process, *Le Nouveau Roman* evolved through different phases toward a much more “interactive” space where the writers eventually regained the title of “authors” and perceived themselves as mediators and active facilitators for form and word interactions to be materialized in a literary text (Ricardou 1978). Starting with Robbe-Grillet, the theoretician of the first, “objective” phase of *Le Nouveau Roman*, as opposed to Ricardou, the defender of the second, formalist approach, the last phase during the eighties was no longer considered as marked by structuralism. Most of the writers acknowledged in different public appearances that autobiography strongly influenced their impersonal, the so-called non-emotional writing (Allemand 1992). But the initial utopia of this strong connection with language as the ultimate principle has not been completely revoked or denied by New Novelists, as they continued to write in the eighties and the nineties.

Particularly as seen in Simon’s writings, we notice that concentrating on language led New Novelists to discover various *geometrical* structures under seemingly arbitrary analogical connections between words. In the late seventies, New Novelists started to perceive these structures as meaningful, as carriers of symbols. Finally, more than ten years later, forms like triangles, circles, and spirals, appeared to some critics as archetypes (Allemand 1993). Such understanding of the role of geometrical structures in novels, by critics rather than by writers, brought to light numerous mythical references that were inscribed in this fiction from the very beginning of *Le Nouveau Roman*, with a number of major Greek myths as metaphors for human condition. Durand published his major work on the anthropological nature of symbolic and mythological thinking as early as 1969. However, mythical analyses of *Le Nouveau Roman* movement remain scarce. One of the examples is Jean-Claude Vareille’s 1989 book on Pinget’s, Robbe-Grillet’s, and Simon’s “imaginary”—“imaginaire,” a term coined by Durand, which includes myths, symbols, and basically all products of human imagination.

4. Orphism and The Nouveau Roman

In his major novel from the early period of the New Novel, *La route des Flandres* (1960), in English translation *The Flanders Road* (1985), Claude Simon brings together war situations from different times, in conjunction with love affairs that often have a tragic outcome. The way he constructs his narrative is to use an element of the “plot” as a metaphor for how different themes and sequences are formally combined in the text. In a clear “*mise en abyme*,” horse races are described as held on a racecourse shaped as a lying figure 8: subsequently, a central scene of the novel is built so as to

reflect this figure, in its form. The narrative moves back and forth from a description of an ambush in the Second World War to jockeys competing with each other for a more mundane prestige. During the sixties, when interviewed about his novel, Simon refused categorically any symbolic explanation of his text (see Ricardou and Van Rossum Guyon 1972), and also any establishment of references to history, to his own war experiences, and to the documents he used. He insisted that the novel was a universe of its own and that we needed to explore the connections between different narratives to find out how they interacted inside the novel.

When I met Simon in 1993 at a conference in his honor, at the University of Queen's, in Kingston, Ontario, he continued to refuse any mention of myths and symbols in this particular text (and consequently in all of his novels). However, many of his themes are "generated" (in Ricardou's terminology) by a series of mythical intertextual references to which Simon frankly admits his debt. Among them we find, for the Second World War soldiers, Dürer's *Four Riders of the Apocalypse*, the fourth in the cycle of fifteen wood-carvings, *The Apocalypse* (1498). For a researcher who is open to symbolic connections, Simon's *Flanders Road* offers ample opportunities for investigations in this direction, especially because of the image of apocalypse being reinforced with the one of flood: the universe such as described by Simon perishes either through water or fire, regenerates itself, and perishes again, in this continuous movement suggested by the figure 8, again in a clear sense of the "eternal return."

In his novel *Triptyque* (1973), translated in English as *Triptych* (1976), Simon distributes three major narratives, with a fourth that reflects them all, in such a manner that they create continuous structures of triangles with circumscribed circles. He constantly curtails the "plot," in order to submit it to a vertical set of analogies that create a (literary) pyramid. One of the narratives—Simon calls them "series"—is set in a particular "modality" that appears closest to "reality" as we would find it in a more traditional novel. This "sequence" then "holds" an element of the second narrative, which appears in a "modality" further away from reality, as a film. Inside this film, for example, we find an element of the third narrative, in yet another "modality," a book, a poster, a picture (a modality that is further away from an illusion of real life). After Simon has aligned these three narratives, he turns them upside down, by changing the "modalities" for each of the narratives. At times, he brings in the "circle," the fourth narrative that serves as a mirror and "embraces" all previous developments.

During my first encounter with this novel, shortly after its publication in the seventies, I was mesmerized by this structural play. The analysis of structures was at that time a very legitimate and highly encouraged critical task, warmly received by Simon. The symbolic dimension of my interpretation that he gladly accepted was the conjunction of Eros and Thanatos, since all three narratives in the novel link death and eroticism. If I were to expand on this novel today, I would insist on such elements as fragmentation of the narrative, together with the couple of Eros and Thanatos, to build a more Jungian type of interpretation of the text.

At the time Simon's novels were published, particularly those that were more structurally oriented, they represented great novelty and challenge for readers who

were still trying to recreate linearity, unity of plot, and unity of characters. This “non-fictional,” “non-linear,” prose was promoted by the whole group of the New Novelists. It used geometry, mathematical ways of exploring language. One might argue that writers of all times used structures and some mathematical combinations in constructing their literature. However, here, the mathematical thinking was a priority before any attention to the plot, and it may be seen as the New Novelists’ major contribution to our understanding of literature.

As I have suggested earlier, the New Novelists, by concentrating upon geometrical forms, meant to deconstruct the traditional novel such as it was inherited from the nineteenth century. But they equally enabled—or rather forced—readers and critics to focus upon these structures that became more and more significant and carried more particular meanings. A major shift in my understanding of Simon’s prose happened when I worked on another of Simon’s novels. With the publication of his fourteenth text, *Les géorgiques* (1981), titled *Georgics* (1988) in English translation, Simon established a strong intertextual link with Vergil’s eponymous masterpiece. There is a strong structural component to the novel, built in five chapters, still in the style of analogical sequences. Among many typical analogical developments in the novel, the description of an airplane in the sky (related to the 1940 French defeat on the Northern front) awakens the theme of a bird, which immediately leads to a mention of the painter Uccello. The logic behind this sequence of images is that Uccello, Simon’s favorite painter, together with other Renaissance innovators in art, was the one who developed perspective. In this same fashion, the novel continues with hints to perspective used for military purposes as well as for agriculture. This is where Simon builds upon Vergil’s intent, in *Georgics*, to have Roman fields brought back to growth, after they have been devastated by the troops. Again in the sense of eternal return(s) of compatible literary and mythical data, this example shows one of the many intertextual links and similarities not only with Vergil, but also with authors such as Monteverdi and Gluck, who used the first *Georgics* for the librettos of their operas based on Orphic myth. In his novel, Simon makes a number of references to both composers.

As I was trying to dissect innumerable connections and organize them into a meaningful system, it became obvious that I could no longer use exclusively the synchronic and “immanent” textual approach from my previous research. It also appeared that I could no longer abide by Simon’s declarations surrounding his novels. In his practice, Simon has always proven the contrary of his own intentions, those of listening only to what language would dictate to him. It was the presence of Orpheus in *Georgics*, as an operatic character mainly from Gluck’s *Orfeo*, that propelled me toward the analysis of myths and symbols. As I have already pointed out, anthropologist Gilbert Durand emerged from the structuralist and post-structuralist French intellectual movements and gave content to “the structures,” something none of the structuralists had produced previously. Myth, at the core of each and every structure, according to Durand, is to be understood as the core belief system and the grounding principle of our lives.

At the core of Simon's novel *Georgics*, I saw Orpheus as a major structural factor, the one that helps create multiple intertextual and interdisciplinary links inside the text. Among many mythical elements of the novel, Orpheus remained the most important, appearing as a connector between mathematical and symbolic thinking. Furthermore, this myth seemed to possess both the magnetic, centripetal, and the centrifugal power of opening the literary space and time, especially compared to *Triptyque*, which presents a model of a literary universe contained in a strict geometrical form.

My reading of *Georgics* in the light of this particular myth initiated my own mythical journey between cultures, different forms of arts, rituals, and spiritualities. Elizabeth Sewell and her essay *The Orphic Voice* (1960) offered a key for the understanding of why, in Simon's novel, there is a textual and intertextual web created with a fixed number of elements. In her essay, Sewell insists that references to Orpheus and more widely of Orphism as a system, in a literary text, always appear through an interdisciplinary interaction of five "Orphic languages": the ritual and the dance, plastic arts with colors and forms, music and rhythm, mathematics, and the literary discourse, the Word, that combines them all. In Simon's *Georgics*, mathematics—geometrical forms, numbers, and also military skills, in artillery—lead to rituals: war is perceived as a major ritual, as is opera. These in turn conduct us to the visual arts: Simon constantly "paints" with words and alludes to a series of painters and also architects, from Piero della Francesca to Palladio, Ver Meer, Poussin, Cézanne and other impressionists, and up to cubism and Picasso. From the visual arts, Simon takes us to music, with Gluck's opera *Orfeo* embedded in one of the narrative "series," with many references not just to Monteverdi, but also to more contemporary composers such as Boulez. Orphic myth in Simon's *Georgics* accounts for constant quotes from many writers, from antiquity to our times, with Proust being one of Simon's favorite authors. Orphism as a way of thinking, as suggested by Sewell's *The Orphic Voice*, and as I have attempted to demonstrate so far, explains not only the connection between myths and mathematical structures, but also the interdisciplinary analogies that are a predominant feature of these literary texts.

Sewell declares that all writing is myth, and in poetry and literature, the central mythical figure remains that of Orpheus: "The myth provides, in its narrative, a method by which to pursue the inquiry" (Sewell 1960,5). And again:

The myth turns back upon itself because it is the question that figures its own reply [. . .]. Orpheus is statement, question and method, at one and the same time. [. . .] we are to think of myth and poetry, under the figure of Orpheus, as an instrument of knowledge and research. (Sewell 1960,4)

It is remarkable that the process of self-reflecting (and thus self-mirroring), which for Sewell represents the basic dimension of myths and of Orphism in particular, is at the core of the techniques adopted by *Le Nouveau Roman* in general as well as by Simon. In *The Mirror in the Text*, his study of these procedures, Lucien Dällenbach defines "*mise en abyme*" as constant mirroring, perpetual speculations, and the intricate

interaction of formal and narrative elements (1977 [1989, English translation]). As Sewell puts it: “For Orpheus is poetry thinking about itself” (Sewell 1960,47); and again: “In the Orpheus story, myth is looking at itself. This is the reflection of myth in its own mirror” (Sewell 1960,41).

Writing poetry or, for that matter, any form of literature, according to Sewell, necessarily takes us back to Orpheus: “If you cannot think in mathematics, you have to think in words; but with words comes Orpheus, the poetic and metaphoric power of language operating on the mind” (Sewell 1960,9). In this sense, language in itself appears as Orphic. Science and poetry, analysis and synthesis, mathematics and Word, all together make a universe in itself, with all parts striving in the same direction:

Science cannot be set against poetry because they are structurally similar activities. Analyses cannot be set [. . .] against synthesis because each is the precondition of the other’s working. Mathematics cannot be set against words because each is an instrument of myth in the mind. (Sewell 1960, 12-13)

In *Le Nouveau Roman*, the predominance of structural concerns governing the narrative (or plot), as demonstrated in Simon’s novels, clearly focuses upon language as such, and upon the science to combine the words so as to create new resonances. This literary movement appears as one of the first, in French literary history, to create a theory, a self-reflection, that comes along with the novels. In this regard, as Elizabeth Sewell reminds us, the Orphic myth suggests a particular type of cognition, of self-reflection:

It promises to give Orpheus a special significance: for myth as living thought and the very type of thought in action, and for all those rather reflexive or self-reflecting forms; for the human organism as an indivisible whole trying to understand itself and its universe [. . .] reflecting on the whole span of life in which thinking man appears as the last enigmatic development. (Sewell 1960,41)

Quite clearly, Elizabeth Sewell opens a whole new perspective for our readings of contemporary fiction in general, offering a number of arguments for a reversal of our perception of the French Nouveau Roman. One may stipulate that her vision of Orphism is too broad and too inclusive, placing all types of writing—and thus all thinking—in a mythical context. It is true that in the past, all literary texts, by the very nature of metaphors and metonymies, explored one form or another of symbols, archetypes, or myths. As a group, New Novelists were among those writers who developed a number of features that belong to mythological thinking, such as analogies, and the conjunction of opposites, together with many mythological images. Meanwhile, especially in the sixties, they fiercely rejected all that would present them as being part of a tradition. However, when they explored new venues for their novels, they remained inside the framework of what they inherited from their predecessors. With a more postmodern awareness, New Novelists progressively accepted to be a part of a large spiral of connections with the past, with the necessary reactivation of older models or paradigms.

It is possible that the much promoted scientific, linguistic approach to literature may have progressively created the grounds for a new position within the New Novel, with the reconsideration of the mythical elements that have been present in this prose since the beginning of this literary movement.

A postmodern and somehow a post-deconstructionist understanding of the New Novelists certainly takes us from a general view of them as destroyers of literary traditions, to the idea that mythical figures in these novels are a very powerful tool for a reconstruction and a continuity: of the tradition-always-to-be-reconsidered, that might skillfully include the dimensions that have empowered humanity throughout history. Much remains to be said in this field, and many more novels remain to be read from this perspective, before we can consider that mythology is a prevalent feature of contemporary prose in general.

Studies in contemporary feminist theory and prose show that mythical figures, such as those borrowed from the past and rewritten in a contemporary context, help us shape social, psychological, and spiritual identity of the subjects involved. Time will tell if contemporary literature, by consciously reusing myths, is playing a role in “resacralizing” our experience of life and of the world. In this regard, *Le Nouveau Roman*, as one of the examples of eternal (and inevitable) return, in this case of the mythical models from the past, deserves to be explored more fully from these new perspectives in philosophy, in history of ideas, and in literary criticism.

Notes

1. Blind Orion, 1970; its title is a clear intertextual reference to Nicolas Poussin’s mythological painting from 1658, titled *Paysage avec Orion aveugle cherchant le soleil*, rendered in English as *Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun*. The cyclical nature of earth’s revolution around the sun, with Orion’s repeated quest for light, is in itself a marker of the eternal return of deeply rooted human preoccupations such as transcribed or rendered through myths.

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The Eternal Return Interrupted: the evolution of the myth of Cythera until today

BRIGITTE LE JUEZ

Abstract

What this article explores is how the myth of Cythera is developed and returns in French literature, and to what effect, through texts selected over several centuries until today. The literary myth of Cythera illustrates the notion of eternal return through its adherence to the ancient myth of Aphrodite, but it also subverts it in a way that pessimistically defies all possibility of cyclical recurrences of sacred times and heroic deeds.

Keywords

Literary myth, Cythera, Antiquity, 19th-century French poetry, 20th-century fiction.

1. Introduction

The eternal return implies the notion (developed by Mircea Eliade) that one can go back to the time of occurrence of events described in a specific myth, thus moving from profane time back to sacred time (Eliade 1967, 23). This is generally understood to refer to the imitation of the exemplary acts of a mythic figure or to the repetition of their circumstances. This process can be repeated over (historical) time and modern authors demonstrate that it can take on new significances while the fundamental meaning of a myth remains unchanged.

The myth of Cythera is present in many European cultures, but this article will focus in particular on how it is developed and returns in French literature, through texts selected over several centuries until today. This myth illustrates the notion of eternal return through a dual quality: its adherence to the ancient myth, mixed with an ever-renewed sense of subversion that brings beliefs of cyclical recurrence to the test.

Yves Chevrel (2009) defines myth as an allegorical narrative configuration, which represents the basis of a collective reference, and emphasises what differentiates literary myth from other myths: it is a relatable narrative iteratively recounted.¹ It is important to keep in mind that, with each iteration of this narrative, free modifications appear and these changes bring new meanings – a process that determines the very nature of literary myth (Albouy 1969).

Contrary to ancient myth which tells, explains and reveals, while remaining anonymous, timeless, and being conveyed by oral traditions, literary myth is identifiable

insofar as its various authors are known (Brunel 1988). Both, however, have in common that they are susceptible to return in endless variants, offering a multitude of interpretations. Although, like ancient myths, it carries universal themes, exploring and fine-tuning them with each rewriting, the literary myth finds its inspiration in contemporary situations which the story-teller uses as stepping-stones in the elaboration of radically new readings.

This adaptability of literary myths necessarily distances them from ancient myths and is one of the features of the process of defiance inherent to them. The rewriting aspect, which is in dissociable from the literary myth, can indeed only function if subversion of an original text is present.

Defiance is also directed at readers and may constitute an author's refusal to submit to their narrative desires, to their horizons of expectation – expectations that are both personal and conventional. In this way, literary myths resist the facile and regulatory discourses that are sometimes carried by consensuses around myths – thus encouraging readers to think for themselves.

A literary myth naturally displays the qualities of a free agent, moving effortlessly between the artistic genres, ideas and images that it transgresses, demonstrating its creative power, through an undisciplined style that borrows from ancient texts to better disturb their meaning, in the successive stages of its evolution, via its reception and adaptations, and the cultures it traverses.

As we shall now see, Cythera perfectly illustrates all these traits, voicing both the irresistible desire of the eternal return and the impossibility to achieve it in modern times.

2. Cythera, a literary myth

Cythera is one of the Ionian islands, situated at the foot of the Peloponnese.² In Ancient Greece, it was the home of a temple dedicated to Aphrodite, honouring her arrival on the island. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Gaia, the Earth, tired of the insatiable sexual appetite of Uranus, the Sky, and after too many pregnancies, asked one of their numerous sons, Cronus, to cut off Uranus' sexual organs. Having castrated his father, Cronus threw away his sex which fell in the middle of the sea. Mixed with the waves, his seed produced Aphrodite, and thus was the Goddess of Love born. Carried away by Zephyr, she landed on Cythera, which is why she is herself occasionally referred to as Cytherea. She is also called Venus in Roman mythology, a name found in many poems and fables dedicated to the theme of Love and to Cythera. As for Cupid, her son, also called Eros, he is sometimes considered the God of Cythera.

Perceived as a paradise island, associated to women and love, Cythera also remained in the collective imagination as an eternal and enigmatic destination. Indeed, the island was for a long time a commercial and maritime (including pirates or conquerors) meeting place, as well as the locus of strangely mysterious historical events. Its culture was influenced by diverse civilisations, which can still be seen in its architecture (a mixture of Aegean et Venetian elements, for the most part). Over time, a succession of political powers, from the Greeks to the Romans, Byzantines, Venetians, Ottomans,

French, and finally the British, occupied Cythera until 1864, when it was reunited with Greece. Cythera's complex history is consequently part of the evolution of the myth that surrounds it and, depending on the circumstances, a journey to Cythera may represent an inaccessible goal, a perilous excursion or a voyage to a different world, or even death.

However, Cythera's long-lasting signification is that of an erotic escape. Its name, associated with an island and a love goddess, combines aspects of both. This is how Aphrodite became, in the poetic imagination, the protector of lovers who have travelled from an orthodox world to find a free-spirited and enchanting location for their love-making. Jacques Peletier du Mans, in the 16th century, saw in Cythera a metonymy associated with the pleasure of love, a synonym of voluptuousness (Goyet 1990, 278).³ To "embark for Cythera" soon became a sexual metaphor.⁴

The island's connotations allow artists to create imaginary realms running according to particular laws, whose topography functions according to feelings, as can be seen in the 1650 *Carte du Royaume d'amour en l'isle de Cythère* (*Map of the Kingdom of Love on the Island of Cythera*) by Tristan l'Hermite.¹ Similar maps are published in the 17th century, but in 1654, Madeleine de Scudéry, develops the idea when she illustrates her novel *Clélie, histoire romaine* (*Clélie, a Roman History*)² with the famous "Carte de Tendre" ("Map of the country of Love"),³ a topographical and allegorical representation of sentimental conduct and practice. On this map, villages, paths, rivers, etc., illustrate the different stages found in love relationships.⁴ One of Tendre's rivers, for instance, is called Inclination, and it joins two other rivers, one called Esteem, the other Recognition. In order to go from a place called New-Friendship to a town called Tendre-upon-Esteem, one needs to pass by an area called Great-Spirit, followed by the agreeable villages of Pretty-Verse and Love-Letter. The river Inclination, in this amorous geography, runs smoothly in contrast with the passionate Sea which is dangerous.⁵

According to Giuliana Bruno (2002), the "Carte de Tendre" maps out routes that explore gender differences, yet, at certain points, join symbolic terrains at intellectual and emotional levels, thus representing the close ties that exist between men and women, which complement amorous relationships. What Scudéry promotes is an emancipatory alternative to the social standards of her time. This map aims to offer women an uncharted and productive, rather than reproductive, path to follow. At a time of absolutist patriarchy (King Louis XIV's rule), Scudéry attaches an egalitarian utopia to the myth of Cythera.¹⁰

3. The Watteauesque Ambiguity in 19th-Century Poetry

This innovation announces Jean-Antoine Watteau's most celebrated work with Cythera at its core. For Julie Anne Plax (2000), Watteau's *fêtes galantes* express a desire felt by the aristocracy at the time to escape royal authoritarianism by engaging in forms of pastoral and hedonistic recreation, in which costumes betrayed egalitarian fantasies. This is particularly evident in Watteau's *Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera* (1717),¹¹ which encapsulates what Cythera meant, at the time: a euphemism for free

love associated with a typical Parisian spot for romantic rendezvous, the Parc de Saint-Cloud on the river Seine (Börsch-Supan 2007, 64).

The exegesis of the *Pilgrimage* raises a polemic, however: some viewers see in it a joyous departure *for* the island of Aphrodite; others, on the contrary, describe it as the preparation for a return *from* the island tinged with melancholic undertones.¹² This ambiguity marks the beginning of a new interpretation of Cythera: the invitation to a celebration of love in the middle of an enchanting, natural environment is now progressively perceived as a journey to an ephemeral paradise.¹³

The revolutionary period temporarily puts an end to Watteau's success – the artist being considered purely frivolous –, but in the 19th century, a renewed interest for his work appears which echoes the duality that had begun to be perceived in the *Pilgrimage*. On the one hand, frivolity is pursued in writings that use Cythera as the place for erotic adventure. Among the many possible examples, there are stories such as *Le Sacrifice de l'amour, ou La messe de Cythère* (1809) by J.B. de Saincrier who describes young priestesses' (sexual) initiation at the Temple of Aphrodite. The theme will continue to recur until the early 20th century, in collections such as *Les Sociétés d'amour au XVIII^e siècle* (Love associations in the 18th century), *Le code de Cythère* (Cythera's Code), or *Le Culte d'Aphrodite et de Lesbos*, (The Cult of Aphrodite and Lesbos) – collections written according to memoirs, chronicles, songs, pamphlets, unpublished plays and manuscripts by Jean Hervez (1906).¹⁴ On the other hand, the interest for Cythera as found in the work of a new generation of 19th century poets, confirms the more gloomy of the interpretations attached to Watteau's masterpiece.

Gérard de Nerval, for instance, is inspired by Watteau's art as he writes his novel *Sylvie* (1853). The narrator, now a Parisian returning to his homeplace in the country after many years, meets again with Sylvie, his first love, and on the occasion of a ball, starts to believe he can relive the passion of their youth. But Sylvie is soon to be married to another. The dream of love followed by sorrow recalls the ambiguity of the *Pilgrimage*, apparently festive and full of hope, yet tinted with nostalgic overtones – an ambiguity that evokes an idyllic world, now lost.¹⁵

Nerval contributes all the more to the establishment of this new tonality, that he had earlier described, in his *Voyage en Orient* (1851), the disappointment he felt when he visited the island of Cythera (Cérigo to him). Indeed, as his boat approaches the coast of the island, Nerval's head is full of images from the poetry and art he has enjoyed in the past, and he feels at first elated, admiring the purple hills resembling clouds. But his dream soon turns into a nightmare: although the sky and the sea are still in beautiful unison, the ground seems dead, destroyed by human exploitative presence, and it seems to him the Gods have fled from it (Nerval 1984, 392). A vision, in particular, deeply strikes him: that of a hanged man. It strikes him all the more that, before he realised what he was gazing at, he had thought he could perceive a small monument on top of a rock which seemed to him the preserved statue of some protective

divinity (no doubt he had Venus-Aphrodite in mind). However, as the boat draws nearer, he sees it is in fact the horrific structure of gallows on which a man has recently been executed (Nerval 1984, 393).¹⁶

This rude awakening provoked by a nauseating vision are found again in Charles Baudelaire's "Un Voyage à Cythère" ("Voyage to Cythera"), in which the sense of revulsion is enhanced and relentlessly plagues the poet:

<p>Mon cœur, comme un oiseau, voltigeait tout joyeux Et planait librement à l'entour des cordages ; Le navire roulait sous un ciel sans nuages ; Comme un ange enivré d'un soleil radieux. Quelle est cette île triste et noire ? — C'est Cythère, Nous dit-on, un pays fameux dans les chansons, [...] — Île des doux secrets et des fêtes du cœur ! [...] Belle île aux myrtes verts, pleine de fleurs écloses, [...] — Cythère n'était plus qu'un terrain des plus maigres [...]. J'entrevois pourtant un objet singulier ! Ce n'était pas un temple aux ombres bocagères, Où la jeune prêtresse, amoureuse des fleurs, Allait, le corps brûlé de secrètes chaleurs, [...] Nous vîmes que c'était un gibet à trois branches, Du ciel se détachant en noir, comme un cyprès. De féroces oiseaux perchés sur leur pâture Détruisaient avec rage un pendu déjà mûr, [...] Ridicule pendu, tes douleurs sont les miennes ! Je sentis, à l'aspect de tes membres flottants, Comme un vomissement, remonter vers mes dents Le long fleuve de fiel des douleurs anciennes ; [...] — Le ciel était charmant, la mer était taitunie ; [...] Hélas ! et j'avais, comme en un suaire épais, Le cœur enroulé dans cette allégorie. Dans ton île, ô Vénus ! j'en ai trouvé debout Qu'un gibet symbolique où pendait mon image... — Ah ! Seigneur ! donnez-moi la force et le courage De contempler mon cœur et mon corps sans dégoût !</p>	<p>[My heart, like a bird, joyfully fluttered And freely glided around the rigging; The ship rolled on under a cloudless sky; Like an angel tipsy on glorious sunshine. What could that dark, grim island be? — It's Cythera, We're told, the legendary land hailed in songs, [...] — The island of the secrets and feasts of love! [...] Sweet isle of green myrtles and blooming flowers, [...] — Cythera now was but the sparsest rock [...]. Yet I glimpsed a singular object ! This was not the temple deep in wooded shade, Where the flower-loving young priestess Went about, her body devoured by a secret fire, [...] We saw that it was a triple gibbet, Standing out darkly against the sky, like a cypress. Ferocious birds perched on their feed, Tore furiously at a decaying dangling body, [...] Grotesque hanged man, your misery is also mine! While I looked at your floating limbs, I felt rising to my throat, like vomit, The long and bitter river of my past suffering; [...] — The sky was lovely, the sea was smooth; [...] Alas! my heart, as in a thick shroud, Felt terminally wrapped in this allegory. On your island, O Venus! all I saw standing Were symbolic gallows from which my own image hung... — Ah! Lord! Give me the strength and the courage To contemplate my heart and my body without loathing!]¹</p>
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(Baudelaire 1999, 173-175)

Here, all the elements of past and new perceptions of Cythera are gathered: the myth of Aphrodite vs the reality of the contemporary island, Watteau's pictorial feasts still feeding sexual fantasies vs the bareness (the sweet berries of the myrtles are gone) and bleakness of the land (the only fruit now visible is a hanged man). These contrasts lament, like Nerval's, an innocence and a paradise lost. The existential tone of Baudelaire's "Un Voyage à Cythère", although it came out four years after Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*, seems to have triggered the largest following and made the poem the biggest source of influence of the two among modern writers, as we shall see later.

However, echoes of and similarities between both can sometimes be found together in a new text. For instance, Victor Hugo worked on a poem entitled, as Cythera was called in Nerval's text, "Cérigo",¹⁸ published in the famous collection *Les Contemplations*, in 1855. Hugohere offers his own take on the subversion of the positive side of the myth of Cythera. Where Nerval had imagined the sorrow that follows the dream and definitive loss of love, recalling the ambiguity of Watteau's *Pilgrimage*, the idyllic world now vanished, in Hugo's poem, the reality behind the Cytherean dream represents the end of bodily pleasures and the beginning of the decrepitude of the human body, the start of old age and the foreboding of death. While the main theme differs quite significantly from Baudelaire's –Hugo does not identify with a corpse but with the island itself as a sad and solitary rock –, interestingly, he does agree with Baudelaire, describing Cythera as once a luscious garden, the island of green myrtles (the same fruit found in "Un Voyage à Cythère"), which is now no more than a lugubrious, exhausted, meaningless place.¹⁹ Moreover, echoing both Nerval and Baudelaire, he addresses himself to Cythera, saying: "tumeurs, sombre captive!" (sombre prisoner, you are dying). With the simple choice of the name "Cérigo", the notion of captivity and death, in a poet as politically involved as Hugo, reminds us of the denunciation of the repeated colonisation of the island over time. The poet's feeling here is therefore not so much one of bitterness and self-disgust, as found in Baudelaire, or simply one of sorrow in the face of the inevitable loss of beauty, love and life, but rather one of regret at the thought of the assaults of human selfish exploitation and destruction, added to a sense of waste. The poet searches for Watteau's beautiful characters supervised by the Gods; yet, like Nerval, he can only remark on a growing emptiness.²⁰

Théodore de Banville belongs to this generation of poets that perpetuates a fresh perspective on Cythera. Just like Nerval, Hugo and Baudelaire did each in his own way, Banville indeed also considers Watteau's paradise destroyed by the materialist, colonialist and heavily industrial societies of his time. Let us remember that, while France was changing quickly at the time, Cythera as a colony, belonged to Britain until 1864, and that Britain was the leading European country then, as far as modern progress was concerned. In 1861, in his "Ballade aux Enfants perdus" ("Ballad for Lost Children"), Banville sees Cythera in "mourning", "agonising", but he insists: "Never mind ! let's go to fictitious lands ! [...] Let's embark for beautiful Cythera." Later,

he adds: “Away from this world with a deadly breath. [...] Let’s embark for beautiful Cythera”, desperately appealing to those “Heroes hidden in sickly bodies, Let us flee, let us leave on our frail boats [...]. Let’s embark for beautiful Cythera.”²¹

Thirty years later, in 1891, with a poem entitled “Cythère”,²² once again Banville contrasts horror and beauty, death and love. He imagines how a local boatman describes Cythera: covered in graves and ruins; it has become an impure marsh populated by vultures, monsters, snakes and toads.²³ However, in light of this desolation the poet pretends he can still see Cythera as it once was. Suddenly turning the poem around, he declares that nature is still as abundant as ever, describing the island as a harmoniously coloured field of flowers, and Aphrodite’s dark eyes filling the air with wonder and joy.²⁴ The poet thus confirms that mythic Cythera continues to exist in dreams and, consequently, can be revived whenever desirable.²⁵

Confirming Eliade’s assertion that: “If one goes to the trouble of penetrating the authentic meaning of an archaic myth or symbol, one cannot but observe that [...] it implies a metaphysical position”, we can observe that, through their many poems on the theme of Cythera, Nerval, Baudelaire, Hugo and Banville together have revealed not only the reality behind the myth, but also the metaphysical aspect of the dream of paradise, while adding to it a humanist and existential reflection.

4. Modern Cythera: Jeanne Hyvrard

The revaluation of the myth of Cythera by 19th century poets is pursued and further subverted in contemporary fiction. The most striking example among new interpretations is Jeanne Hyvrard’s first novel, *Les Prunes de Cythère* (The Plums of Cythera) published in 1975. This text dramatically develops the transgressive approach of the myth Cythera by transposing it to another island: Martinique. The plums of Cythera, who form the title of the book, are actually typical of Martinique, the Antillean island that was compared to Cythera when it was first discovered, being perceived as a paradise island,²⁶ hence the name of these plums. Like her predecessors, who had turned the idyllic myth on its head through images of decay and pain, Hyvrard expresses bitter nostalgia when she evokes the real beauty that is no more, revealing what hides behind the perception of the heavenly isle: “L’île entière sent la mort [The whole island reeks of death]”²⁷ (Hyvrard 1975, 34), declares the main narrator, called like the author, Jeanne.

There are indeed several, difficult to identify, narrators in this text, all women, who may or may not be relatives, possibly ancestors, of Jeanne. Where her predecessors had all proposed masculine perspectives on an island associated with the goddess of love and sexual passion, Hyvrard chooses a narrative style which allows several broken female voices to mix and complement each other to ruthlessly denounce the condition of the most destitute, among them women, on this territory in the Caribbean that still belongs to France. Through the character of Jeanne-la-Folle (Mad Jeanne), Hyvrard revisits the ancient myth and condemns the foundations of a patriarchal, brutal and arbitrary world. The bitter cries that Baudelaire’s narrator heard on his voyage to Cythera can be heard here too, when Jeanne, who is being kept in a

mental institution, screams with pain and frustration. Is she really mad? Or is she being punished, in which case, what was her fault? It seems that her sin was to give birth to an unholy child. Progressively, the reader deciphers Jeanne's tragedy, that proves to also be Martinique's tragedy as Jeanne's heartbreak, in Hugolian fashion, reflects the destiny of the island itself.

Like Cythera, Martinique has indeed had a troubled past. Its inhabitants, the Caribs, had to deal with different invasions until 1493, when Columbus landed there and gave it its current name. French settlers claimed the island in 1635 and, at first, met with local resistance. Soon, however, brutal retaliation resulted in many being killed, while survivors were taken captive and expelled from the island. Later, Britain attempted several times to occupy the island and did control it from 1794 to 1815, before it became again, once the Napoleonic Wars ended, a French region, which it has remained ever since.

In Hyvrard's novel, the perception of the island's beauty still belongs to the male coloniser's discourse in which, as Joëlle Cauville writes, "La désagrégation du fémininest [...] mise en parallèle avec l'aliénation du colonisé [The disintegration of the feminine is [...] paralleled with the alienation of the colonised]" (Cauville 2010).²⁸ Hyvrard uses historical facts: girls are taken forcefully away from their mothers to be sold as slaves, to be raped by their masters and give birth to children who will know the same fate – a vicious circle that continues until madness and death are all that is left.

Adopting the Banvillian refusal of an atrocious reality, and perpetuating the dream, would not help in this case:

Remontons le temps à la recherche de l'innocence. Rends-moi les terres que tu as pillées. Je ne parlerai pas français. Je ne servirai pas chez les maîtres. [...] Les Blancs ont pris nos terres. Mais nous partirons dans la jungle, le corps exultant et les cheveux en broussaille. (Hyvrard 1975, 171).

[Let's go back in time to regain our innocence. Give me back the land that you have plundered. I will not speak French. I will not be a servant at the master's house. [...] The White people took our land. But we will take to the jungle, our bodies jubilant and our hair dishevelled.]

Hope would be to no avail to those who were born on the type of *isle Baudelaire* qualified as a "banal Eldorado". Reality is indeed harsh for the natives. In the following passage, the contrast between their population, mostly descended from enslaved Africans, that constitutes the largest workforce toiling the island's fields, and the white land owners mostly descended from French settlers, who constitute a minority, is blatant: the natives are depressed and deprived, while the settlers live comfortably and follow their whims:

Au beau milieu du jardin, le prunier de Cythère. Et, dans mes mains, la corde pour me pendre. [...] Ah, mon cher, les jus de Cythère... Et la langue des îles. Et les doudous... Et dans mes mains, la corde. (Hyvrard 1975, 120).

[“In the middle of the garden, the Cythera plum tree. And, in my hands, the rope to hang myself with. [...] Ah, my dear friend, the juices of Cythera... And the languor of these islands. And the local girls... And in my hands, the rope.]

For Jeanne, the indigenous woman, the Cythera plum tree is synonymous with the Baudelairian gibbet and indicative of self-loathing. For the white masters, it is attached to promises of sexual favours.

Martinique is nothing like the gentle and prolific mythical Cythera and prayers can only remain unanswered: “Mais! amour même est mort. [...] Je tends les mains vers le prunier de Cythère. [Even love is dead. [...] I reach out to the Cythera plum tree.]” (Hyvrard 1975,170) The reader cannot be sure whether those hands are beseeching or whether they are getting ready to tie the noose.

Yet, the picture was not always so dark: “Les prunes de Cythère. Vert jade, vert printemps, vert laitue. Mon luxe. [The Cythera plums. Jade green. Springtime green. Lettuce green. My luxury.]” (Hyvrard 1975,49) This colour reminds us of what grew on Baudelaire’s beautiful island of green myrtles, that is Cythera before the invasions and the abuse of the land. Now, however:

Le prunier de Cythère juste assez haut pour qu’on s’y pendre. Le prunier de Cythère dont on fait les jus. Le prunier qui ne fait pas d’ombre et qui tend les doigts cartelés vers les fenêtres de la maison. Le prunier qui m’appelle la nuit quand tu dors et que rien ne me protège. (Hyvrard 1975, 38).

[The Cythera plum tree just high enough to hang yourself from. The Cythera plum tree which produces juices. The plum tree that casts no shadow and that holds its widespread fingers toward the windows of the house. The plum tree that calls me at night when you are asleep and nothing protects me.]

The Cythera plum tree, leitmotiv of the novel, presents the same duality as the Cythera island after Watteau: life (through its juices) and death (through its rope-inviting branches). In the above quote, a supplication seems to come from the tree. In a mirror effect, Jeanne reaches out for the tree and the tree seems to yearn for her.

Nerval’s chilling vision seems to haunt Jeanne, and it is herself, as in Baudelaire’s vision, she sees on the gallows. The devouring vultures in her case are her wardens: “Ils ont cimenté ma gorge pour que je ne crie pas. Ils ont lié mon corps pour que je ne danse pas. Et ils ont fait de moi la mort. [The Cythera plum tree just high enough to hang yourself from. The Cythera plum tree which produces juices. The plum tree that casts no shadow and that holds its widespread fingers toward the windows of the house. The plum tree that calls me at night when you are asleep and nothing protects me.]” (Hyvrard 1975,189) The voice that speaks for several female narrators says she has been called sometimes adulterous, sometimes incestuous, but there is no evidence in the novel that she ever chose her lover(s) and the child of her forbidden love is either aborted, still-born, or she keeps being told she will always remain infertile. *Mère*

(mother)thus becomes synonymous with *mort* (death). Could we find ourselves further from the myth of Aphrodite? Jeanne's infecundity does not give her the space to develop personally that Scudéry recommended for women in her day. Indeed, Scudéry's "carte de Tendre" had aimed to offer women an uncharted path that would take them away from the reproductive role their patriarchal society imposed on them. She thus promoted an egalitarian hope through the myth of Cythera. Yet, women in Hyvrard's novel seem to receive even less consideration and respect than their metropolitan French ancestors.

The only possible way out of this situation is to flee the Cytherean, forsaken island of Martinique: "Mère, laisse-moi partir. [...] versl' autre port, versl' autre part, versl' impossible autrefois. [Mother, please let me go [...] to the other port, to the other place, to the chimerical elsewhere.]" (Hyvrard 1975,100) However, earlier in the text, one of the feminine voices said: "L'autre part, c'est ici. [Elsewhere is here.]" (Hyvrard 1975,61) Indeed, but for whom? For the navigators who once landed on the beaches of Martinique? For those settlers who came later from their European shores to help themselves to the productive land and its beautiful daughters? Certainly not for Jeanne, for whom to leave is to live; otherwise, madness and suicide will be her lot:

Le prunier de Cythère. Les bonheurs morts. Les branches écartelées lui tendent les mains. Au beaumilieu du jardin. Fais pas ça. Essaie encore un peu. Pour quoi faire ? (Hyvrard 1975,77).

[The Cythera plum tree. Defunct felicity. The painfully spread out branches are stretching their hands out to her. In the middle of the garden. Try a little, once more. What for?]

The Cythera plum tree, the novel's leitmotif, is therefore the fatalistic sign of the island's annihilation; the sign also of an obsolete symbolism, obsolete because the reality behind the phantasy has been revealed.

There is no reason to hesitate before setting out on a sea voyage, because the mythical Hero has already made [such a voyage] in the fabulous Time. All that is needed is to follow his example. Similarly, there is no reason to fear settling an unknown, wild territory, because one knows what to do. One has merely to repeat the cosmogonic ritual, whereupon the unknown territory (= 'Chaos') is transformed into 'Cosmos'. (Eliade 1967, 141).

With Hyvrard's most recent interpretation in mind, in which chaos only lead to more chaos, it seems hard to adhere to Eliade's encouragement and attempt to embark for Cythera today. However, the multifarious rewritings of the myth of Cythera over time allow us to evaluate its deep dichotomy: on the one hand, it can be buoyantly positive when relating to the hedonistic pleasures of the privileged; on the other, it can be bitterly cynical to the outcast victims of the powers that be. The constantly renewed exploration of the myth of Cythera demonstrates that, each time it is put in question, the literary myth's sever-modern quality shines forth, thus creating yet another collective reference for a theme in constant evolution.

As we have seen, literary myths being in essence subjective and disobedient – and Cythera is the perfect example of those traits –, they systematically defy the iterative and therefore exemplary aspects of the recounted stories. While the myth of Cythera illustrates the notion of eternal return through its adherence to the ancient myth of Aphrodite, it rebels against it too, which rather complicates matters for any possibilities of an eternal return. Progressively, indeed, this hope is interrupted by considerations that would tend to indicate that it is only possible to eternally return to a myth through the imagination, and that, even then, this can lead, not to an enlightening resolution, but to cruel disappointment. This is the message carried by the myth of Cythera which, having followed a certain optimistic trend from Jacques Peletier du Mans's work, in the 16th century, and Madeleine de Scudéry in the 17th, developed to progressively, through Watteau's art in the 18th century and the poetry of the 19th (Nerval, Hugo, Baudelaire and Banville), and increasingly so in more recent times (as we saw in Hyvrard), tend to pessimistically defy all potentiality of cyclical recurrences of sacred times and heroic deeds.

Notes

1. Chevrel also emphasizes the crucial work of Gilbert Durand and Pierre Brunel in the development of myth criticism, as both scholars focus not only on the emergence and flexibility of aspects of myths, but also on the powerful ability of myths to irradiate other texts.
2. Cythera is its Latin name (used in English). It is also known as Kitira, Kythera (in Greek), Kythira (also a Greek name but used in German), Citera (in Spanish), Cythère (in French), or Cerigo (in Italian), etc.
3. Original: Peletier du Mans, Jacques. *L'Art poétique d'Horace, traduit en vers françois*. Paris: M. Vascosan, 1545.
4. There are many such allusions to be found, among others, in *La Pléiade*, the name given to a group of 16th-century French Renaissance poets whose principal members were Pierre de Ronsard, Joachim du Bellay and Jean-Antoine de Baïf.
5. This map by Tristan l'Hermite can be consulted here: https://spacefiction.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/carte_tristan_lhermitte.jpg. See also Buffard-Moret, Brigitte.
6. *Clélie, histoire romaine*'s 10 volumes were published between 1654 and 1660.
7. To view the map: <https://spacefiction.wordpress.com/2014/02/03/la-carte-de-tendre-un-exemple-des-cartes-allegoriques-du-pays-de-lamour-la-carte-de-tendre-an-exemple-of-allegorical-maps-of-country-of-love/>
8. The literary style used by Madeleine de Scudéry arose in her generation from the conversations and word games of *les précieuses*, the witty and educated intellectual ladies who frequented salons and stayed away from the male political disputes of the royal court. The map was aimed at their group's entertainment. It was a sort of board game they enjoyed playing.
9. My translations. For more details, see Thureau-Dangin, Philippe.

10. See also Mallinson, Jonathan.
11. *Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera* is also sometimes called *Embarkation for Cythera*. Another version of the *Pilgrimage* (Musée du Louvre, Paris) was made in 1719 (Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin). To view both paintings: http://www.artble.com/artists/antoine_watteau/paintings/embarkation_for_cythera. Watteau had painted his first representation of Cythera as early as 1709, with *Ile de Cythère* (Island of Cythera) which was only rediscovered in 1981. To view it: <http://www.jean-antoine-watteau.org/The-Island-of-Cythera-1709.html>.
12. For more details, see Levey, Michael.
13. See also Cusset, Catherine.
14. For more detail, see Brulotte, Gaétan & John Phillips. In particular, vol.2, p.1198, on Edward Sellon's *Cythera's Hymnal*, 1870.
15. For more detail, see Posner, Donald. *Antoine Watteau*, and Ostrowski, J.K. N.B.: in the poem entitled "Cythère" in the collection, *Fêtes galantes* (1869), Paul Verlaine is also inspired by Watteau.
16. See also Rouger, Gilbert.
17. My translation. N.B.: "Un Voyage à Cythère" was first published in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1855.
18. According to Georges Brunet, Hugo composed this poem between 1853 and 1854.
19. "Tout homme qui vieillit est ce roc solitaire/ Et triste, Cérigo, qui fut jadis Cythère, / Cythère aux nids charmants, Cythère aux myrtes verts, / La vie auguste, goutte à goutte, heure par heure, / S'épand sur ce qui passe et sur ce qui demeure [...] ;/ Cythère est là, lugubre, épuisée, idiote [...]." (Victor Hugo 1972, 344).
20. My translation. "Tête de mort du rêve amour, et crâne nu/ Du plaisir, ce chanteur masqué, spectre inconnu. / [...] Mais toujours le ciel bleu. C'est-à-dire, ô destin! / Sur l'homme, jeune ou vieux, harmonie ou souffrance, / Toujours la même mort et la même espérance. / Cérigo, qu'as-tu fait de Cythère? Nuit! deuil! / L'éden s'est éclipsé, laissant à nu l'écueil. / [...] Qu'as-tu fait des chansons [...] / Des danses, des gazons, des bois mélodieux, / De l'ombre que faisait le passage des dieux? / [...] Tu t'appelles oublié! tu meurs, sombre captive! [...] / Ce monde inférieur, où tout rampe et s'altère, / A ce qui disparaît et s'efface, Cythère, / Le jardin qui se change en rocher aux flancs nus [...]." (Victor Hugo 1972, 344).
21. My translation. "Je le sais bien que Cythère est en deuil! / [...] Agonisant sous le soleil sauvage. / La solitude habite son rivage. / Qu'importe! allons vers les pays fictifs! / Embarquons-nous pour la belle Cythère. / [...] Loin de ce monde au souffle délétère. / Embarquons-nous pour la belle Cythère. / [...] Héros cachés dans ces corps maladifs, / Fuyons, partons sur nos légers esquifs, / [...] Embarquons-nous pour la belle Cythère." (Banville 1861).
22. Published posthumously in the collection *Dans la fournaise (In the Fire)* in 1892.
23. "Son fier palais, ses blanches tours/ Sont des ruines et des tombes, / Et les aigles et les vautours / Ont déchiqueté ses colombes. / [...] Cythère est un impur marais / Où des monstres s'entre-dévorent, / [...] De longs serpents et des crapauds / Y rampent, tout couverts de boue." (Banville, 1892). My translation.

24. “L’île n’était qu’un champ de fleurs/ Aux mille corolles écloses,/ Où s’harmonisaient les couleurs [...]/ Cypris, vierge, ravie encor/ [...]/ Parut. Ses yeux noirs pleins d’éclairs,/ [...] Emplissaient follement les airs/ D’éblouissement et de joie.” (Banville, 1892).
25. “Certes, je sais bien que Vénus/ Est dans la nuit et dans le rêve./ Mais c’est toi, perfide enchanteur/ [...] Qui la ramène dans le jour/ Et qui l’empêche d’être morte!” (Banville 1892).
26. Tahiti, interestingly but the same reason, was too. See Conrad, Peter. *Islands. A Trip through Time and Space*, London, Thames & Hudson (2009, 29).
27. All translations of Hyvrard henceforth are mine.
28. My translation.

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Aleksandr Skrjabin, the Russian Orpheus

FRANCISCO MOLINA-MORENO

Abstract

This article presents Russian composer and pianist, Aleksandr Skrjabin (1872-1915), as the creator of myths about the origin and destiny of the universe and mankind. Within the framework of those myths, laid out in his *Preparatory Act*, Skrjabin himself would assume a role that seems inspired by that of Orpheus in Classical mythology.

Keywords

Skrjabin, *Preparatory Act*, Orpheus.

*To the memory of Vjačeslav Ivanov (1866-1949),
who noticed Skrjabin's affinity with Orpheus.¹*

1. Introduction

In the early stages of his career, the Russian composer and pianist Aleksandr Skrjabin (1872-1915) was considered a romantic artist along the likes of Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, and Wagner. From 1903 onwards, however, and as his intellectual curiosity in philosophy and theosophy grew, Skrjabin quickly developed a highly personal, innovative style - especially in the field of harmony, which put him at the forefront of musical modernism (Schloezer 1975, Macdonald 1986, Bowers 1996, Kelkel 1999, and Verdi 2010). Around 1902, Skrjabin began drafting a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) which would ultimately be entitled *Mysterium* and involve not only music, poetry, drama, and dance (which could remind us of the musical dramas by Wagner, whom Skrjabin admired), but also coloured lights, flavours, caresses, and tastes.² Undaunted in the face of his own unbridled fantasies, the composer planned to gather all mankind for the première of his *Mysterium* in a temple built on a lake in India, where the limits between performers and audience would disappear, with everyone taking part in the action (Сабанеев 1916, 34-5, 95-6; Сабанеев 1925, 214; Schloezer 1975, 127, and Morrison 2002, 195 and 197). Thus, a purifying ecstasy would surface, leading to the dissolution of the universe and mankind in their current material conditions, and to their transformation and elevation to a higher level in the hierarchy of being.³

Whatever Skrjabin's achievements might have been with such a visionary project, they would always have fallen short of the composer's grandiose goals. In 1913, Skrjabin began composing a *Preparatory Act* (*Предварительное действие*, in Russian), not only as an introduction, but also as a summary of what the whole

Mysterium would be (Шлецер 1919, 102 and 114; Сабанеєв 1916, 103-5; Сабанеєв 1925, 169 and 214, and Schloezer, 1975, 207-18). Skrjabin wrote a first version of the libretto for the *Preparatory Act* in the summer of 1914, and by year-end, had read it aloud for his friends, the Symbolist poets Vjačeslav Ivanov, Jurgis Baltrušaitis, and Konstantin Bal'mont. Perhaps following the suggestions of such qualified listeners, the composer started a second, revised version that remained unfinished at his untimely death in 1915 (Шлецер 1919, 102-3; Bowers² 1996, II, 253-4; Kelkel 1999, 225-6, and Verdi 2010, 72 and 138).⁴ The basis of this article will be the first version of the *Preparatory Act*, which - despite not being the definitive one - is the only one that presents the myths we will be addressing here - namely those which can represent a return, under a new guise, of the myth of Orpheus' magical music.⁵

In his *Preparatory Act*, Skrjabin created a personal mythology about the spirit's descent into matter, and the return of both to unity (Шлецер 1919, 114).⁶ The process would involve the origin of the universe, the birth of the male and female principles (represented by the Wave and Lightning images), the birth of creatures and mankind, the fall of mankind into the abyss of evil, and the intervention of a 'prophet,' whose sacrifice brings a liberating truth to mankind. As we aim to show in this article, Skrjabin, quite modestly, identified - at least in part - with said prophet.⁷ We shall, in due course, examine the degree of coincidence between Skrjabin and the prophet in the *Preparatory Act*. Now we can say that the liberation, carried out by the new "messiah" Skrjabin thought himself to be, would consist in leading mankind and the entire universe to a purifying ecstasy and an immaterial state of being by means of the artwork to which the *Preparatory Act* would be the introduction (Скрябин †1919, 154; Сабанеєв 1916, 3-4, 49, 57, and 88; Сабанеєв 1925, 120 and 182, and Molina Moreno 2004, 220, and 2005-6, 22). Yearning for that ontological transformation of the universe and mankind to be accomplished through art, Skrjabin was placing himself - perhaps even consciously - above Orpheus, who - according to the sources of ancient Greek and Roman literature and art - also exerted a magical influence over nature, mankind, and the gods, through his music.

2. The Prophet of the *Preparatory Act*

The *Preparatory Act* begins with a cosmogony and a cosmology (ll. 1-430, in Скрябин †1919, 202-15, and Morrison 2002, 313-26), including the birth of human beings from the union of the Wave and the Lightning (symbols of the female and male principles; cf. ll. 361-2). Although the text does not include any directions about who is speaking in each passage, we may guess that, in ll. 469-91, the whole of mankind is addressing a character endowed with Promethean traits (Скрябин †1919, 216-7, and Morrison 2002, 328). As an answer to those pleadings, the following verses show said speaker teaching his captive audience (ll. 492-7):

Въ храмѣ любви въ ослѣпляющей славѣ на тронѣ горящемъ
Свѣтлый внимавшихъ ему поучалъ: кто законъ мой единый
Вѣчной любви и смиренія вѣчнаго дерзко преступить
Будетъ повергнуть въ великую скорбь и тоску отлученья.

495

Смертные, вамъ я повѣдаю тайны небесныхъ гармоній
 Да раздаются гимны и славы на солнечной лирѣ! (Скрябин †1919, 217)
 [In the cathedral of love in dazzling splendor on a blazing throne
 The radiant one preached to those heeding him: who dares to violate
 My sole law of eternal love and eternal humility
 Will be cast into the great sorrow and anguish of excommunication. 495

Mortals, I will reveal to you the secret of celestial harmonies
 May hymns and praises resound on the sun lyre!] (Morrison 2002, 328-9)

Besides the law of eternal love and eternal humility (ll. 493-4), the speaker promises to teach mankind “the mystery of celestial harmonies” (l. 496), an allusion to cosmic music also hinted at in ll. 428-30:

Сей храмъ – какъ свѣтлый гимнъ, сей міръ – какъ звѣздный храмъ
 Эфиръ наполненъ золотымъ зазывномъ звономъ
 Что души емлетъ къ недоступнымъ небесамъ. 430
 (Скрябин †1919, 215)

[This cathedral is like a bright hymn, this world is like a starry cathedral

The ether reverberates with a golden summons
 That takes souls into the inaccessible heavens.] 430
 (Morrison 2002, 326)

This cosmic music was already anticipated in l. 63 of the first version (“the harmonious choirs of the worlds”; cf. Скрябин †1919, 204; our translation). Thereafter, the wish that hymns of glory would resound on the sun lyre (l. 497), brings to mind the fact that the ancient Greeks - at least from the fifth century B. C. E. - and later also the Romans, associated the Sun with Apollo, who was imagined ruling the universe with his lyre.⁸

After those words of the anonymous prophet, promising he would teach mankind the mystery of celestial harmonies, the narrator in the *Preparatory Act* tells how “the people, searching for consonant sonorities, touch the strings that are alien to them” (l. 498, in Скрябин †1919, 217, and Morrison 2002, 329). Mankind falls into the abyss of evil, described in a section of the poem entitled *Song – Dance of the Fallen Ones* (ll. 581-616, in Скрябин †1919, 220-1, and Morrison 2002, 331-2). In that passage, the verses 607-8 are especially meaningful:

Пѣснямъ неба, намъ докучнымъ
 Наши пѣсни не созвучны (Скрябин †1919, 221)

[Our songs are not consonant
 With the songs of heaven, which are tedious to us.] (Morrison 2002, 332).

That is an adequate way to express the conflict between that wayward mankind, and the remaining part of the universe: if, as we had seen, the latter consists of

harmonious choirs (l. 63 of the first version), “not to be in harmony” can mean “disagree”. The songs of those who do not agree with anything, therefore, can be said not to be in harmony therewith.

From l. 657 onwards, the first person plural that had thus far been referring to humanity as a whole (in the description of its own mad violence and wickedness) is replaced by the first person singular. Here, we are likely facing a man intoxicated by his own power, who believes himself to be equal to God, and who tries to keep and enlarge his own loathsome power by means of a bloody and endless fight against all his fellow human beings.

That violent monster, however, becomes conscious of the horror he had triggered (ll. 673-95), and listens then to the voice of what seems to be the eternal female principle (ll. 708-15, in Скрябин †1919, 224, and Morrison 2002, 336). It could seem odd that the eternal female principle is identified with a personification of Death, but here, we are dealing with a ‘liberating’ Death, as is evident if we compare ll. 708-15 with 35-40.⁹ Despite the lack of indications, it seems that it is the human being (represented by the riotous individual of ll. 657-72, later repentant in ll. 673-95) who wants to join the eternal female principle, identified with a liberating Death (ll. 736-7, in Скрябин †1919, 225, and Morrison 2002, 337). But, according to the eternal female principle, the riotous individual has not yet expiated his fault (ll. 738-9); he must approach his fellow human beings, put himself at their service and “bring the tidings of heaven / to the dying” (ll. 746-75, in Скрябин †1919, 225-6, and Morrison 2002, 337-8).

The repentant monster, then, tries to play the prophet’s role assigned to him by the eternal female principle, but mankind rejects him (ll. 780-95, in Скрябин †1919, 226-7, and Morrison 2002, 338-9). In his dialogue with mankind, the prophet describes the universe with sumptuous references to the Pythagorean doctrine of the music of the spheres (ll. 844-59):

Онъ – созерцаніе гармоній	
И всеединства міра сновъ	845
А міръ – роскошная симфонія	
Его различныхъ голосовъ	
Земныя истины созвучныя	
А съ ними истины небесъ	
Слились въ аккорды полнозвучные	850
Изъ струнъ исторгнутыхъ чудесъ	
Ему грядущія мгновенія	
Несутъ созвучій новый строй	
Онъ весь – святое упоеніе	
Своей божественной игрой	855
И подъ десницею божественной	
Послушна каждая струна	
На солнце- лирѣ гимнъ торжественный	
Играетъ пламени волна.(Скрябин †1919, 228-9)	

[He¹⁰ is the contemplation of harmony
 And of the all-unity of the world of dreams 845
 And the world is a splendid symphony
 of his various voices

 Earthly consonant truths
 And heavenly truths
 Combined in sonorous chords 850
 Of wonders emanating from strings

 The coming moments
 Bring a new order of consonance to him
 He is engulfed in holy ecstasy
 By his divine playing 855

 And each dutiful string
 Is under his divine right hand
 A flaming wave performs
 A solemn hymn on the sun lyre.] (Morrison 2002, 341)

The prophet's statement that his world is contemplation of harmony reminds us that Skrjabin told Sabaneev that the contemplation of harmony was mandatory to achieve dematerialization, and that this was a logical consequence of the principle of unity (Сабанеев 1925, 42, 50, and 86). While it is not clear what "the principle of unity" meant for Skrjabin, Sabaneev hinted at it when he wrote:

Его творчество представлялось ему точным подобием мирового процесса—так должно было быть и по его теории. Микрокосм человека отражал в своем творчестве микрокосм мира—и законы были одни и те-же. В этом и был «принцип Единства», который он так любил и в который верил так догматически.(Сабанеев 1925, 221)

[His work seemed to him an exact image of the cosmic process –and it should be so, according to his theory–. The microcosm of the human being reflected, in his own work, the microcosm of the universe, and their laws were identical. The 'principle of unity' lay just in that fact (that principle of unity that he cherished so much, and in which he believed in such a dogmatic way.)¹¹

The connection between Skrjabin's longing for dematerialization and for unity can be understood if we remember that, in the cosmogony of the *Preparatory Act*, the genesis of the material world was due to differentiation (ll. 11-2, 143, 503-10¹²); so, if primordial unity could be recovered, dematerialization would follow. We must realize that, for bringing the universe back to its primordial unity, a synthesis of all arts was analogically required (Сабанеев 1916, 58 and 95-6). According to Sabaneev, Skrjabin believed that music - like everything else - should be dematerialized, and held his own music as a gigantic step towards dematerialization.¹³

Besides the statement that his world is contemplation of harmony, the passage we quoted above (ll. 844-59) offers a dazzling description of the universe that is in line

with other passages of the *Preparatory Act*: we may remember the “harmonious choirs of the worlds” (l. 63, in Скрябин †1919, 204) and the “golden summons” of ether (ll. 429-30, in Скрябин †1919, 215, and Morrison 2002, 326); in l. 496, the prophet had promised to teach mankind the mystery of celestial harmonies (a promise he seems to be fulfilling in ll. 844-59); in l. 497, he wished that glorious hymns would resound on the sun lyre. Now it seems that one of those hymns is actually resounding on the sun lyre. Skrjabin did not specify whose divine right hand was playing the hymn, but we may remember Apollo’s at the Orphic hymn No. 34 (cf. Molina-Moreno 2013, 155-60). That celestial lyre, identified with the Sun in Skrjabin’s poem (l. 858), can remind us of Jean Delville’s drawing for the cover of the score of Skrjabin’s *Prometheus, the Poem of Fire* (cf., for example, Kelkel 1999, 265). There we see a lyre, the arms of which hold a large flower or star with a human face in the middle; the lyre’s strings go through the flower and reappear above it, reaching the lower half of a Sun which occupies the upper part of the sheet.

After describing that splendid and musical universe, the prophet invites his audience to a cosmic festival (ll. 860-3):

Все напряженный струны лирные	860
Все глубже смотреть в душу взоръ	
До дна испейте чаши пирные	
Звучи, свѣтися, звѣздный хоръ.(Скрябин †1919, 229)	
[Ever tighter the lyre strings	860
Ever deeper the glance into the soul	
Empty the ceremonial chalices	
Sound, shine, starry chorus.] (Morrison 2002, 341)	

But the prophet’s insistence on his message irritates mankind, which kills the prophet. However, the prophet will forgive his murderers (ll. 864-94).¹⁴ Then, mankind expresses its nostalgia for the prophet (ll. 895-920, in Скрябин †1919, 230-1, and Morrison 2002, 343-4), who - from the other world - prophesies final liberation and orders the construction of a new temple, where mankind could achieve its dreams (ll. 921-40, in Скрябин †1919, 231, and Morrison 2002, 344). This time, mankind accepts the prophet’s words (ll. 941-50, in Скрябин †1919, 231-2, and Morrison 2002, 344), and the rest of the poem describes the cosmic festival through which final ecstasy and dematerialization would be achieved.

3. The Eschatology of the *Preparatory Act*

After mankind’s acceptance of the prophet’s message (ll. 941-50), the narrator (or perhaps the whole of humanity, including the narrator) describes the temple where the great cosmic festival would take place (ll. 951-68):

Стѣны храма какъ гимны свободѣ горять
И сверкаетъ столповъ ослѣпительный рядъ.

Каждый камень волшебнo-поющей звѣздой
Со струны солнце-лирной упаль огневой.

Онъ блаженно упаль 955
 Какъ звенящій кристалъ
 Какъ сверкающій звукъ
 Полный сладостныхъ мукъ
 И блеситъ какъ топазь,
 Гіацинтъ, хризопразъ 960
 Какъ карбункулъ, опаль,
 Сардоникса кристалъ
 Какъ смарагдъ, маргарить
 Халкедонъ, хризолитъ
 Какъ небесный сапфиръ 965
 Как ласкающій міръ
 Онъ горитъ, какъ единый всецвѣтный алмазь
 Этотъ храмъ — наша жизнь, нашъ расцвѣтъ, нашъ экстазь
 (Скрябин †1919, 232)

[The walls of the cathedral burn as hymns to freedom
 And the dazzling row of columns sparkle
 Each stone, as a magical singing star
 Fell from a burning string of the sun lyre.
 It blissfully fell 955
 Like chiming crystal
 Like sparkling sound
 Full of sweet torments
 And they glitter like topaz,
 Hyacinth, crysopraxe, 960
 Like carbuncle, opal,
 Crystal of sardonyx
 Like emerald, margarite
 Chalcedony, chrysolite
 Like heavenly sapphire 965
 Like the caressing world
 It burns, like a single multicolored diamond
 This cathedral—our life, our blooming, our ecstasy.]

(Morrison 2002, 344-5)

The whole passage recalls what Skrjabin had anticipated in the preceding parts of the poem: the walls that glow like hymns to freedom (l. 951) bring to mind that - according to l. 428 - the temple would be “like a hymn of light”; we may also remember the prophet’s wish that hymns of glory would resound on the sun lyre (l. 497). Now it seems that all those wishes are coming true. Last, the multi-coloured precious gems with which the temple is being built (ll. 959-65) join all its colours into a “unique, all-coloured diamond,” and the temple is compared with the glowing of that diamond in ll.

967-8. This makes us remember Scriabin's longing for a recovered unity of all beings, and the text adds that such a temple is the life, the flower, and the ecstasy of all mankind.

The comparison of the temple with the flower and the ecstasy of all mankind deserves further comment. To begin with, we could remember that, already in *The Poem of Ecstasy*, published in 1907 as a programme for the symphonic poem of the same title, flowers are a symbol of the creations of the spirit (ll. 35-8, in Скрибин †1919, 193, Bowers ²1996, II, 131). Then, in the same text of the *Preparatory Act*, a flower is taken as a symbol of the new existence aimed at by the composer (l. 755, in Скрибин †1919, 225, and Morrison 2002, 338). Other passages of the *Preparatory Act* are also meaningful in this connection (ll. 557-8, in Скрибин †1919, 219, and Morrison 2002, 330; ll. 895-6, in Скрибин †1919, 230, and Morrison 2002, 343). Most importantly, in the *Preparatory Act*, the very process of flowering and flourishing (both words being etymologically cognate with one another, but both meanings being conveyed by the same Russian word) means "to reach the peak of satisfaction," as we can see in l. 979-80 (Скрибин †1919, 233, and Morrison 2002, 345). Further, in ll. 985-8, the same word is referred to reaching the summit of being (Скрибин †1919, 233, and Morrison 2002, 345-6), and the same can be seen in the end of the poem (ll. 1036-42):

И въ блескъ роскошномъ
 Расцвѣта послѣдняго
 Являясь другъ
 Въ красъ обнаженной
 Сверкающихъ душъ 1040
 Исчезнемъ...
 Растаемъ... (Скрибин †1919, 234-5)

[And in the splendid luster
 Of the final flourish
 Appearing to each other
 In the exposed beauty
 Of sparkling souls 1040
 We will disappear...
 Dissolve...] (Morrison 2002, 347)

In Scriabin's notebooks, we also find many passages illustrating what the images of blossoming, flowering, and flourishing meant to the composer. In his notes from 1904-5 (that is, the years in which he was beginning to plan his *Mysterium*), we can see that his ultimate goal was a universal blossoming:

Послѣдняя цѣль – абсолютное бытъе – есть общій расцвѣтъ. Это послѣдній моментъ, въ который свершится божественный синтезъ. Это расцвѣтъ всеобъемлющей индивидуальности, это возстановленіе міровой гармоніи, экстазъ, возвращающій меня къ покою. (Скрибин †1919, 171)

[The ultimate goal is the absolute existence, that is, the universal blossoming. That is the last instant, when divine synthesis is fulfilled. That is the blossoming of my all-encompassing individuality, that is the restoration of cosmic harmony, the ecstasy that will get me back to rest.]

And the connection of blossoming with ecstasy is obvious in another passage:

Въ формѣ мышленія экстазъ есть высшій синтезъ. Въ формѣ чувства экстазъ есть высшее блаженство. Въ формѣ пространства экстазъ есть высшій расцвѣтъ и уничтоженіе (Скрябин †1919, 163; cf. Schloezer 1975, 99).

[In the shape of thought, ecstasy is the supreme synthesis. In the shape of feeling, it is the supreme joy. In the shape of space, it is the supreme blossoming and annihilation.]

We will be going on to present further evidence of flourishing and ecstasy in Skrjabin's conception. As an introduction to it, let us now turn to the text of the *Preparatory Act*. After describing the temple where the final cosmic festival will take place, the prophet invites mankind to it (ll. 969-72), and sings (ll. 973-1004):

Я слетѣвшій съ небесъ	
Богъ любовиныхъ чудесъ.	
Не учить, а ласкать	975
Душъ воскрыльную рать	
Ихъ позвавшій на пиръ	
Я пришелъ на этотъ мѣръ!	
Каждой жадѣ въ отвѣтъ	
Приношу я расцвѣтъ.	980
То не истины гнетъ,	
Къ вамъ свобода грядетъ!	

Я утвержденіе всеоживляющее,
Я отрицаніе всесоздающее

Раздѣляйтесь, расцвѣтайте,	985
На высоты возлетайте,	
И побѣду надъ стихіей	
Въ пляскѣ празднуйте священной	
Въ красотѣ Іерархіи	
Въ красотѣ неизрѣченной	990

Пляска — первая причина
И суда вершитель правый
Все содѣлаетъ единой
И сверкающей державой!

Кто свѣтлѣе, къ сердцу ближе	995
чѣмъ тусклѣе, тѣмъ все ниже	
Кто дерзаетъ въ сокровенный	
Ликъ божественный взглянуть	
Тотъ взлетай, благословенный	
Для того открытый путь!	1000

Я послѣднее свершеніе
Я блаженство растворенія
Я всевъздности алмазь

Я свобода, я экстазь! (Скрябин †1919, 232-3)

[I am descended from the heavens	
The god of loving wonders.	
Not to teach, but to caress	975
The winged army of souls	
Having invited them to the feast	
I came to this world!	
In answer to each craving	
I offer blooming.	980
Not the oppression of truth,	
Freedom will come to you!	
I am the all reviving confirmation,	
I am the all creating negation	
Divide, bloom,	985
Soar to the heights,	
Celebrate in sacred dance	
In the beauty of the hierarchy	
In unspeakable beauty	
The victory over the primal state	990
The dance is the first order	
And the righteous executor of judgment	
Will transform everything into a united	
And sparkling kingdom!	
He who is brighter is closer to the heart	995
The dimmer, that much lower	
He who dares to look	
Into the hidden, divine face	
Then take wing, blessed one	
For you the path is open!	1000
I am the final achievement,	
I am the bliss of dissolution	

I am the diamond of the galaxy,
I am freedom, I am ecstasy!] (Morrison 2002, 345-6)

Let us notice, in that fragment, that the passage ll. 979-80:

In answer to each craving
I offer blooming (Morrison 2002, 345-6)

can be compared with this note by Skrjabin:

Я пришелъ спасти міръ отъ тиранов-царей, как и отъ тирана-народа. Я принесъ безграничную свободу и справедливость, принесъ полный расцвѣтъ, божественную радость творчества (Скрябин †1919, 154).

[I have come to save the world from the tyrants that are the tsars and from the tyrant that is the people. I have brought limitless freedom and justice to the world, I have brought full blossoming, the divine joy of creation.]

Likewise, the passage ll. 983-4:

I am the all reviving confirmation,
I am the all creating negation

can be compared with another passage of Skrjabin's notebooks, where we can see that blossoming, for the composer, was a metaphor of his own creative activity:

Я создаю каждый мигъ, чтобы отрицать его въ слѣдующій. Я всегда протестъ, всегда желаніе новаго, другого. Я вѣчное отрицаніе прошлаго, я вѣчная любовь, вѣчный расцвѣтъ (Скрябин †1919, 158-9)

[I create every instant, for denying it at the next instant. I am always protest, always desire of what is new, what is other. I am the eternal negation of the past, I am the eternal love, the eternal blossoming.]

Those passages suggest that Skrjabin identified himself with the prophet of the *Preparatory Act*.¹⁵

If we come back now to the *Preparatory Act*, we shall see that the answer of mankind to the prophet's words (in the above quoted ll. 973-1004) is enthusiastic (ll. 1005-8, in Скрябин †1919, 233-4; cf. Morrison 2002, 346), and, after a transition, the work concludes with a splendid dematerialization of the world (ll. 1021-42):

Мы, увлеченныя
Смерти видѣніемъ
Мы, увлеченныя
Въ нашемъ движеніи

Зажгись, священный храмъ от пламени сердець
Зажгись и стань святымъ пожаромъ
Смѣсись блаженно въ насъ, о сладостный отецъ,
Смѣсись со смертью въ танцъ яромъ! 1025

Въ этотъ послѣдній мигъ совлеченья Вбросимъ мы вѣчности нашихъ мгновений Въ этомъ послѣднѣмъ звучіи лирномъ Всѣ мы растаемъ въ вихрь эфирномъ	1030
--	------

Родимся въ вихрь! Проснемся въ небо! Смѣшаемъ чувства въ волнѣ единой! И въ блескѣ роскошномъ Расцвѣта послѣдняго Являясь другъ другу Въ красѣ обнаженной Сверкающихъ душъ Исчезнемъ... Растаемъ... (Скрябин †1919, 234-5)	1035 1040
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[We are carried away
By the vision of death
We are calmed
In our motion

Ignite, sacred temple from hearts' flame Ignite and become a sacred fire Merge blessedly in us, o ravishing father, Merge with death in a heated dance!	1025
--	------

In this final moment of divestment We will cast off the eternities of our instants Into this final lyre consonance We will dissolve in the ethereal whirlwind	1030
--	------

We will be born in the whirlwind! We will awaken in heaven! We will merge emotions in a united wave! And in the splendid luster Of the final flourish Appearing to each other In the exposed beauty Of sparkling souls We will disappear... Dissolve...] (Morrison 2002, 347)	1035 1040
--	--------------------------------------

[That which menaced
Is now seduction
That which frightened
Is now pleasure.
And the bites of panther and hyena
Are new caresses
A new torment
And the serpent's sting
Is but a burning kiss.] (Bowers ²1996, II, p. 135)

Moreover, the erotic character of that ecstatic dematerialization is obvious in a conversation recorded by Skrjabin's student Margarita Kirillovna Morozova. While visiting the Louvre, in 1907, she recalled:

[Aleksandr Nikolaevič explained to me in detail how he imagined *ecstasy* itself. Like a universal, cosmic fusion of the male and female principles, of spirit and matter. *Universal ecstasy* is an erotic act, a blissful end, the return to Unity.]

Какъ человѣкъ во время полового акта въ минуту экстаза теряетъ *сознаніе и весь его организмъ* во всѣхъ точкахъ переживаетъ блаженство, такъ и Богъ-человѣкъ, переживая экстазъ, наполнить вселенную блаженствомъ и зажжетъ пожаръ (Скрябин †1919, 189).

In the same notes, a bit later, we read more about that “God-human being,” with whom Skrjabin (we can be almost sure) dreamt of identifying himself: the “God-human being” will be able to transform the world into a divine organism; that will be ecstasy, and the universe will give in to the “God-human being,” “like a woman to her lover.”

[If an individual acquires the ability of influencing on the external world to such a degree as to modifying at will the system of relationships in every given moment, such an individual will have a divine power. Such an individual will transform the universe into a divine organism. That will be the achievement of full harmony, the peak of creative enthusiasm, ecstasy. Such an individual will be a general requirement, the requirement to contemplate divine beauty. The Universe will give in to such an individual, like a woman to her lover.]

Last but not least, we must remember another note by Skrjabin, later set into verse in *The Poem of Ecstasy* (ll. 236-41), where we can see that the ideas of separation, flowering, pleasure, and re-unification were intertwined in Skrjabin's conception of ecstasy:

Раздѣляйтесь, расцвѣтайте,
 Возставайте другъ на друга,
 Возноситеcь на высоты,
 Чтобы въ сладостномъ блаженствѣ
 Вамъ познать себя единствомъ, 240
 Уничтожиться во мнѣ! (Скрябин †1919, 198, and cf. *ibid.*, 153)

[Fragment and flower
 Separately
 Rise up one against another
 Flee to the summits
 That in sweetest bliss
 You may know all your oneness 240
 Annihilated within me!] (Bowers ²1996, vol. II, 134)

But perhaps the most alluring aspect of Skrjabin's eschatology is that, according to l. 1031 of the *Preparatory Act*, dematerialization and ecstasy will be fulfilled in the "final lyre consonance." We believe that this lyre is the one identified with the Sun in ll. 497 and 856-9 of the *Preparatory Act*. That is, the universe and mankind, in their current disastrous state, would disappear with the sound of that lyre, or - more precisely: the current state of loss of cosmic harmony would come to an end and be replaced by a new recovered harmony. This makes sense if we remember that, according to l. 5 of both versions of the *Preparatory Act*, the universe had originated with an explosion (Скрябин †1919, 202 and 235, and Morrison 2002, 313). Opposite to that initial, indeterminate, chaotic bang, there will be, at the end of the current era, the tuned sound of a lyre, an instrument that, at human level, is a fruit of civilization. Moreover, for the ancient Greeks, the lyre belonged to Apollo, the god of most rational and orderly artistic manifestations. It was also the instrument with which Orpheus calmed storms and wild beasts (cf., on this topic, Molina-Moreno 2008 a). And it was this very instrument, endowed with a cosmic dimension through its association with the Sun, which would raise the world and mankind to a higher state in the scale of being.¹⁶

It is obvious that Skrjabin achieved a high logical consistency by placing sound at the core of his mythical cosmogony, cosmology, and eschatology. This can be due not only to his being a musician, but - more specifically - to the fact that since he was a musician, he wanted sound to have a magical, enchanting power. And, to support this belief, it was necessary to admit that sound was at the very origin and constitution of the universe, according to a psychological “law” governing magical beliefs: *similia similibus*, similar things are influenced by similar things.¹⁷ In this connection, Sabaneev remembers how Skrjabin admired Hans von Bülow’s saying “in the beginning was rhythm,” which the author of the *Preparatory Act* quickly referred to the idea that the world had arisen by means of rhythm. Moreover, Skrjabin saw in rhythm the basis of all magic, and in music the highest magic.¹⁸

Skrjabin’s concern with magic, especially in connection with his *Mysterium*, is also obvious in Sabaneev’s memories: for Skrjabin, he wrote, established forms of religious cult were degenerate descendants of what was before, when there was true magic in cult, and Skrjabin wanted to see that magic reborn (Сабанеев 1925, 119; cf. Сабанеев 1925, 287-8, and Сабанеев 1916, 59, 89-92 and 228-30). In this connection, Skrjabin wished to make use of alliteration in his verses (like the poets of his time), in order for those alliterations to act like a spell, like hypnosis (Сабанеев 1925, 251). Likewise, according to Sabaneev, Skrjabin stated that the first theme of his *Ninth Sonata* was neither music nor melody, but “a spell in sounds,” and that it could not simply be played. Indeed, one had to enchant when playing it (Сабанеев 1925, 139). Skrjabin also told Sabaneev that he was convinced that with the help of the “light symphony” (that is, his *Prometheus or the Poem of Fire*) it was possible to heal anybody from whatever disease (Сабанеев 1925, 204; cf. Сабанеев 1916, 79, 213, and 228-30). Sabaneev also points out that harmony was the aspect of music where the magic effect desired by Skrjabin can most easily be achieved, and that it was namely in the field of harmony where Skrjabin was most innovative (Сабанеев 1916, 144-5, 187, 190-2, and 213).

4. Conclusion: The Prophet of the *Preparatory Act*, Orpheus, and Skrjabin

Let us focus on the prophet of the *Preparatory Act* again. He had brought mankind a religious revelation (ll. 492-7); more specifically, he had promised to reveal the mysteries of celestial harmonies to mankind (l. 496). This in turn immediately brings to mind Orpheus doing the same, according to the Latin grammarian Servius, in his *scholium* to Vergil’s *Aeneis*, 6, 645. More generally, Orpheus was held to be the founder of mystery cults (Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008).

Conversely, the prophet in the *Preparatory Act* echoes the statements of the composer himself. According to his notes from 1904-5, Skrjabin wanted to captivate the world by means of the marvellous beauty of his work, to attract the world to a divine flight without destiny, to his free play (Скрябин †1919, 139 and 146; cf. also Скрябин †1919, 191, quoted above; Сабанеев 1916, 75, and Морозова †1997, 52). This desire can be connected with Skrjabin’s goal of the audience of his *Mysterium* also enacting it. Then again, Skrjabin also wrote that the highest power was the power

of charm, power without violence, and therefore to destroy the enemy could not give any satisfaction; for our composer, to dominate meant to include in the own self (Скрябин †1919, 146). Besides the emphasis on attraction and charm we must pay attention to the fact that Skrjabin wished to attract the world to his “free play” - what he called his own creative activity (Скрябин †1919, 139-43). We also have to notice that the Russian word «игра» means both “play” and “to make music on an instrument” just as it does in the English word, “play.” All this reminds us again of the effects of Orpheus’ music on nature, mankind, and the gods (Molina-Moreno 2008). Perhaps without being entirely aware of it, Skrjabin wished to be a new Orpheus: in this connection, Bowers states that, through the translations of ancient Greek literature by Sergej Trubeckoj and Vladimir Solov’ev, Skrjabin got acquainted with ancient Greek myths, and often alluded to Orpheus and Amphion. As for Orpheus, Bowers’ statement is confirmed by Skrjabin’s brother-in-law, Boris de Schloezer (Bowers ²1996, I, 319; Schloezer 1975, 118, 163-6, and Сабанеев 1916, 7, 11, 18, and especially 38-40, with the critical remarks by Schloezer 1975, 166-75; cf. also Сабанеев 1916, 47 and 98).

Did Skrjabin see himself as the prophet of his *Preparatory Act*? We believe he did - but only in part. Actually, the prophet does not bring about, but only foresees dematerialization and ecstasy. Skrjabin’s real desire was to elicit an ontological transformation of the world (Сабанеев 1916, 75; Сабанеев 1925, 100; Морозова †1997, 52). Actually, the end of this world, according to the *Preparatory Act*, coincides with what Skrjabin wanted his *Mysterium* to be. In particular, when our composer wanted the audience to take part in the enactment of the *Mysterium*, that meant not only the suppression of limits and the recovery of primordial unity (Сабанеев 1925, 103), but also the transformation of the entire universe into a work of art or - perhaps better yet - into artistic activity (Сабанеев 1916, 58). In this respect, we can mention that after a performance of *The Poem of Ecstasy*, the composer, exultant, said:

А я, правда, так люблю это праздничное настроение после концерта... Никогда не хочется домой, хочется продолжения праздника... хочется, чтобы празднество ширилось, росло, умножалось, чтобы оно стало вечным, чтобы оно захватило мир. Это и есть моя мистерия, когда этот праздник охватит все человечество... (Сабанеев 1925, 67).

[I really love this festive atmosphere after the concert... I would never go back home, I would like that the party continued... I would like that the party spread, grew, multiplied, became eternal, encompassed the world. That is my *Mysterium*: when this party will encompass the whole of mankind.]

Related to that wish of identification between life and art, we must remember that Skrjabin did not want his *Mysterium* to be a performance, but an effective enactment of universal ecstasy (Schloezer, 1975, 124-31; cf. Сабанеев 1916, 88). Therefore, we can say that the ontological transformation of the universe, which Skrjabin sought to achieve through his artwork, was a superhuman feat (cf. Скрябин †1919, 191, quoted above) - even superior to those of Orpheus: a metaphysical revolution, through which Skrjabin endowed himself with the traits of a mythical hero. Thus, Skrjabin’s self-

mythification, as we can trace it in the *Preparatory Act* and in the composer's notebooks, represents a return of the myth of Orpheus' magical music, taken to a new dimension of incredible audacity, consistency, and beauty.

Notes

1. ИВАНОВ (1915, 11-8).
2. Сабанеев (1916, 85-97), and Morrison (2002, 190-2, 194). Despite Skrjabin's admiration for Wagner (cf. Морозова †1997, 48, and Энгель 1916, 51), the respective composers' artistic goals differed (Сабанеев 1916, 255; Энгель 1916, 56, and Schloezer 1975, 49-51). Generally speaking, Skrjabin did not want his *Mysterium* to be represented, but rather enacted (Сабанеев 1916, 34-5 and 88, about the *Preparatory Act*; Schloezer 1975, 124-31, and Morrison 2002, 197).
3. About Skrjabin's *Mysterium*, cf. Сабанеев (1911, 287-8); Сабанеев (1916, 12-3, 37-84, 97-103, and 228-9); Энгель (1916, 50, 56, 67, 71, and 88-92); Riesenmann (1924, 11-9); Сабанеев (1925, 20, 44-6, 58, 82-3, 86, 106-8, 119-20, 122, 149-50, 160, 171, 205-6, 214-5, 229, 233, 267-72, and 284); Schloezer (1975, 121-206); Scriabine (1975, 14 and 17); Bowers (1996, II, 49-50, quoting Энгель 1916, 56-7); Морозова (†1997, 49 and 54); Kelkel (1999, 225-6, and 351); Morrison (2002, 184-241), and Verdi (2010, 66, 72, 126, 128-42, 190, and 319; in his p. 131, Verdi quotes p. 150 of the German version of Сабанеев 1911, but the actual citation is Сабанеев 1925, 150).
4. Skrjabin revised just the first 425 verses of his first version. The original Russian text of the second, revised version of the *Preparatory Act* can be found in Скрябин (†1919, 235-47); cf. Bowers (1996, II, 271-6), and Morrison (2002, 313-26).
5. The original Russian text of the first version of the *Preparatory Act* can be found in Скрябин (†1919, 202-35). So far as we know, there are no full translations of the first version of the *Preparatory Act* into English; instead of ll. 1-425 of the first version, Morrison (2002, 313-26), has translated the text of the second, revised version (having 332 verses), followed by the text of the first one from l. 426 (Morrison 2002, 326-47). Here we shall follow the verse numbering of the first version.
6. Сабанеев (1925, 106) remembers a talk in which Skrjabin attributed the same "programme" to his symphonic poem *Prometheus, the Poem of Fire*.
7. Our author even established analogies between Jesus Christ and himself, on the basis that he was born on December 25th, according to the Julian calendar still in use at the time in Russia (Macdonald 1986, 51; Сабанеев 1925, 290, and Bowers 1996, II, 49-50, quoting Энгель 1916, 56-7).
8. On the association or even identification between the Sun and Apollo, cf. Molina Moreno (2013, 147-8 with the notes on pp. 163-4). Apollo appeared playing the cithara already in Homer's *Iliad*, 1, 602; as for his ruling the course of the universe with his instrument, cf. Molina-Moreno (2013, 155-60). Lastly, cf. Proclus, *Hymn to Helios*, ll. 15-23, esp. 18-20, to which we shall return in due course.
9. Скрябин (†1919, 203) and Morrison (2002, 314). Сабанеев (1925, 270) tells that Skrjabin - after playing his *Prelude, op. 74, N° 2* for him - told him that it expressed

“death as the manifestation of the Female that leads to reunification. Death and love... Death is, as I call her in the *Preparatory Act*, a Sister. There must not be an element of terror before her; she is the highest reconciliation, the white sound...” Judging from those words by Skrjabin, so clearly bringing to our minds the passage we are dealing with, we could think that Skrjabin’s *Prelude, op. 74, N° 2*, was a sketch of what would have been a part of the music of the *Preparatory Act*... and of the *Mysterium*, because, according to Sabaneev, Skrjabin also told him: “–This is the mystery... Look, perhaps you feel, Leonid Leonidovič, that actually this is not just music, and it must not be just music. Here an occult ceremony is beginning...” (cf. Сабанеев 1925, 271).

10. The pronoun used makes it difficult to determine who is alluded to here. At first glance, it would seem that the pronoun “онъ” (= “he”), in the Russian original, refers to the prophet’s own universe (міръ, grammatically masculine in Russian), which has been alluded to in ll. 840-1; but if so, it should rather be translated as “it.” However, the passage seems a bit awkward, since two verses later (846-7), the universe is mentioned again, as something contrasted to what is described in ll. 844-5. Perhaps Skrjabin had in mind an “alternative” god, distinct from that of established religions; but then we could ask why he wrote “онъ” (= “he” / “it”), instead of “богъ” (= “god”), which is metrically equivalent.
11. Excepting the passages quoted from the *Preparatory Act* and *The Poem of Ecstasy*, all translations from the Russian are by the author of this article. It may seem a bit strange that Sabaneev wrote “microcosm” when he referred to both the human being and the universe, instead of talking of the “microcosm of human beings” and the “macrocosm of the universe;” perhaps we are dealing with a *lapsus calami*.
12. Cf. certain passages of Skrjabin’s notebooks which show that the composer was well aware of the relationship between creation, differentiation, multiplicity, space, and time (Скрябин †1919, 136, 147, 149, 161, and 166-7, and Scriabine 1979, 12, 27, 29, 44, and 50-2; cf. Schloezer 1975, 136).
13. Сабанеев (1925, 102 and 228-9), and Энгель (1916, 85); as for how that ideal was reflected in Skrjabin’s music, cf. Сабанеев (1916, 206-7). Lastly, Skrjabin saw in atomic decay proof that dematerialization was possible (Сабанеев 1925, 151).
14. Скрябин (†1919, 229-30), and Morrison (2002, 341-3). This entire episode is reminiscent of the Passion of the Christ; we have already said that Skrjabin dared even to draw parallels between Jesus Christ and himself (cf. our n. 7). However, Сабанеев (1925, 120) remembers Skrjabin’s wish that his *Mysterium* would be something more substantial and have more substantial results than Christian mystery (cf. also Schloezer 1975, 74-6 and 143).
15. According to Morrison (2002: 185 and 195 quoting Энгель 1916, 90), Skrjabin assigned himself the role of the Narrator in the *Preparatory Act*. We were, however, unable to find that in Engel’s paper.
16. Cf. Proclus (fifth century C. E.), *Hymn to Helios*, ll. 18-20: “Apollo, singing inspired songs to the accompaniment of the kithara, calms the great wave of deep-roaring becoming” (cf. Berg 2001, 148, 150, and 168-9).

17. Vid. Combarieu (1909, 12), Schneider (1951, 141-3), Müller (1965), and Molina-Moreno (2008 b), as well as Иванов (1915, 11-2). In particular, Schloezer (1975, 164), says that Combarieu's theory that the origin of music was to be found in magic spells seemed to Scriabin the confirmation of his own ideas by a scientist who was far from mysticism. Cf. also Сабанеев (1916, 30-1 and 38-40), with the critical remarks from Schloezer (1975, 166-75).
18. Сабанеев (1925, 111); cf. the quotation from Hans von Bülow in Walker (1993, 175). The primal character of rhythm is also obvious in this note by Scriabin: "Первое усилие, первый порывъ къ освобожденію есть первая ритмическая фигура времени, первая жизнь, первое сознание, пронизавшее хаосъ и создавшее 2-ю степень (стадію), первую" (Скрябин †1919, 153), i.e., "The first effort, the first impetus towards liberation, is the first rhythmic figure of time, the first life, the first conscience that went through chaos and that created the second period (the second stage), the first limit." Although there are no clear allusions to rhythm in the cosmogony of the *Preparatory Act*, both versions of the poem mention sound phenomena in ll. 5-12 (Скрябин †1919, 202 and 235, and Morrison 2002, 313). Cf. also Сабанеев (1916, 57) and Сабанеев (1925, 266-7).

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Ulysses's Journey and Homer's *Odyssey*: An Eternal Return

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Abstract

Homer's *Odyssey* provides a perfect case for showing the eternal return of the Greek myths in contemporary literature, and culture: tales of Ulysses's journeys have always been popular, till nowadays. He is the only survivor of an entire crew: he safely arrived home alone, and soon left, heading for a new journey. Today, in a way, he keeps coming back, on and on: in all sort of books, in fine arts, inside and outside theatres. Ulysses and his myth are also "surfing the web", as I proved with a recent survey on the use of the terms 'Odyssey', 'Odysseus', and 'Ulysses', on the Internet.

Moreover, the last decades recorded, all over the world, an increasing amount of modern versions of *Odyssey*, and related myths. I focus particularly on the most recent translations and adaptations for the stage: many of them are dedicated to those who did not come back home – unlike Ulysses – or did not survive at all. In 2010, for instance, the Italian playwright and director Marco Martinelli wrote *Rumore di Acque* ("Noise in the Waters"), a play later translated into English, French, German, and other languages. Ulysses's myth and its happy end are reversed, in his antiheroic *Odyssey*, inspired by the tragic death of immigrants, in the shipwreck of their boats, while they try to reach Southern Italy and Sicily. The play was staged in Lampedusa – the island on Italy's Southern border where many ships land, and countless corpses are found – and it is still on tour in Europe, Africa, and U.S. Meanwhile, other international projects inspired by Ulysses's journeys tell us the "Odyssey of Nobodies", while thousands of unnamed sailors keep challenging the waves, as they have done since the Minoan Age, across the Mediterranean Sea.

Keywords

Homer; *Odyssey*; Ulysses; Travel; Shipwreck.

1. A never-ending journey.

Among ancient myths, and figures, those which appear in the so-called Homeric poems (*Iliad* and *Odyssey*) are increasingly popular, worldwide, especially in the past decade, thanks to translations, adaptations, performances, and public readings.¹

Not only epic poems can count on a large audience, but they are the object of more and more reception studies in recent years: international conferences, essays on

single authors or specific aspects, collections of studies on a range of examples all over the world.

The complex interaction between epic, drama and performance (especially ‘durational performance’) is well-synthesised in the Call for Papers of the Panel “Performing Epic/Epic Performance” at the Tenth Celtic Conference in Classics:

Especially interesting are those adaptations that attempt to capture the ‘epicness’ of the original: National Theatre of Wales’ *‘Marathon’* production of Christopher Logue’s War Music; Stathis Livathinos’ five-hour *Iliad*; the Almeida’s day-long readings of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Outside of Homeric adaptations, durational performances have become more popular and internationally recognised, including those based on the Classics, like Sean Graney’s *All Our Tragic* or Jan Fabre’s *Mount Olympus: To glorify the cult of tragedy*, and others not, like Taylor Mac’s *24-Decade History of Popular Music*. How can contemporary durational performance lend new insight into the Homeric performance tradition?.²

The reception of the *Odyssey*, in particular, rapidly expands across all genres and medias, from cinema to TV, and radio, from children books to comics. On these premises, of course, it would be impossible to treat adequately all aspects of this heterogeneous field, in the limited space of this article. Therefore, this article will expose the main thread of my research on some aspects of the contemporary reception of Homer’s *Odyssey*, and on the common use of the terms ‘*Odyssey*,’ ‘Odysseus’ and ‘Ulysses.’ Secondly, some trends and key-themes in reception will be analyzed, with examples, particularly on the international scenes: on stage, the *Odyssey* is adapted and played worldwide, with a remarkable frequency. Thirdly, a special attention will be given to some theatre productions of the past fifteen years (variously connected not only to the *Odyssey*, but also to ancient and modern routes across the Mediterranean Sea), with a brief account of the most relevant cases.

Before focusing on reception, it is worth remembering that the two surviving poems were originally part of a larger ‘epic cycle’; an extensive narration of the Trojan War and of many related myths, regarding the heroes who took part in it.³ Some of them came back home from Troy, and their adventurous homecoming was sung in a few distinct poems known as “Nostoi” (literally “Returns”). Only one of these poems survived, the *Odyssey*. Its very name is meaningful still today, trespassing all boundaries of space and time, and becoming even more popular than the hero himself: Odysseus, aka Ulysses, King of Ithaca.

Notoriously, he came home from Troy, alone, after a decade spent in travels on the sea: meanwhile, unfortunately, he lost all his ships and comrades. He survived, and he is the only eye-witness of his journey. He (a notorious liar, according to epic and tragic tradition) is in charge of telling us what happened, and carrying the memory of those who perished at Troy, or died in the waves.

The happy ending of the poem reflects the good luck of its hero (or anti-hero? The question is open). But the war and the journey, over two decades, have left

permanent scars on his skin.⁴ Ulysses comes home, at last, but the price is high in terms of human lives and sufferings. The seafaring is particularly tragic, for the perils he has to face and for the death of his comrades in arms.

2. Ancient words, modern travellers.

The ambivalent legacy of the Homeric hero, and of his adventurous journey, is still visible today all over the world: not only in books, comics, on screen and on stage (as many studies testify), but in a more pervasive, immediate way. The deep roots of Homer's legacy lie even in current words of everyday life.

This is precisely the starting point of my research: many terms related to my subject are still in use, with a striking variety of meanings. In order to show it, as a first step, I searched on the Internet 'Odyssey', 'Odysseus' and 'Ulysses': most references are related to travel, of course, to seafaring, sailing, homecoming. But they are also popular names for tools, cars, videogames, cruise companies, leisure places, camping sites, hotels, etc. However, the lists of places, objects, persons, events may change consistently from one language to another. Even the numbers of occurrences vary if I look for the same terms in different languages. In English, for instance, I find 10.400.00 results for 'Odysseus' and 23.900.000 for 'Ulysses', thanks to Joyce's novel which occurs on top on <https://www.google.it/> (Last accessed 28 August 2017).⁶ The name of the hero, in a larger view, fits also a variety of places, objects and events, more or less related to the concept of travel, discovery, and adventure (such as hotels, ships, travel agencies), but also to learning and getting to know people and places (reviews, TV show, schools, etc.).

As for 'Odyssey' I find 184.000.000 results, including many possible definitions, often ambiguous, suspended between positive and negative meanings, such as "an adventurous /unfortunate journey", "a long journey full of adventures".⁷ On top of the list, after the Homeric poems, stands a recent adaptation written by Simon Armitage, directed by Bob Wilson and produced by the National Theater of Greece and the Piccolo Teatro (Milan). Across the world, theatres and other public spaces host performances and lectures of the poem: at the University of Almeria (Spain), for instance, various chapters have been performed in Spanish over a few years, and are available online.⁸

There are also hundreds of references to other adaptations of the poem, on stage and on screen, which usually include well-known masterpieces of different *genres*, from graphic novels to science-fiction movies, such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: a Space Odyssey* (1968).⁹ Perhaps under his influence, the name of the poem is quite frequent in cinema. As the most celebrated movies and TV series have been already analysed by many critics, I will focus here on less known examples, which borrow their name from the *Odyssey*, in order to verify if they share meanings, implications, and concepts.

In July 2009, Scottish newspapers described as "*an Odyssey in the Highlands*" a travelling movie festival named '*Pilgrimage*' (meant as a mix of *pilgrim* and *image*).¹⁰ Historical, classical movies were shown inside a mobile cinema on wheels, which travelled through the Highlands; once a day it was also 'pulled', with ropes, by the

walking pilgrims. In this case, the definition of “Odyssey” was clearly associated to the concept of travel, but also to the effort, and to the passion for cinema, which moved the participants. The festival was created and led by the Scottish actress Tilda Swinton and by the Irish director Marc Cousins. Significantly, the same director later wrote and directed an ambitious and artistic documentary in fifteen episodes: “an epic journey through the history of cinema” entitled *The Story of Film: an Odyssey*.¹¹

My third, and last example outside theatre, is a TV series produced by NBC (premiere April 5th 2015), simply called *Odyssey* in UK and, quite significantly, *American Odyssey* in the U.S. It was meant as a modern-day take on the *Odyssey*, according to its authors. The leading character is a female U.S. soldier, the only survivor of her military unit. She has to go back home, alone: “A soldier. A mother. Betrayed. Her *Odyssey* begins”, says the trailer (released on March 6th 2015). The series was not lucky as the archetype, it had poor reviews, and it was canceled at the end of season One.¹² I wish better luck to another *Odyssey*, a NASA Exploration Project (still ongoing, on the seas of Mars), and to many other enterprises (tour operators, guides, travel agencies) and safe shelters for ‘adventurous’ travelers, all named after Homer’s poem.¹³

To my knowledge, there is no evidence of any scientific bibliography on the current use of terms related to Homer’s *Odyssey*. My research is still in progress, but I may just outline some major trends.¹⁴ First, some differences may be observed between the terms regarding the poem and the eponymous hero. The name *Odyssey* seems more ambivalent and ambiguous, as it may be possibly connected to journeys of all kind: not only by sea, and not necessarily of home coming, and – most notable – mainly adventurous travels, bad experiences, dangerous missions, one-way journeys, with no possible retreat.¹⁵

Compared to these implications, often related to collective characters, “good vibrations” are more frequently connected to a single traveller who follows the example of Ulysses, the hero who survived. As a talisman, a brand, or a trademark, he lends his name to TV shows, novels and enterprises, but also to fortunate missions of exploration, adventure, and quests of a man seeking himself. For instance, the oldest and most popular TV show in Italy dealing with nature, science, travels, and knowledge, by Piero and Alberto Angela, is called *Ulisse. Il piacere della scoperta* (“Ulysses. The Pleasure of Discovery”).

My hypothesis is that such a wide range of meanings and examples is connected to the very nature of Homer’s poem. First of all, notoriously, it is an oral composition, meant to be sung in portions, pieces, and episodes. The lack of continuity is part of its fascination, and beauty: not only the theme itself, a journey, but also the facts, the characters, the very language consistently change and continuously vary throughout the poem. Every element, character, or place of the poem seems to contain its opposite: on top of the list there is of course Ulysses, the “man of many devices” (“*polytropos*”, as stated in *Odyssey*, 1.1), a warrior, a brave captain, a rascal, and a liar, who inspired many modern figures of sailors, refugees, travellers, with his ambiguous nature of hero, and anti-hero.

Secondly, the destination of Ulysses's journey is, of course, home. He misses his island, his family, his house, his fireplace, his people: in one word, what is most familiar to him.¹⁶ The centre of this complex universe is recognizable in a woman: Penelope, the ideal wife, the safe shelter, where Ulysses keeps heading to. Yet, her words and especially her dreams (such as the symbolic dream where the eagle kills the gees, *Od.* 19.655-695) may reveal – at a careful glance – inner doubts, secret fears, and ambivalent desires.¹⁷

On the other hand, Ulysses is constantly refrained and driven away from home, not only by the god of the sea Poseidon, his main opponent, but also by a mysterious force, inside him: it compels him to sail away, towards new lands, new discoveries, and new adventures. He will leave again, soon after his return, as we are told at the end of the poem. His most negative features as shown by Homer and even more in Attic tragedy (he is depicted as a liar, a traitor, and a rascal) are balanced by his qualities, including curiosity and courage, which allow him to become a symbol of the modern man, always in search of something he cannot have.

In this perspective, I suggest to look at the whole poem and its reception as somehow suspended between two poles: the certain, familiar Island (Home) the uncertain /Unfamiliar /Unknown (Sea), where Ulysses keeps travelling without rest. And 'Ithaca' may be considered the treasure of travel itself: another Greek poet, Constantinos Cavafy, described it perfectly in his poem *Ithaca*.¹⁸

3. An audience of all ages.

For the reasons listed above, in my opinion, the *Odyssey* encourages free adaptations, very different from one another: even the most celebrated elements – the Hero, the Homeland, the Family, the Return – are not quite what they seem at first. The multiple aspects of Ulysses's journey inspire artists with a variety of solutions, stimulate their creative invention, and the combinations of different medias and genres: somehow, it is a puzzle that any artist, playwright, or director can dismantle and reconstruct, each time in a different shape. According to their inspiration, context, media, and language, they may develop one or more aspects, or characters, of the original poem, in order to reach audiences of all ages and cultures.

In this regard, I may cite here just a few Italian examples, with different targets, outside theatre. In the past years, the archaeologist and journalist Valerio Massimo Manfredi published a few best sellers, free adaptations of Ulysses's tales, under the title *Il mio nome è Nessuno* ("My name is Nobody").¹⁹ In turn, his novels inspired an illustrated book, *Odisseo* ("Odysseus") by Valerio and Diana Manfredi (Mondadori Electa, 2014) and a theatre adaptation by Francesco Niccolini: *Il mio nome è Nessuno – L'Ulisse* ("My Name is Nobody – Ulysses"): it was recently staged by Alessio Pizzecchi, with a well-known Sicilian actor, Sebastiano Lomonaco, in the leading role.²⁰

Apart from theatre, I may also cite other examples of genres and media which cannot be treated here: Homer's *Odyssey* has always been a popular theme for illustrated books and children games. For instance, a popular adaptation for children may have inspired Joyce's *Ulysses* (see Hall 2012, 26). Today, the poem keeps entertaining an

audience of all ages in books, comics and graphic novels: a sign of its popularity is the name of a world-famous Japanese *manga*, *Nausicaa*, by Miyazaki, and the related cartoon (1982-84), although not directly inspired by Homer. As for comics, many authors adapted the whole poem in all languages (such as Thomas and Tocchini 2012) while others focused on some episodes (Harambat 2014, for instance, starts when Ulysses lands on Ithaca's shore).²¹ As for opera, I shall briefly recall *Outis* by Luciano Berio, libretto by Berio and Del Corno, dated 1996.²²

Needless to say, Ulysses's adventures also inspired blockbuster movies and TV series: as a first example, I may cite a 1954 movie *Ulisse* by Mario Camerini with an all-star cast: Kirk Douglas, Anthony Quinn and Silvana Mangano were playing respectively Ulysses, Antinous, and the double role – quite interesting choice – of Penelope/Circe.

Other free adaptations for the screen – all very different from the archetype – do not preserve the original text, but focus on the core idea of homecoming, and on selected episodes of Ulysses's adventurous journey. They include, for instance, *Nostos* by Franco Piavoli (1989), *Ulysses's Gaze* by Theo Anghelopoulos (1995), *O Brother where art thou?* (2000) by Joel and Ethan Cohen. Among TV series, the Italian *Odissea* by Franco Rossi (1968) has been repeatedly defined by Martin Winkler “the greatest screen adaptation of Homer” till today. Now available in DVD, it keeps fascinating an audience of all ages, including children.²³

As for other genres, it is worth mentioning an ambitious project still in progress: *Odisseo: re-mapping-Sicily* by the Sicilian choreographer Roberto Zappalà and his company, from Catania (Sicily). Their first stunning production, named *Naufregio con spettatore* (“Shipwreck with Spectator”), significantly bears the same title of a 1979 essay by Hans Blumenberg, inspired by Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (“On the Nature of things”).²⁴ Zappalà's choreography is based not only on this book, but on many iconographic models: first of all, a well-known painting by Géricault, inspired by a real, historical shipwreck, *The Raft of the Medusa*.²⁵ Two dancers, mostly lying on the ground, on an imaginary raft, mime the shipwreck of Ulysses's ship – or any modern ship – in a desperate effort to survive, with a tragic, shocking end, including cannibalism.

This outstanding case brings us to the core of my study. The dangers of troubled waters play an important role in the Homeric reception, and they somehow balance, as a counterpart, the hero. The sea, indeed, may be considered as the second leading character of the poem, but it also dominates an epic genre – the adventurous journey – tightly connected to our times, and to the tragic shipwrecks across the Mediterranean. In my opinion, the present-day mass movements are among the most important causes of the revival of *Odyssey* worldwide.²⁶ Therefore, I find particularly interesting those adaptations, which show a stronger connection both to the ancient Homeric routes, and to the troubled waters of present times.

Regarding the sea, specifically, two recent case studies are worth mentioning: *Odissea: un racconto mediterraneo*, (“Odyssey, a Mediterranean Tale”) created by Sergio Maifredi (Teatro Pubblico Ligure) and *Meeting the Odyssey* directed by Michele Losi (Scarlattine Teatro). They are both collective projects, each covering many years,

which choose the sea as their main stage: they go out of theatres, and re-create Ulysses's journey on the shores and in the waters of Northern and Southern seas.

The first director, Maifredi, has been working in the past years with teachers and scholars on most chapters of the Homeric poem. He gathered, in time, many well-known Italian actors, singers, storytellers, such as the folksinger Roberto Vecchioni (Politeama Theatre, Genua). As a general rule, Maifredi led them to read (or sing) one or more books of the poem, with music inspired by the Mediterranean folk songs. They do not respect the original sequence of the poem, but rather – as in the original contests of *rapsodoi* – the unique nature of the open-air, oral performance on the sea: each time different, unpredictable, and inspired by the location, the art of improvisation, the personality of each performer, the feeling with the audience, and the interaction with other performances. The project, so far, has been travelling back and forth on the Italian coasts, from the Northwestern coasts to Southern Italy and Sicily.

In the summer of 2014, for instance, the Theatre Festival “Orestyadi di Gibellina” hosted an all-star cast of performers: Moni Ovadia (*Odisseo e la gara dell'arco*, chapter XXI), Giuseppe Cederna (*Odisseo e i Feaci*, canti V-VIII), Vincenzo Pirrotta (*La partenza*, chapter IX; *Scilla e Cariddi*, canto XII), Gioele Dix (*I canti di Telemaco*, chapters I-IV), Maddalena Crippa (*Penelope*, chapter XXIII).²⁷

In the summer of 2015, other brilliant performers read or sang chapters from the *Odyssey*, and the *Iliad* and other texts, on many shores of Italy, but also in ancient and modern theatres: Davide Enia (*La discesa agli Inferi*, chapter XI), Ascanio Celestini (*La strage dei Proci*, chapter XXII), Amanda Sandrelli (*Calipso*, chapter V), Tullio Solenghi (*Odisseo e Penelope*, chapter XIX), David Riondino e Dario Vergassola (*I patti di pace*, chapter XXIV).

The second international project, even more focused on the sea, is *Meeting the Odyssey. An Adventure beyond Arts, Myths, and Everyday Life in Europe* (2013-2016). For three summers, several theatre crews have been travelling on a historical sailboat, called ‘Hoppet’ (‘Hope’): it sailed from Saint Petersburg across the Baltic Sea and the channels of Europe (2014), reached Northern Italy, stopped in Sardinia and Malta (2015), and in the summer of 2016 headed towards Greece (where the last performances were scheduled in July). The project involved dozens of theatre companies, hundreds of participants. It included conferences, meetings, events, exhibitions, a few big productions (with an international cast), and “instant performances” (site-specific theatre workshops, led by professional actors, with local inhabitants).²⁸

Each show or workshop explored a different theme of the *Odyssey*, in connection with local, present issues (immigration, friendship, hospitality, sexual prejudices etc.). For instance, the 2014 production *Waiting for the Rain* premiered in Opole, a Polish town whose male inhabitants mostly left decades ago in order to work abroad. The script therefore focused on the feelings of women and children who keep waiting for their relatives, like Penelope and Telemachus. As for the Italian tour, the first instant performance (Milan, May 23 and 24, 2015) was based on a workshop with Italian and foreign students of various high schools: it was freely inspired by the Sirens myth,

read by the teenagers' point of view, in order to show some ambivalent aspects of today's stereotypes on women and on their relationships with men.

The second Italian production, *sbarchi un' Odissea* ("landing an *Odyssey*", May, 2015) counted on an international cast and on a quite unusual location: the first open-air theatre built on the shore of the Navigli Channels. The set recreates a modern disco (Ithaca's palace) where Penelope and Telemachus dance, as Ulysses lands silently in the night, alone, on his sailboat. In the third production, *Nausicaa. Io sono io* ("Nausicaa, I am I") by the Sardinian theatre company Cadadieteatro (July and August, 2015), Nausicaa and her family host a chorus of refugees of past and present times (including Ulysses, but also Hector's widow, Andromache).²⁹

To sum up, the two projects recreated Ulysses's journey, although in different ways: the first gathered public readings of the poem (*Un racconto mediterraneo*, "A Mediterranean Tale"), the second commissioned adaptations of Homer's poem (*Meeting the Odyssey*): they both mirrored its complexity and richness, as a joint effort of many artists, comparable to ancient *rapsodoi*.³⁰

4. Towards Ithaca

Compared to these projects, most adaptations focus on partial points of view, on one, or few, key-ideas or characters, excluding others: on these premises, I have tried to classify some of the most recent productions of the *Odyssey*, on the basis of the main themes or characters treated.

First of all, as I said before, many theatre productions deal with the navigation on the Mediterranean Sea: some of them share a positive attitude towards sailing and travelling, connected to adventure, the desire of knowledge and discovery, the pleasure of telling tales. In this category, for the type of narrative and the nature of audience, I found many examples among the most recent and successful in Italy. On one side, there are small productions for selected audiences, especially for children: I just cite *Canto la storia dell'astuto Ulisse* ("I sing the story of astute Ulysses") by Flavio Albanese (Piccolo Teatro, Milan), *Odissea viaggio nel teatro* ("*Odyssey*, a journey in theatre") and *Odissea per bambini, viaggio nel teatro per venti bambini di tutte le età* ("*Odyssey* for children. A journey in theatre for twenty children of all ages") by Teatro del Lemming, Rovigo; on the other side, on a wider scale, a well-known example is the Greek-Italian *Odyssey* directed by Robert Wilson, based on the script by Simon Armitage translated into modern Greek.³¹ After the premiere at Athens (2012), and a sold out in Milan (2013), the show returned to Piccolo Teatro (Milan) in October 2015. Its huge success has many causes: the cast, the scenes, the live music, but also Wilson's fast rhythm, and Armitage's brilliant style.

Here, in particular, the *Odyssey* becomes part of a collective heritage, regarding adventurous journeys: a fascinating universe, which includes many modern and ancient narration of travel, not only by sea: from Sinbad to Jules Verne, from comics to science fiction. The homecoming of Ulysses, perhaps, loses a part of its original bittersweet taste, especially for the tragic death of the crew. What counts is the joyful, thrilling, even childish pleasure of storytelling. The show perfectly matches the various

expectations and tastes of an international audience and attracts, moreover, for its ‘fantastic’ characters: i.e. dangerous women, seductive witches (Circe), bizarre creatures, hybrids (the Sirens), and monsters (the Cyclops).³²

In this regard, another branch of tradition was born from Homer’s *Odyssey* IX and from Euripides’ satyr play *Cyclops*. Sicily, in particular, claims to be the homeland of Cyclops’s legend, and it hosts many recent versions of their myth, including some in Sicilian dialect: such is the case of ‘*U Ciclopu*’ (“The Cyclops”, 1914), by the Nobel Prize Luigi Pirandello, wonderfully adapted for the modern stage, directed and played by Vincenzo Pirrotta (Palazzolo Acreide, Greek theatre, 2005).³³

Another Sicilian dramatist, in his long career, has been translating classical patterns into his own ‘personal language’: the artist Emilio Isgrò, known since the Eighties for his monumental trilogy *Oresteia di Gibellina* (“Gibellina’s *Oresteia*”). Among his masterpieces are the experimental novel *Polifemo* (“Polyphemus”, 1989), and the monologue *Odissea cancellata* (“Cancelled *Odyssey*”, 2004).³⁴ The most distinctive feature of his works is the ambivalent treatment of both figures, Ulysses and Polyphemus: they both share bad and good instincts, qualities and virtues, doubts and vices.

In Sicily, again, a modern version of the Cyclops’s tale was written and played by a master of ‘cunto’ (a Sicilian technique of oral performance) and of Puppet Opera (“Opera dei pupi”): Mimmo Cuticchio.³⁵ From Palermo, too, comes the director and actress Emma Dante, former artistic director of the classical festival at Teatro Olimpico (Vicenza), with her free adaptation of Polyphemus’s myth: *Io nessuno e Polifemo: intervista impossibile* (“I, Nobody, and Polyphemus: an impossible interview”).³⁶

One year later, the same theatre in Vicenza hosted a new version of the *Odyssey*, directed by Emma Dante: *Odissea, movimento n. 1* (“*Odyssey*, Movement 1”, September 26-27, 2015).³⁷ The title indicates the beginning of a cycle. Indeed the script is based on the first books of the poem, and it opens with Penelope and Telemachus waiting for Ulysses. The plot seems frozen in a suspended action, as in other modern plays mostly focused on the last chapters of the poem, such as *Ithaka* by Botho Strauss (1996), all set in Ulysses’s palace.³⁸

A comparable emphasis on the mother /son couple, and on those who spend their lives waiting, may be found in other works either focused on collective figures, such as *Waiting for the rain*, and the Greek poem by Yannis Ritsos *The old Women and the Sea* (1958),³⁹ or dedicated to single characters, such as three recent Italian monologues respectively entitled *Penelope* by Paolo Puppa (played, among others, by Laura Curino)⁴⁰, *Odiséa. Lettura selvatica*, (“*Odyssey*, a wild reading”, by Tonino Guerra,⁴¹ and *Odissea* by Mario Perrotta (2013).⁴²

Other plays focus on Ulysses’s homecoming and on the family reunion. Three different examples of this category have been recently staged in Milan: *sbarchi un’Odissea* (“landing an *Odyssey*”) by Michele Losi (cited above), *Ulisse: il ritorno* (“Ulysses: the homecoming”, a 2013 production, by Corrado d’Elia, reprised on May 5-18, 2015) and *La casa – Odissea di un crack* (“Home. An *Odyssey* of a crack”) by La

Fionda Teatro (reprised on July 13th, 2015).⁴³ All these productions freely reinterpret and update the Greek poem. The first one can count on an international cast who speaks very few words, but takes advantage of places, sounds, music and dance: at night, in a real harbor (the Navigli shore) a real ship silently carries Ulysses to his palace, where a wild party is going on, and Penelope is dancing with her Suitors; the second adaptation combines ancient and modern texts, including film scripts (such as *Ulysses's Gaze*, cited above); the third one is a witty dialogue between two female actresses – a bored old couple of Ulysses and Penelope, trapped inside their house – with hints of parody and mockery which recall more Beckett's *Happy Days* than Homer's *Odyssey*.

5. One-way ticket

At the end of our journey, let us focus on those productions, which inspired the first steps of our research. They are dedicated to Ulysses's crew, and to all those seafarers who tragically perish nowadays, while trying to go North, or West, from Africa or from Syria. Most of them lie under the Mediterranean, their bodies are missing, their names are unknown.

A multitude of Nobodies. The dead ones, in the *Odyssey*, are not only in book XI (*Od.* XI 46-800): they are everywhere, around Ulysses, in the waves, in Ithaca's palace, before their descent into Hades.⁴⁴ In this sense, Isgrò's *Odissea cancellata*⁴⁵ could be interpreted as a nightmare or delirium, where all voices are ghosts or visions of Ulysses's hallucinated mind. Or, maybe, even the hero is nothing more than a spirit, wandering with Aeolus' winds, on the waves of the Mediterranean Sea.⁴⁶

In the past decade, after Isgrò, the 'tragedies of the seas' evoke, unfortunately, Homeric echoes in the minds of artists. They rapidly increase: not only the number of productions directly connected to the *Odyssey*, but also those focused on the troubled waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The first example may be the Sicilian artist Mimmo Cuticchio (cited above), who created an oral performance ('cunto') inspired by Homer's poem (*L'approdo di Ulisse*, "Ulysses's landing", Linosa, 2011).⁴⁷

The ancient model is less explicit, but always present, in other plays which depict contemporary shipwrecks with epic tones, comparable to the *Odyssey*: *La Nave Fantasma* ("The ghost ship"), by Giovanni Maria Bellu, Renato Sarti and Bebo Storti (2004),⁴⁸ *Trilogia del naufragio* ("Shipwreck Trilogy", by Lina Prosa (2007-2013),⁴⁹ "Noise in the Waters" by Marco Martinelli (2010).⁵⁰

This last production deserves special attention: in 2008/2009, while Martinelli worked in Sicily, and sailed the troubled waters of the Mediterranean, he created his text as a nightmare, ultimately inspired by Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. He imagined a General, possibly similar to Colonel Gaddafi, but symbolically meant as a demon of the Abyss, a Poseidon or Hades of our times. In the original production, he is played by a young dynamic actor, Alessandro Renda, with the support of traditional tunes (from Arab and Sicilian folk music repertoires) played live by two Sicilian musicians "the Mancuso Brothers". The text is a litany, a funeral oration: for one hour, the General keeps scanning numbers and names. Little by little, the audience knows what they

mean: he is counting the missing ones, the dead corpses lying under the Mediterranean Sea.

The original production premiered in Mazara del Vallo, a maritime border town in Western Sicily (2010); it was reprised several times in Italy and abroad, and in particular in a symbolic place: Lampedusa, an island just off Sicily, a landing point for thousands of immigrants. There, *Rumore di acque* was last staged in 2014, on the first anniversary of a most tragic shipwreck (October 3rd, 2013).

In the past years, Martinelli's text has been performed many times, in Italian, French, English, German, Portuguese, Spanish, and Romanian; it is still on tour, either directed by Martinelli or by other directors worldwide: all over Europe, in Senegal, in Chile and in the U.S.⁵¹ It will also be staged at Washington DC, under the patronage of the United Nations, by a Jacopo Rampini: he asked Martinelli if in his production the General could act and be dressed as Donald Trump... and of course the permission was granted!

While walls are planned and built on the borders between U.S. and Mexico, as well as in Eastern Europe, the issues concerning migrations and refugees become everyday more and more dramatic and urgent. Martinelli reminds us, in every possible occasion, that the numbers listed in his drama are not hyperbolic. They are real persons, dead or missing: we know of many thousands, but they should be more. Their number keeps growing, unfortunately, while this play (as well as others on the same subject) is being translated and staged. The figures evoked here, with or without names, are celebrated, remembered, sung, as in a non-religious funeral rite.

6. Epic and tragic journeys.

On the route I have traced so far, the Homeric reception meets another ancient archetype: the Attic playwright Aeschylus, in his tragedy *Suppliant Women*, dramatically follows the adventurous 'odyssey' of a chorus of women refugees from Africa to Athens, where they seek – and fortunately find – a shelter. Aeschylus's tragedy too recently inspired many adaptations: *Die Schutzbefohlenen* ("The Suppliants") written by the Austrian playwright Elfriede Jelinek (2013) has been staged several times since 2014 in Austria, Germany, and Italy (by Claudio Longhi, at the University of Bologna)⁵².

In Sicily (a crucial crossroad, as I have showed), two stunning theatre productions mixed the ancient tragedy with the real stories of contemporary refugees: the former was called *Supplici a Portopalo* ("Suppliants at Portopalo", from the name of the town cited above, located on the extreme Southern point of Sicily), directed by Gabriele Vacis, and performed by the talented Sicilian actor Vincenzo Pirrotta (2009);⁵³ the latter, written in Italian, Sicilian dialect and modern Greek, was directed by Moni Ovadia, Mario Incudine and Pippo Kaballà, and produced by INDA Foundation (Syracuse). In the summer of 2015, it was watched by thousands spectators, with great success, at the most ancient Classical Festival in Italy.⁵⁴

While the directors were planning the show, they met some of the refugees who had just landed on Sicilian shores, a few miles from the ancient Greek theatre where

The Suppliants was staged: the refugees were invited to seat in the front rows, to watch the tragedy, and to join the crew at the end of the show. In the same days, INDA Foundation also organized a public reading of ancient and modern texts on a special “Refugee Day”, which is still celebrated every year, in the archaeological area of the ancient Greek city: the number of participants, citizens and refugees keeps growing.

Like Ovadia, Martinelli and the other directors cited above are aware of the responsibility of European countries in this situation, and of the burden we all have to carry. As a conclusion, I would like to cite the words of the project manager of *Meeting the Odyssey*, which express the feelings and the commitment shared by most artists involved in their productions, and by many others we know: “We, the artists of *Meeting the Odyssey*, dedicate this tour and all the performances to those who, unlike us, are not able to return home nor travel further with the winds. You are the real Odysseuses of today, and we wish you will find shelter in Europe or peace in your country very soon”.⁵⁵

In ancient myths, Ulysses made several choices: when he left Ithaca, heading to Troy, and when he came home. Others have no choice. They never arrive, nor come back. How many? No one knows. The shipwrecks continue, and the tragic count is still increasing every day. My research is still in progress, as the *Odyssey* is adapted and staged more and more.

Meanwhile, artists, directors, playwrights, journalists, writers, and classical scholars work side by side in order to keep the world’s attention on this huge contemporary tragedy. One last example: on April 7th and 8th 2017, Andrea Palladio’s Teatro Olimpico (Vicenza) hosted the latest edition of a festival called “Classici Contro”, which the University of Venice has been organizing since 2010⁵⁶. Under the title “Utopia (Europa)”, this new cycle of events, shows and conferences focused on ‘Xenia’: a key-concept, in ancient Greek society, of sacred and mutual hospitality: we all have to do our best, in order to prevent shipwrecks and casualties, to give the refugees a shelter, to allow them to go back to *their own* Ithaca, and finally find peace at home.⁵⁷

Notes

1. For a general introduction to Homer’s *Odyssey* see Finley 1954; Rubens and Taplin 1989; Ahl and Roisman 1996. On Homeric reception, see the works cited at the end of this article, such as the surveys by Stanford 1954; Stanford and Luce 1974; Boitani 1992, 1998, 2016; Luther 2005; Graziosi and Greenwood 2010; Cavallini 2010; Hall 2012; McConnell 2013; Belloni, Citti, De Finis, 2014. About Italy, in particular, see Nicosia 2003; Ciani 2014 and the essay by Sotera Fornaro, *L’ambiguo ritorno: sondaggi su Omero nella letteratura italiana del Novecento*, in Cavallini 2010, 9-38. Among my works, see Treu 2009a, Treu 2016, Notti and Treu 2017 (forthcoming), Ieranò and Taravacci 2017 (forthcoming). See also the programme of the APGRD conference *Performing Epic into 21st century* (APGRD, Oxford, September 18th - 19th, 2014: www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk. [Last accessed 28 August 2017]).
2. The conference, co-hosted by McGill University and Université de Montréal, took place on 19th – 22nd July, 2017 in Montreal, Canada. <http://>

- www.celticconferenceclassics.com [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. On *Mount Olympos*, by Fabre, and *Santa Estasi*, another “durational performance” by Antonio Latella, see also Giovannelli (2016).
3. For an accurate analysis, and bibliography, see Burgess (2001). See also Finley 1954 and Ieranò (2015, 171-173).
 4. Ancient epic poems have inspired, among others, the well-known works by Jonathan Shay about the trauma suffered by ancient and modern veterans, since the Vietnam War till today. On Ulysses in particular see Shay (2002), on the war trauma in the modern reception of Sophocles’s *Ajax* see Treu (2017a).
 5. My research on the stage reception of Homer’s *Odyssey* started in 2009 and is still in progress: see Treu 2009a, 2014, 2015a, Ieranò and Taravacci 2017 (forthcoming), Notti and Treu 2017 (forthcoming). Given the target and the themes of this article, I prefer to use the Latin name (Ulysses), rather than the Greek one (Odysseus), as it is by far the most largely used in reception (for a survey on terms, see Treu 2015e).
 6. Actually, Ulysses is still sailing not only across the Mediterranean, but he is also “surfing the internet” (the expression was created by Jean Armour Polly, on March 17th 1992, by mixing “*Information surfer*” and “*channel-surfing*” with a TV remote control: cfr. <http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/surfing.html> and <http://www.netmom.com/about-net-mom/23-who-invented-surfing-the-internet> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]).
 7. See for instance <https://www.merriam-webster.com/> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
 8. See the description of the research project and the podcast series, online, at <http://www2.ual.es/redesliterarias> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
 9. On Kubrick’s movie, see the essay by Giorgio Ieranò *Ulisce alla deriva: l’epopea tragica di Stanley Kubrick*, in Cavallini 2010, 133-152. For other movies and TV series directly related to Homer, which have been already analysed by critics, and cannot be treated here, see bibliography below, and particularly the essays by Martin Winkler.
 10. See for instance <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/aug/02/tilda-swinton-mobile-cinema> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
 11. The episodes (one hour each) were written and directed by Cousins, first shown in cinemas (2011-), now available in DVD.
 12. See for instance the review at <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2015/sep/11/a-bumpy-journey-for-anna-friel-have-you-been-watching-odyssey> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
 13. See respectively the websites of the NASA project “2001 Mars Odyssey” (<http://mars.nasa.gov/odyssey/>), of the Odyssee hostel in Berlin (<http://www.globetrotterhostel.de/>), of the Odyssey hotel on the Greek island of Kephallonia, opposite to Ithaca (<https://hotelodyssey.gr/>). [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
 14. See bibliography below, and particularly Treu, 2009a, 2017 (forthcoming), Notti and Treu 2017 (forthcoming).
 15. Another dangerous, yet successful, military retreat – narrated by the Greek historian Xenophon in his *Anabasis* – inspired, in turn, a remarkable case: *The Warriors* (a novel by Sol Yurick, 1965, and a cult movie by Walter Hill, 1979: see Treu 2017a, 67-68).
 16. The English term ‘homely’, and the German ‘*heimlich*’ - from ‘*Heim*’, ‘home’ - share the same root of ‘*Heimat*’, ‘Homeland’.

17. About Penelope's dreams, in comparison with those of Attic tragedies, see Treu 2006. For some relevant adaptations, particularly regarding Penelope and the homecoming, see Knight 2016.
18. The whole text is online at <http://www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?cat=1&id=74> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
19. The story of Ulysses is divided by Manfredi in two parts (before and after the Trojan war) – *Il giuramento* ("The Oath", 2012) and *Il ritorno* "The return", 2013) – ideally followed by a third novel, *L'oracolo* ("The Oracle" which was originally dated 1990, re-written and set in a different context.
20. Première at Plautusfestival, Sarsina, 11th August 2015, Italian tour in 2015/2016. See the online reviews at <http://www.sipario.it/recensioniprosah/item/9477-il-mio-nome-e-nessuno-l-ulisse-regia-alessio-pizzzech.html> and http://www.dramma.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=18973:il-mio-nome-e-nessuno-l-ulisse&catid=39&Itemid=14 [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
21. Among children books, see for instance Codignola and Papini 1999 and 2014, Cinquetti and Guicciardini 2014. As for comics, for a general survey see the essays by Massimo Manca (*Omero a fumetti*, in Cavallini 2010, 269-289) and by Thomas E. Jenkins (*Heavy Metal Homer*, in Kovacs and Marshall, 2011, 221-235). There are also three fictional characters named 'Ulysses' in Marvel comics: see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulysses_\(comics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulysses_(comics)) [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
22. The first part is online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCMVQatMW1M> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
23. For examples in cinema and TV see Hall, 2012, 29, and most of all about Franco Rossi's *Odissea* see Winkler, "Franco Rossi's *Odissea*: The Greatest Screen Adaptation of Homer", online at <https://camws.org/meeting/2009/program/abstracts/03A2.Winkler.pdf> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. See also other essays by Winkler in Cavallini 2010, 153-163, in Knippschild and García Morcillo 2013, 133-153 (see more at: <http://www.bloomsbury.com/us/seduction-and-power-9781441177469/#sthash.Ed1qlMUGdpuf> [Last accessed 28 August 2017], and Winkler 2015, 154. For a remarkable, personal souvenir about Rossi's *Odissea* see Ieranò, 2015, 227-230.
24. Blumenberg 1979.
25. World premiere in Catania on August 31st 2010, reprised at Festival MilanOltre, Milan, in autumn 2016. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6uggrJ58uw>, <http://www.scenariopubblico.com/compagnia-zappala-danza/> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
26. See bibliography below, and particularly Treu 2009a, 2014, 2015e.
27. For updated information see <http://www.teatropubblicoligure.it/> [Last accessed: August 28th, 2017], Ieranò and Taravacci 2017 (forthcoming). About the Festival "Orestyadi" see <http://www.fondazioneorestiadi.it/orestiadifestival/calendario.html> [Last accessed 28 August 2017], Isgrò (2011, 9-67) and Garavaglia 2012.
28. See www.meetingtheodyssey.eu [Last accessed 30 August 2017]). See also Treu 2014 and 2015b.
29. See <http://www.cadadieteatro.com/2015/10/15/nausicaa-io-sono-io/> [Last accessed 30 August 2017]. I thank the team of *MeetingtheOdyssey*, Cadadieteatro and the staff at the Olbia performance (August 13, 2015).
30. Another international project, *Odyssee Europa* (2010) created by Christoph Ramsayr, was a theatre journey in six episodes across the Germany (spectators were following

- Ulysses on a bus, and travelling across a former industrial area); the paper by Sotera Fornaro, *L'ambiguo ritorno: sondaggi su Omero nella letteratura italiana del Novecento*, in Cavallini 2010, 9-38 (cited above, n.1).
31. For these productions, see respectively <https://www.piccoloteatro.org/it/2016-2017/canto-la-storia-dell-astuto-ulisse>, <http://www.teatrodellemming.it/>, <http://www.piccoloteatro.org/it/2015-2016/odyssey> [Last accessed 30 August 2017], Tentorio 2013, Frattali and Pietrosanti 2014.
 32. Wilson, in a meeting crowded with students (Università Statale, Milan, October 1st, 2015), confirmed that his key-idea was “a fantastic journey for the 21st century”, and he asked the actors “to tell the story to a child, to a little boy or girl in the audience, like a bed-time tale with scary monsters and terrible moments”.
 33. For Pirandello’s text, see Pagliaro 1967. About Pirrotta see Rimini (2015, 117-120, 130), Treu 2006, and 2016, 229-31.
 34. See respectively, on Isgrò’s *Polifemo*, the paper by Sotera Fornaro in Cavallini 2010 (cited above, n.1); on *Odissea cancellata* Isgrò (2011, 79-82, 495-52), and Ieranò and Taravacci 2017 (forthcoming). About Gibellina see also Garavaglia 2012.
 35. See http://www.figlidartecuticchio.com/cuticchio_Mostro.swf [Last accessed 28 August 2017], *Cuticchio and Licata* 1993, Rimini (2015, 131).
 36. On Emma Dante see Barone 2014, Giovannelli 2014, Piovani and Brazzale (2014, 9, 15-41).
 37. See <http://classici.tcvl.it/it/eventi/2014-2015/68-ciclo> [Last accessed 28 August 2017] and Treu 2015d.
 38. On the Italian production of this play, directed by Luca Ronconi, *Odissea doppio ritorno* (Ferrara 2007 – Milano 2008) see Iannucci 2007.
 39. An adaptation of this poem, “*Le donne e il mare*” (“Women and the Sea”) was staged at the Venice Theatre Biennale: see Treu (2009a, 177).
 40. See for the text Puppa “(2000, 69-80).
 41. See <http://www.teatrodelrealbe.com/eng/spettacolo.php?id=63> [Last accessed: August 29th, 2017] for the adaptation directed by Marco Martinelli, with Roberto Magnani (2009).
 42. On Perrotta see Treu (2009a, 165-167). The *Odyssey* is also a recognizable model, although not explicit, for Perrotta’s new project on migration: *Versoterra*, 30th September-2nd October 2016: see <http://versoterra.it/>, <http://www.stratagemmi.it/?p=9272>, and <http://www.marioperrotta.com/> [Last accessed 30 August 2017].
 43. See respectively for *Ulisse il ritorno*, Treu 2013a, and Viccei 2013; for *La casa. Odissea di un crack* Treu 2015a [Last accessed 30 August 2017].
 44. Ulysses’s descent into Hades recently inspired a modern production, *Nekyia* by Michail Marmarinos (Epidauros Festival, 24th-25th July, 2015) where his Greek company interacts with dancers and musicians of NO theatre, from Japan: see the online review by Tentorio, 2015 [Last accessed 30 August 2017].
 45. Cited above.
 46. About Isgrò’s *Odissea cancellata* see Ieranò and Taravacci 2017 (forthcoming).
 47. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YP5tX3J7P-Q> and http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=790 [Last accessed 30 August 2017].
 48. The play is based on the investigation led by the Italian journalist Giovanni Maria Bellu, regarding a mysterious shipwreck dated December 25th, 1996, denounced five

years later by a fisherman from Portopalo (Sicily). The play is still reprised on stage (see <http://www.teatrodellacooperativa.it/distribuzione/la-nave-fantasma/#> [Last accessed 30 August 2017]). Meanwhile, the story inspired a book (Bellu 2004) and a TV movie in two episodes recently broadcasted by RAI 1 (the first and flagship channel of RAI, Italy's National Public Service Broadcaster): *Ifantasmì di Portopalo* ("Portopalo's ghosts"), Rai1, August 20th – 21st, 2017. Another "Odyssey of Nobodies", called "Bilal" was written by an Italian journalist (Gatti 2008) and inspired, in turn, the theatre production *Bilal*, directed by Annalisa Bianco: see for a general survey Fornaro 2016 [Last accessed 28 August 2017].

49. Prosa 2013 is another good example of ancient myths turned into modern stories on stage. The three chapters of her tragic trilogy ("Trilogia del Naufragio"), regarding immigrants of our times, were recently reprised in France and in Italy: for instance at Piccolo Teatro, Milan, respectively in 2015, 2016 and 2017 (<https://www.piccoloteatro.org/it/2016-2017/lampedusa-way> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]).
50. On *Rumore di Acque* see Martinelli 2010, and Teatro delle Albe website (repertory): <http://www.teatrodellealbe.com/eng/spettacolo.php?id=65> (English version) and <http://www.teatrodellealbe.com/eng/teatrografia.php?id=1> for the updated list of performances and bibliographic references [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. I thank Martinelli, Renda, and all their staff for their splendid job, and constant support. Several videos are also available online, on Vimeo and Youtube (including a movie by Alessandro Renda, *Mare bianco*), see <https://vimeo.com/85579977> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. See also Treu 2010 and 2013b. On the same subject, the contemporary shipwrecks, see also the documentary *Summertime* by Marcella Vanzo (2007, 14').
51. The English version, by Thomas Simpson, is online at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/95d7c407#page-39> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. The French version, *Bruits d'Eaux* has been staged several times, in France and Belgium, in the past six years: see the videos online, for instance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiB1Xt-7Zlc> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. The German version *Wassergerausch*, was staged in Bremen with Michael Meyer: he will also be on stage at CISIM (Lido Adriano, Ravenna), in a half-German, half Italian text with Alessandro Renda. The English version, by Tom Simpson, was staged in Chicago, in New Jersey, in NY (La Mama), and in Milwaukee with a new score by Guy Klucevsek ("functioning as a Greek chorus", according to Mike Fischer, "In theater Gigante's play, African refugees refuse to be counted out", *Journal Sentinel*, Milwaukee, 2nd October 2015, <http://archive.jsonline.com/entertainment/arts/in-gigantes-play-african-refugees-refused-to-be-counted-out-b99584820z1-330431851.html> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]).
52. See the University Website <http://www.dar.unibo.it/it/ricerca/centri/cimes/14-15/teatro/calendario/schutzbefohlenen> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
53. See Rimini (2015, 146) and Pedersoli 2010. The show was reprised by Pirrotta at Turin, Italy, on September 26th, 2016.
54. See Treu 2015c, and <http://www.indafondazione.org/it/> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
55. <https://www.meetingtheodyssey.eu/> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
56. See <http://lettere2.unive.it/flgreca/ClassiciContro.htm> [Last accessed 30 August 2017].
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Reconfiguring the Garden of Eden: suspended temporality in Jim Jarmusch's "*Only Lovers Left Alive*"

CHRISTOS ANGELIS

Abstract

The Gothic has long been considered a mode particularly apt to describe conditions at the limits of human comprehension. In a way parallel to the process of creating myths and legends, the Gothic features strong elements of metaphor and allusion, of symbolic representation that facilitates the viewing of realities that would have otherwise been too horrific, confusing, or taboo to be exposed. In this article I study Jim Jarmusch's film *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), a Gothic story revolving around a vampire couple aptly called Adam and Eve. The narrative arc is strongly structured around the concept of time and progress. More particularly, the film – fittingly set in the collapsing city of Detroit in the wake of the 2007-2008 financial crisis – attempts to negotiate the seemingly unresolvable dialectics between, on the one hand, experience and progress and, on the other, decay and loss. The core question posited by the narrative is ultimately related to the reconfiguration of the archetypal myth of the Garden of Eden in a contemporary environment: to which extent is the human experience intrinsically connected with suffering, regression and loss, and what is the role of time and its repercussions in the process? As the concept of the eternal return focuses precisely on repetition (and hence time), the examination of the dialectics presented above can be a fruitful task. The goal of this article is to offer an attempt at a resolution of the dialectical knot, precisely focusing on the blurry in-between area between these (only seemingly) antithetical and neatly separated dialectics.

Keywords: Gothic, temporality, humanity, progress, ambiguity.

1. Introduction

The Gothic, as a literary mode, has had a rather remarkable and perhaps surprising journey. Beginning with a group of texts written between 1760 and 1820 and referred to as "Gothic novels", it has since undergone numerous modifications. From Frankenstein's creation (1818) to Dr. Jekyll's (1886) equally unwise experimentation,

and from Count Dracula's (1897) enigmatic sexuality to Lestat's (1976) matter-of-fact bisexuality (in the era of the AIDS epidemic, to boot),¹ the Gothic mode seems to be as undead as its characters.

More importantly, as I will explain in this article, the Gothic possesses the rather unique attribute of balancing between two antithetical metaphysical categories: although not strictly fantastic in a Tolkienian sense, it nevertheless cannot be called a realistic mode, either. Similarly, despite the superficial obsession of the Gothic with the past, its here-and-now relevance cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the merging between past and present (or the threat of such an outcome) precisely emphasizes the lack of a neatly defined temporal border (Botting 2014, 3-4). This inherent ambiguity of the Gothic facilitates its deployment as a mechanism of allusion, with Gothic texts being typically replete with metaphors, hidden meanings, intertextual connections, and archetypal symbolism.

It is in this aspect, in particular, that Gothic texts are often read as parallels of traditional myths and legends, classical as well as biblical. Sometimes the association is explicit, as in the case of Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, the title of which already indicates the thematic area. Additionally, the novel begins with a quotation from *Paradise Lost*, itself directly associated with the legend of Prometheus and his fall from grace.² More often than not, however, the connection is very subtle. As a simple example, I will mention Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*, elements of which have been read as a parody of Christianity (Rowen 1997, 241).

However, as the example right above illustrates, there is often a significant divergence between classical (and especially biblical) legends and the Gothic: the stance in regard to patriarchy and established ideology. While traditional legends are often offered in a distinctly moralistic framework, the Gothic is habitually deployed as a mode that can express the marginal, the unspeakable, and the taboo. As David Punter argues, the Gothic often serves as a mechanism opposing "the function of ideology to naturalise the presented world, to make its consumers think that the cardinal features of the world they inhabit are natural, eternal, unchangeable" (Punter 1980, 419). In other words, while the basic function of biblical legends is that of *cohesion* and *continuation*, the Gothic acts as a mode that facilitates *decohesion* and *discontinuation*. By upsetting the monolithic order, the Gothic attempts to offer different interpretations, diverse alternatives, and unique outcomes. By offering connections to traditional legends – indeed, sometimes by parodying them – the Gothic draws attention to the subconscious need to demolish fossilized ideas. I will refer to this process as *reconfiguration*.

Before focusing on the analysis of *Only Lovers Left Alive*, I will begin by placing some theoretical foundations. In more detail, I will rely on the concept of ambiguity as presented by Tzvetan Todorov in his attempt to define the fantastic (Todorov 1973, 25). Todorov emphasizes the uncertainty between reality and fantasy, and it is precisely in this area that I choose to place the Gothic mode. At the same time, I will study

Hegelian concepts related to synthesis, with the purpose of formulating the process of reconfiguration mentioned above. Since the goal of the article is to examine how the archetypal myth of the Garden of Eden can be reconfigured in a modern context, aspects of temporality will also be studied, particularly focusing on the concepts of the eternal now and the eternal return.

2. Ambiguity, Synthesis, and Time

As mentioned in the introduction, I argue that the Gothic can be productively examined as a mode situated in the ambiguous halfway area between categories it seems to separate – only seemingly, as it will become apparent. I have so far mentioned the pseudo-separation between the past and the present/future, as well as the ambiguous placement of the Gothic between reality and fantasy. Arguably this latter element is where one should begin any analysis related to Gothic metaphysics. At this point, it is productive to recall Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of the same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us ...

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. (Todorov 1973, 25)

Todorov's formulation drives a wedge into the traditional process of dividing the Gothic into "explained" and "supernatural". Although Todorov himself refers to the "two tendencies" within the Gothic, "that of the supernatural explained (the 'uncanny') ... and that of the supernatural accepted (the 'marvelous')" (Todorov 1973, 41-42), this separation can be considered problematic, if not outright lacking. For if the Gothic exists only for the duration of the uncertainty, once it collapses onto either of the two separate branches, it should no longer be considered as truly Gothic. In other words, to divide the Gothic into explained and supernatural produces the paradoxical outcome of neither branch being Gothic, at least within the Todorovian framework. The way out of this predicament is to focus precisely on the ambiguity, which is arguably the purest form of the Gothic mode, according to Todorov's definition.³

If one wished to approach Todorovian ambiguity from a more general perspective, it becomes apparent that a certain pseudo-dichotomy is present: that between the fantastic and the realistic. The reason I refer to this as a *pseudo*-dichotomy is the fact that the ambiguous placement of the Gothic as the tangent between these metaphysical circles precisely allows it to assume either form, shifting enigmatically from one to the other. In other words, although nominally the Gothic functions as a separator between reality and fantasy, the fact that this separator is an ambiguous one means that it simultaneously also functions as a connector.

At this point, it is fruitful to recall Hegelian dialectics and particularly the triad comprising of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The thesis signifies a proposition (generalizing, one can refer to any given perspective or posited fact); the antithesis is its negation, essentially a reactionary polar opposition; the synthesis offers a resolution of the conflict by incorporating both thesis and antithesis into a new thesis. In the context of the present article, it is particularly important to underline the temporal aspects of synthesis:

Thus, while “being” and “nothing” seem both absolutely distinct and opposed, from another point of view they appear the same as no criterion can be invoked which differentiates them. The only way out of this paradox is to posit a third category, “becoming,” which seems to save thinking from paralysis because it accommodates both concepts: “becoming” contains “being” and “nothing” since when something “becomes” it passes, as it were, from nothingness to being. That is, when something becomes it seems to possess aspects of both being and nothingness, and it is in this sense that the third category of such triads can be understood as containing the first two as sublated “moments”. (Redding 2010)

Effectively, what occurs is a temporal separation between past and future, with a focus placed on the ambiguously defined present; the undefinably small *eternal now*. It is important to acknowledge not only the temporal dimension implied, but also the fact that a synthesis does not nullify the thesis and its antithesis but rather incorporates them.

At the same time, however, it is important to underline that the difficulty encountered in defining the eternal now is not the only ambiguity about it. Indeed, it is perhaps precisely this inherent inability of definition that causes a certain paradox to emerge: the metaphysical spectrality of the eternal now exists in a conflicting relationship with the sheer weight of reality it seems to carry. Human consciousness possesses epistemological access to the present that is uniquely more reliable than that of the past or the future. According to Arthur Schopenhauer, these “contain mere concepts and phantasms ... The present alone is that which always exists” (Schopenhauer 1969, 279).

Zeroing in on the concept of the eternal return, Friedrich Nietzsche – who was inspired by Schopenhauer’s work – made the dialectical conflict explicit in his 1882 work *The Gay Science*:

What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again” ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine”. (Nietzsche 2001, 194)

As Nietzsche's thought experiment illuminates, it is at least probable that without new experiencing and progress, humanity as we understand it seems to lack something critical. It is precisely this lack that Jarmusch's film attempts to highlight, as I will demonstrate.

3. *Only Lovers Left Alive*: Life at the Bottom of the Hourglass

Arguably one of the most pivotal moments of *Only Lovers Left Alive* comes when Adam, the male vampire protagonist, utters with despaired surrender that he feels as if "all the sand is at the bottom of the hourglass". He expresses his misery at the realization that every experience worth having has already been had and, as he believes, the future holds nothing better. Eve, his loyal partner who is much more of an optimist by nature, tells him to simply turn the hourglass over; to reset time.

In effect, the core problem of *Only Lovers Left Alive* is indeed related to time, particularly in the context of experience and progress: if perfection is already achieved (the archetypal paradise of the Garden of Eden), is the only way forward through loss and suffering? And, perhaps more importantly, to which extent is the human experience intrinsically connected with this grand paradox of time and progress?

The film begins with a shot of the starry sky. Soon the stars begin to revolve, as if the entire universe is spinning, and then the picture fades into a revolving record. The story is mostly set in the collapsing city of Detroit after the 2007-2008 financial crisis. This at first might appear counterintuitive in terms of the film being a metaphor of the Garden of Eden, but in actual fact there is a definite contrast between Adam's house and everything else in the city. His is a place of art, inventions, ingenuity; the rest of the city is displayed as a dead, decayed space. Notably, the film relies precisely on this contrast – between the "Paradise" and what is outside of it – something entirely absent from the archetypal myth, where the absence of a contrasting point of reference renders Paradise effectively meaningless. At this point, it is productive to recall Plato's allegory of the cave: Plato describes a group of people who have spent their whole lives chained to the wall of a cave, facing a blank wall opposite. A fire behind them projects shadows on this blank wall, causing them to construct reality in terms of the shadows. Until an individual is freed from the cave and is able to see the objects projecting the shadows, the only existing reality is the shadows. A similar argument could be put forward for the traditional Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve must rely (and accept as truth) the information presented to them, without having the ability to compare it with a reality external to the Garden.

Perhaps not surprisingly, considering the fact that the main protagonists are vampires, the story unfolds exclusively during the nights, in the dark, a fact which augments the display of the urban environment as a derelict and gloomy place. There are few inhabited houses shown, and even fewer with electricity. Humans are painted in mostly dystopic tints, referred to as "zombies" by the philosophically and artistically savvy vampire pair.

Although there is a nominal plot, in actual fact nothing really much takes place in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, which mostly involves long philosophical discussions and

dialectical discourses – more like a play and less like a film. Indeed, in that aspect as well Jarmusch’s production is strongly reminiscent of its archetypal myth, the Garden of Eden. For Adam and Eve, the vampires, there is no real past – but only as a romanticized daydream – and no real future. There is only an eternal now where, in a Hegelian sense, only “being” has any kind of meaning and weight, albeit incorporeal. However, the dialectical pull between past and future appears difficult to resolve. Eve chooses a clearly idolized eternal now; a never-ending series of present instances, where experiencing and enjoying (albeit, on a very sophisticated and mature level) becomes an existence-in-itself. Adam, disillusioned and depressed, sees death as the only subliminal escape. For him, Eve’s eternal present appears problematic and unsatisfactory.

Much like a Baudelairian dandy figure, or “the last shimmer of the heroic in times of decadence” (Benjamin 1983, 96) Adam is appalled in realizing his temporal displacement. Having influenced great historic figures, having discoursed with the greatest names in history – being still friends with a vampire Christopher Marlowe – he is now surrounded by mediocrity and servile “zombies”.

The end of the narrative – though there is no real conclusion – is instigated by necessity and *fait accompli*, much like in the archetypal myth. The couple is forced to flee after the arrival of Eve’s unruly sister and the ensuing events, which are loosely constructed as an allegory to temptation: the rowdy young vampire persuades the couple to go out to a nightclub and intermingle with humans – the film ambiguously implies that there are also other vampires present there. Away from Detroit and roaming the dark alleys of Tangiers, Adam and Eve are eventually compelled to make some difficult choices. They must either perish, or regress to older vampiric methods – that is, attacking people for nutrition.

This course of action is something that especially Eve is vehemently against, as she has earlier claimed that “this is the *bloody* twenty-first century!” after seeing her sister having sucked the blood of a human, killing him. Eve might be unaware of the irony carried by her words, but the film itself probably is not. After all, a similar occasion can be found in Bram Stoker’s seminal novel *Dracula*, the eponymous character of which is arguably the archetype to which all subsequent vampire characters must inevitably be compared to. In Stoker’s novel, the character of Mina Harker appears particularly insistent in describing in rich detail the “bloom and blood” narration of the captain of *Czarina Catherine*, the ship that transports Count Dracula back to Transylvania:

Final the captain, more red than ever, and in more tongues tell him that he doesn’t want no Frenchmen—with bloom upon them and also with blood—in his ship—with blood on her also...”No one knew where he went ‘or bloomin’ well cared,’ as they said, for they had something else to think of—well with blood again... The captain swore polyglot—very polyglot—polyglot with bloom and blood... Then the captain replied that he wished that he and his box—old and with much bloom and blood—were in hell. (Stoker 2003, 338)

The repetition is not accidental; rather, it is offered precisely because it draws attention to one of the major elements that permeates the novel, namely blood. Similarly, in *Only Lovers Left Alive* Eve rejects the practice of attacking humans as one not belonging to the “bloody twenty-first century”. At the same time, however, she subconsciously emphasizes not only the importance of blood in any vampire narrative, but, more importantly, the harsh modern reality: current times are bloody, too. In ways perhaps different than the past, but no less cruel.

On the surface, the expulsion from “Paradise” seems like a disastrous outcome. Adam in particular seems lost and forlorn, having abandoned his beloved musical instruments. At the same time, however, a glimmer of hope seems to exist in this new world. Having been exposed to the mediocrity and stupidity of “the zombies” throughout the narrative, Adam is fascinated with a young singer in Tangiers. New, local musical instruments are also discovered. The concluding act of the film is ambiguously but deliberately constructed as an in-between area which, while unsafe, dangerous, and representing loss, at the same time signals the emergence of new opportunities. More importantly, still, for Adam it stands as a possible answer to his boredom, depression, and misery. In the light of the traditional myth of Adam and Eve, it can be argued that safety has been exchanged for free will and the potentiality for growth and achievement. To revisit Nietzsche’s thought experiment and the concept of the eternal return, the choice seems to be one favouring change and new experiences, rather than mere repetition.

The film, perhaps subtly but still unmistakably, hints at a synthetic resolution of the quagmire. By being precariously placed between life and death, and ambiguously incorporating elements of both states, Adam and Eve are offered the single factor which was absent from their prior existence: temporal evolution. Much like in the archetypal myth, where time did not really exist until after the defining event, the “before and after” of the expulsion from Paradise, in *Only Lovers Left Alive* time is defined based on the very same dichotomy. As such, the concept of evolution or progress – even in its antithetical aspect of devolution and regression, respectively – can exist only within the framework of temporal succession. There is a hidden detail, however.

Although not directly exposed by the narrative, it can be assumed that such defining events in the history of the vampire couple were repetitive; that there had been prior “expulsions” from a settled way of life, a “Paradise”. As Eve in particular is revealed to be far older than Adam, who is only a few centuries old, she appears somewhat more accustomed to such great changes, a fact that perhaps explains her nonchalant talk of turning the hourglass over and resetting time. As a result, and unlike the archetypal myth, the film suggests a temporal model that does not depart from a cyclical to enter a linear form, but rather hints at the Hegelian synthesis of these two apparently unresolvable opposites, which is none other than the spiral. What occurs, then, is a reconfiguration of the legend of the Garden of Eden that posits a recurrence of past forms and experiences, but still leading to a forward motion of reaching new, future such forms and experiences.

The ability to escape the timelessness of the Paradise is intrinsically connected with the human experience. Rendering one's self vulnerable to loss and suffering effectively becomes a prerequisite for evolving and experiencing, because in an unaltered environment where nothing ever changes, there can be no talk of progression. Furthermore, in such a context the concept of ethics becomes meaningless. Umberto Eco, in his essay "The Myth of Superman", argues that in the time span of an individual story, the mythical superhero fulfils a task and, at the end of the story, there is a clear closure; a new comic book that brings with it an entirely new story, totally disconnected from any past events. The crucial inference is this: had the new story presented a sort of narrative evolution from a prior one, it would essentially mean that Superman "would have taken a step toward death" (Eco 1984, 114). However, the inevitable result is a situation in which reality is formulated as consisting solely of an "ever-continuing present", and this absence of past or future as reference points fails to communicate a sense of moral stability and continuity (Eco 1984, 116).

In the Paradise of Adam and Eve – in the traditional myth as well as in Jarmusch's film – the lack of time progression signifies a lack of meaning. Adam, as a younger vampire, appears more human in his reactions and more dismayed by his own meaninglessness, as well as by the state of the world in general. His state of mind mirrors that of traditional Gothic immortals, whose inability to die is portrayed as a curse far more than as a gift. A typical such example can be found in Mary Shelley's story "The Mortal Immortal", where Winzy, one of the students of Cornelius Agrippa, gets his inexperienced hands on his master's elixir of eternal life, unleashing the curse of immortality upon himself. Everyone he loves withers away, and things become meaningless. As the human existence is located *within* time, once human life loses its temporal foundation, it becomes degenerate, as temporal linearity without the end that is death is incompatible with the human experience, which is based on cause and consequence. As Kochhar-Lindgren argues, Winzy feels aimless and alone because, by lacking the ability to die, he has lost his "compass for the human passage from nothing to nothing ... a contoured horizon to existence ... enabling a certain type of evaluation" (2005, 74).

In *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Adam faces this lack to such an extent that he actively considers suicide. Somewhat dramatically – and certainly so from Eve's perspective – he asks from his human assistant (who is unaware of his master's vampire state) to get him a wooden bullet, claiming it is for an art project. When Eve discovers Adam's plan, she is surprised and chides him, yet in her unique, carefree way. She wonders how he could not see that his thoughts are a waste of living that could be instead dedicated to "surviving things, appreciating nature, nurturing kindness and friendship ... and dancing". She then proceeds to display her solution quite literally, playing an LP record and dancing to the music, pulling Adam along with her. The macabre thoughts are temporarily swept under the proverbial rug, but the raw reality of Adam's predicament does not vanish.

Trapped by timelessness, by the lack of evolution and progress (or even devolution and regression), Adam is painfully aware of the absence of meaning in his journey. His existential fear is augmented by the sheer scope of his vampiric life span – which is theoretically infinite – but *Only Lovers Left Alive* constructs the allusion with clear focalization on the human experience. Perhaps precisely for these reasons, that is, the limited time humans have on earth and Adam's own immortality, the use of the term "zombie" appears so apt to describe a way of life devoid of sense of purpose. For Adam, who *cannot* die – but only by taking his own life – the human existence is but a waste of potential.

4. Conclusion: Living and Dying in an Eternal Now

The present article revolved around issues that, though not synonymous, can be seen as homocentric: time and timelessness, progress and loss, death and life. Intuitively, perhaps any one of us could vicariously understand the importance of these binary pairs, for without the one the other could not be defined. But just like time and timelessness appear mutually exclusive, so do life and death.

The realization is embodied much more eminently in Adam who, unlike his traditional namesake, seems far more aware of the quagmire posed by his peculiar condition, that is, immortality. For the vampire, to be immortal also holds implications regarding his being alive. Neither of the two categories, life and death, seem to be applicable to Adam. In a Hegelian framework, one could emphasize how the thesis of life and the antithesis of death need to merge and produce a synthesis which could resolve the predicament. Perhaps Bram Stoker's use of the term "undead" was a subconscious understanding of this very issue. To be undead means neither to be dead, nor to be alive, and although Bram Stoker did not coin the word, the modern meaning of it begins with *Dracula*.

Applying a Todorovian process of ambiguity, that is, embracing the very inability to neatly define between these binary pairs, is a step toward a resolution. But, perhaps inevitably, such a resolution cannot be meant in the usual, linear way of cause-and-effect systems. The traditional legend of the Garden of Eden is ultimately a narrative of time, perhaps one of the earliest examples of the linkage between time, the human experience, and change. The change of affairs for the archetypal couple, Adam and Eve, has been approached as a loss, thus overlooking the fact that the expulsion from Paradise introduced time and change in the human experience.

Traditionally, the timelessness of the eternal now was unequivocally connected with the Divine and a Christian God that was outside time altogether, thus mediating a coexistence of past and present.⁴ Erich Auerbach rightly argues that such a simultaneity was then inconceivable without the Divine:

the here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is simultaneously something which has always been, and will be fulfilled in the future; and strictly, in the eyes of God, it is something eternal, something omni-temporal, something already consummated in the realm of fragmentary earthly event. (Auerbach 2003, 74)

In such a temporal model, the future is effectively meaningless, as it does not possess any ontological substance, nor does it differ from the past in any graspable way. It is in such a predicament, precisely, that the vampire couple find themselves – with Adam, perhaps due to his younger age as I already mentioned, appearing more aware of the situation. The great difference is that this eternal now, this temporal void, is now decoupled from the Divine. As such, the rebellion against authority is all but absent, and the figurative expulsion from Paradise appears no longer as such – that is, enforced by an external factor – but more as a quasi-voluntary decision.

As a result, in Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive*, the process of introducing time and change is reconfigured in a way that highlights its anthropocentric characteristics. Although Adam and Eve, the immortal vampire couple, abandon their way of life and come face to face with extinction, at the same time they also experience what is akin to enlightenment. The process is more evident in Adam who, in the darkest and most critical hour, finally discovers a glimmer of hope in the voice of a young Lebanese woman. Eve notes that this is a singer that will surely be very famous, to which Adam meaningfully replies "God, I hope not".

Ultimately, in accordance with the ambiguous nature of the preceding narrative, the film ends without a clear indication of how the story of Adam and Eve continues. The cut occurs just as the vampires are about to attack a young couple kissing under the stars. This scene, the very final one, functions as an exclamation mark. Not only because it is the only occasion in the film where Adam and Eve are seen about to attack a human for nutrition, but also because it serves as a parallel with the archetypal fall from Paradise. Adam and Eve are indeed free, and all possibilities are available. But these are impossible to foreknow. Just perhaps, however, this is the very element that renders the vampires suddenly more human, namely the same element Adam and Eve faced leaving Paradise: the possibility to die, to experience loss and suffering, and to regress also assigns importance and value to the possibility to progress, and experience love, companionship, meaning, and pleasure.

Notes

1. For queer readings of the Gothic, see Haggerty 2006.
2. For connections between Prometheus and the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, see Werblowsky 1952.
3. For a more extended theoretical argument on Todorovian ambiguity and the Gothic, including a contrast to Tolkienian theorizations, see Angelis (forthcoming).
4. For a more extended analysis of the eternal now and divinity, see Anderson (2006, 23) and West-Pavlov (2013, 63).

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Penelope weaving the (F)e-mail: texting and sexting

PENELOPE-FOTEINI KOLOVOU

Abstract

In the advent of new media technologies, the Greek poet Koula Adaloglou rewrites the Penelopean myth, engaging among other things a laptop instead of a loom. Penelope may this way *text* her “Messages to Odysseus”. Although it remains open whether each message is sent, discarded or saved as a draft, Penelope reveals the aesthetics and politics of her contemporary self through a texting project. Having woven different *text(u)s*¹ on the loom, on music scores, on canvas, on stage, and other media during an ongoing post-Homeric tradition, by texting her thoughts to the absent addressee Penelope demonstrates part of the intermedial reproducibility of her myth, while she implicitly communicates her self within a *sexting* activity. This article explores a (*ré*)*écriture féminine* of a classical myth which once again returns updated – that is remediated in terms of postmodern communicational schemes – in contemporary Greek literature.

Keywords: Comparative literature and media studies, *écriture féminine*, sexual performance, Modern Greek, Homer.

1. Introduction

This is a common story: getting acquainted with the use of new media technologies demands patience, similar to one’s first tries in needlework. These activities may not be regarded as unrelated to each other, in that the digital might not be considered as an exclusive invention of modernity, and weaving may well contribute to our comprehension of the electronic *world wide web*.² Reflecting on patience and weaving in terms of classical literature, one of the most prominent weavers in antiquity (and its reception in post-classical contexts) is the Homeric Penelope, the “chaste wife” of Odysseus, “caring mother” of Telemachus, and “constant” Queen of Ithaca, who spent her nights unravelling what she had woven by daylight at her loom. Although Athena and the Moirai, Arachne and Philomela, as well as Helena, Arete, Medea and Ariadne are also popular mythical hand-women, it is Penelope’s repeated weaving / unweaving activity in order to constantly avoid a forced marriage to any of the suitors courting her during Odysseus’ absence that made her an exemplum of feminine virtue in centuries of literary criticism. Apart from her patient efforts, however, Penelope’s

unique virtuous quality explicitly praised in the *Odyssey* remains in large silenced or even ignored: her intelligence. For the only attributes accompanying Penelope in the *Odyssey* are *ἐχέφρων* and *περίφρων*, meaning prudent, thoughtful, careful to a high degree.³

Along these interwoven associations, considering intelligence and patience, weaving and Internet modalities, Penelope stands for more than a personification of patriarchally imposed stereotypes. For, what is more, among her many skills, Penelope makes use of the “oldest digital machine”, i.e. the loom, a weaving tool which requires a lot of reflection in dyadic arithmetic and in the logic of spatial construction.⁴ This assumption, by calling into question the activity of weaving as a technically “mindless work” done by passive housewives, brings Penelope to the frontline of challenging intellectual endeavours. To speak so, the argument that the loom is considered to be the first computer (even much earlier than the Joseph-Marie Jacquard’s punch-card-controlled loom)⁵ may after all lead one to regard Penelope as a female premodern skilled IT user. This assumption foregrounds in turn the two elements of the updated Penelopean myth, which this article deals with: *texting* and the *female*.

The medial shift from the loom to the laptop and the like, invites to a closer reading of this (post)modern rewriting of Penelope’s myth. *Penelope* has often been invoked in literature, arts, and theory foremost as a metonymy for text(ile) creation and highly praised female qualities. Reconsidering the *eternal return* of both Penelopean *mythemes*, weaving as *texere* (Latin, “to weave”), and idealisation of a faithful wife’s constant attitude, this article examines Penelope’s texting activity in terms of new media technologies, and aspects of her female self inscribed within her texts. Under the premise that a medium shift in the tradition of a text means a relevant impact on the communicated message, Penelope’s intermedial activity correspondingly does affect the critical reading of her texts.⁶ Therefore, focusing on conventions of a *(ré)écriture féminine*, one could regard Penelope as a cultural semantic agent of feminine poetics. Consequently, in Penelope’s contemporary *texting*, that is *texere* re-appropriated as modern electronic creative writing, this article will examine the *sexual / textual* politics that lie in the poetics of her texts. Bridging these two angles of view, *sex* and *text*, I therefore regard Penelope’s writing activity as a performance of contemporary literary *sexting*.⁷

The concept about Penelope taking advantage of modern texting technologies is prominently deployed in Koula Adaloglou’s poetical collection *Οδυσσέας, τρόπον τινά* (“Odysseus; somehow”, Adaloglou, 2013)⁸. Other than expected, the lyric *I* belongs to Penelope, whereas Odysseus may only be present as the addressee in Penelope’s various texts. The first part of the collection is accordingly named after this texting activity of Penelope as “Μηνύματα στον Οδυσσέα” (“Messages to Odysseus”), and may in turn be divided into two sections, which correspond to considerably different texting media and different *voices* of Penelope’s different selves.

This article focuses on the *meantime* (“μεσοδιάστημα”) between Odysseus’ latest departure and his long desired return (which is implied in the second section of this part of the collection), during which Penelope takes advantage of new media and

composes two longer texts explicitly written on a laptop, entitled “Πρώτη γραφή” (“First Text”) and “Δεύτερη γραφή” (“Second Text”)⁹, and minor untitled texts which may well be read as different types of messages, may they be SMS, post-it notes, fictive messages spontaneously written down in a notebook or Penelope’s secret diary.¹⁰ Penelope has therefore the chance to voice herself, and thus manifest the various aspects of her reappropriated self. Nevertheless, as long as the female appears as still defined within a binary system with reference to the male, Penelope has not yet managed her emancipation from patriarchal discourse, anticipating her restraintment within patriarchal ideology. Adaloglou’s Penelope most likely seems to oscillate between autonomy gained while working in terms of new media and the need of *him* to reconstruct *her* otherwise decayed sexual identity. This intersection of autonomy and subordination becomes evident in Penelope’s different needs, wishes and definitive nuances, mostly often in reference to Odysseus. For there are texts in which Penelope (a) asks for affection, the male being the only source to satisfy her emotional and corporeal *pending* needs, while in other texts (b) she demonstrates her emancipation and independence from male-relevant skills concerning, for instance, the operation of computational technologies:

(a)

Τι σου ζητώ, ένα χάδι, ένα χαμόγελο.

[What am I asking you for, a caress, a smile.] (Adaloglou 2013, 15)

(b)

Οδυσσέα Dear,

ελπίζω να περνάς καλά με την αντροπαρέα σου.

Και να σου πω ότι, παρά την άρνησή σου για βοήθεια,

βρήκα τους αριθμητικούς συσχετισμούς που με βασάνιζαν.

Ευελπιστώ, λοιπόν, να ολοκληρώσω το υφαντό που σχεδιάζω.

Με άλλα λόγια, τα καταφέρνω και χωρίς εσένα!

[Odysseus Dear, / I hope you are having fun with your guys. / And let me tell you that, despite your refusing help, / I found the numerical correlations that have been torturing me. / I therefore hope to complete the texture I am planning. / In other words, I can make it even without you!] (Adaloglou 2013, 15)

2. Tex(t)ing: Weaving the e-mail

2.1. Tex(t)ere 2.0

The key to understand Penelope also as a contemporary poet of a *text(u)s* is to comprehend the semantics of *texting* terminology (and its synecdoches) engaged in her *texts* in(to) which the myth returns. One needs to reflect namely on the connection between the Homeric Penelope’s most typical activity, its Latin equivalent *texere*, and, *texts* and *contexts*, familiar “passepartouts” in our contemporary intellectual culture.

To begin with, the weaving motif is one of the most prominent metaphors (within Indo-European literature) that describe any intellectual process as poetics in

material terms. In the Western literary canon, the analogy between any intellectual process and textilisation / textualisation appears already in Homer, so that poetics and weaving appear ever since intermingled with each other.¹¹ On that account, *text(u)s*, as the final product of *texere* (“to weave”), signify the end product of poetics, attributing to any a *text* the quality of *textuality*, that is coherence, continuity, completeness. The historical semantics of *textus* are found in a wide range of sources within various fields of arts and sciences, and its continuities and discontinuities are accordingly approached in rather different ways by the different disciplines.¹² Consequently, *text* as textile and relevant metaphors of weaving, embroidery, recently even quilting, along with mythical hand-women, have become commonplaces of contemporary female literary criticism too,¹³ and particularly Penelope weaving at her loom has the last decades quite often played a crucial role in rereading the meta-poetics of the *Odyssey*. In line with this tradition, Michel Serres most aptly theorises Penelope’s *textilising* endeavour as a *textualising* one, when he says about the Ithacan queen that:

[she] is the author, the signatory of the discourse; she traces its graph, she draws its itinerary. She makes and undoes this cloth that mimes the progress and delays of the navigator, of Ulysses on board his ship, the shuttle that weaves and interweaves fibers separated by the void, spatial varieties bordered by crevices. She is the embroideress, the lace-maker, by wells and bridges, of this continuous flux interrupted by catastrophes that is called discourse. In the palace of Ithaca, Ulysses, finally in the arms of the queen, finds the finished theory of his own myth.¹⁴

Penelope, therefore, as a meta-poet herself, seems to reweave in various texts a relevant aesthetics concerning her own myth in her post-Homeric tradition. It is therefore no surprise that Penelope in Adaloglou’s poetical collection does still *text* Odysseus, and in digital script. For among the different *text(u)s* Penelope has so far woven, she has also been literally related to text production, considering oral or written discourse. Although fictive prosopopoeia (mixed with the love-letter discourse) traces its roots much earlier than the Ovidian epistle addressed by Penelope to Odysseus, it is since then that Penelope has often been given the word and has been expected to speak for herself, within the realm of her mythical tradition.

2.2. The Loom 2.0.

Considering the various intermedial re-contextualisations of the narrative lying upon its classical *text(u)s*, the *Odyssey*, in the advent of computational and digital technologies, has consequently been adapted to technologically advanced permeated systems. In this aspect, particularly in line with a significant turn in the history of information and (tele)communication also affecting production, distribution, and consumption of literature, this article focuses on Penelope’s modern laptop, otherwise termed as a *notebook computer*. Taking also into account Penelope’s *textus* / text relation, this very medial shift within the long *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of the Penelopean myth is less unexpected.

Focusing on the “First Text” and “Second Text”, already interwoven with each other, as their titles may suggest, the ambiguity of their leitmotif demonstrates

Penelope's most prominent identity, as a *text(u)s* weaver.¹⁵ In modern terms, an Internet connection, alluding to Penelope's Homeric looming, facilitates the verbal communication with Odysseus: the threads of the loom, that used to create the woven textile are transformed into a network of interwoven data, so that electronic messages can thus be diffused from the looming source to meet Odysseus. According to the classical Homeric version of the myth, the two partners though apart do "communicate" by sharing a like-mindedness described under the stunning ideal of *ὁμοφρονέοντε νοήμασι* ("oneness of heart", *Od.* 6.183). A new communication schema is therefore constructed within the realm of the contemporary electronic *world wide web*, marking the transition from "texting" on the loom to texting on a notebook.

Beyond that, not merely Penelope's weaving as such is creatively appropriated, but her cunning plan too, as soon as Penelope "types" the final line (upon completion?) of her "First text":

Επιλογή: Delete

[Option: Delete.] (Adaloglou 2013, 10)

as well as the final line of her "Second text":

Δεν ξέρω αν θα στείλω το e-mail.

[I don't know if I will send the e-mail.] (Adaloglou 2013, 11)

Both texts as never ending and self-consuming weaving projects are left open-ended, since Penelope is considering deleting the first one, while she shows ambivalence about mailing the second one. It would not be groundless to assume though that the first text has indeed been deleted, since Penelope continues to write an explicitly *second* one. Nevertheless, it remains uncertain and still unknown, whether these e-mails are finally sent or discarded, or saved as drafts, since the composition of a new text to follow is implied in both of them.

Thus, the metaphor lying in the probable "Delete" of her first text, alluding to the Odyssean Penelope's cunning plan, that is every night undoing the shroud she has been weaving all day long, in order to keep the suitors away, sheds light anew upon Penelope's alleged indeterminacy, undecidability and hesitation as typical qualities of hers who manipulates e-narrative(s) now as well. For it has been argued that the regular cancelation of the *textus* she had woven so far does manipulate the plot of the *Odyssey* itself.¹⁶

In a further reading, Penelope's weaving / texting with no final formation may offer fruitful ground to reflect on the technical transformations of knowledge, especially considering Penelope's knowledge of her own self.¹⁷ For her modern agency as a composer of fragmentary e-mails alludes not only to the communication systems that constantly shape various data into legible information, but she thus *informs* her ideology and identity as a female poetical *I* too. What is interesting under this light is to trace and critically approach significant elements that demonstrate how this medial shift does most probably affect the communicated message lying in the new text.

3. Weaving the (f)e-mail

In terms of feminist poetics, the motif of weaving has been theorised as a self-making metaphor. This part of our article discusses the concept of Penelope constructing her feminine self, while handling the absence of the Other by undertaking the creative activity of texting on a laptop, while left home alone.

Since initially weaving, and then writing as such, has been interpreted as a founding experience of constructing the self, and since Penelope writes situated at home, it occurs that the patriarchally defined topos of Penelope's classical realm of agency, the house ("οἶκος"), may also be interpreted as the topos of a founding experience of her self. What is striking is that although the laptop signifies the possibility of mobility, as to be discussed below, it seems that Penelope has not yet dared to step outside, in order to seek for her *self*. She most likely keeps in line with the tendency that it is only "à huis clos", by distancing, where one may get prepared to afterwards perceive the world. Penelope's spot as Odysseus' non-place ("οὐ τόπος") is after all the *room of her own* where she can realise the creation of her own self, using either threads or words, though signified with reference to *his* absence. Thus, Penelope finally manages to construct the *she-I* of herself opposite to Odysseus' constantly absent *he-Other*, implied by the (masculine) appellative *you*.¹⁸

The meta-poetical character of Penelope's creative activity is still evident, calling nevertheless for further question. Beyond meta-poetics, why should Penelope be writing now? The answer may be found in terms of *écriture féminine* broadly regarding writing and discourse production as a form of resistance to phallogocentrism. A more concrete answer may also come from Penelope herself, uttered as a theory on writing in existentialist terms, and summarised in one rhetorical question as follows: *What would Penelope do without writing?*

Γράφω
ημερολόγιο
γράφω μηνύματα
γράφω.
Τι θα 'κανε η Πηνελόπη χωρίς γράψιμο;
Μ' αυτό παλεύει τη φθορά, τον χρόνο,
τη λαγνεία, τον φόβο, την απόγνωση.
Τα υφαντά τελειώνουν κάποτε,
το γράψιμο κρατάει όσο κι η ζωή μας.
Πρόσεξε πώς διαβάζεις τα μηνυματά μου.

[I write / a diary / I write messages / I write. / What would Penelope do without writing? / This is how she wrestles with the wear and tear, the time, / the lust, the fear, the despair. / Texts come some time to an end, / writing keeps as long as our own life. / Pay attention to how you read my messages.] (Adaloglou 2013, 19)

Penelope writes relentlessly, repeatedly, as if writing were a ritual for forgetfulness, which she enjoys as such. It is indifferent whether Odysseus may reply or not; writing is rather a *rite of passage* from stillness to Logos in order to secure *her* own existence. Weaving as a metonymy for any housework is read as a fatal web in which any existence meets its end,¹⁹ so that Penelope rejects any other banal housework, and writes, accomplishing a first step outside her otherwise still identity. The laptop bought by Odysseus for Penelope, (most probably) before his *nostos*, but still after the slaughter of the suitors,²⁰ may be regarded from different aspects.

Αγαπημένε μου Οδυσσέα,
γράφω στο λάπτοπ που μου πήρες.

[My beloved Odysseus, / I am writing on the laptop you bought me.]
(Adaloglou 2013, 11)

Apart from establishing a power relationship in economical terms, in that the male is the one buying gifts to the female, the laptop as a gift itself also signifies Penelope's *possibility* to *mobilise* herself. In this very act of gift giving lies on the one hand the donation of mobility towards Penelope's journey to *her* self. Reading beyond the obvious, though, the laptop may also be regarded as an obscene metaphor, considering the etymology of the word, which indicates its use "on top of one's lap". Although in Modern English the substantive "lap" does not bear any sexual connotations, a *lap* literally meant the "female pudendum" in Middle English, while the word (often in plural, *lappes*) is found as a euphemism to denote the vagina from the 15th to the 17th century, as used, for instance, by Shakespeare.²¹ Under the light of obscenity, therefore, Penelope *texting* on top of her lap does indeed manage a turn to the self, during Odysseus' absence.

Questioning at this point the importance of love letters as such in the erotic life of Penelope, one may compare with the confession of another *Penelope*, as put in the homonymous chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*, at the breaking dawn of mythical modernity. It occurs that Molly Bloom's "only satisfactory period of her life", has been her courtship by Harold Bloom, whose "mad crazy letters" led her even to masturbate, whereas since her marriage, Molly has been in an epistolary desert.²² Therefore, a written text addressed to the beloved Other, as Penelope's "Messages to Odysseus" are, may indeed function as an allusion to sexual activity too.²³

3.1. Sexting: Fragments of an *écriture féminine*

With regard to classical weaving, modern texting, and sexual performances within and concerning new media, we are about to discuss concrete instances of *sexting*. In line with literary theory and critical discourse analysis we adopt the term to describe compelling questions concerning the construction of a sexed composition of written texts, looking into how individual sex identities or socioculturally constructed genders may be discursively represented. Consequently, in the close readings that follow, aesthetic reflections of sexuality that shape the feminist or masculinist ideology are taken into consideration, while the feminine sexuality is still strikingly prescribed by – thus not yet liberated from – male figureheads of the Western socioliterary reality.

Penelope under discussion cleverly bridges a tradition breach with progress. The *oikos* discourse, for instance, wherein Penelope is traditionally situated, along with all the crafting within its realm, is often read as a gender projection. Penelope is at times mostly in line with the feminine aspect of the *oikos*, at others she most strikingly rejects its phallogocentric (*sic*) substance, not neglecting though her husband's delight, shortly before she departs for "the women's congress":

Το ταξί σταμάτησε απότομα.
Ο άντρας πετάχτηκε έξω βιαστικά.
Χάζευα απ' το μπαλκόνι αμήχανα.
Να 'σουν εσύ; Γύρισες μήπως με προλάβεις
πριν φύγω στο Συνέδριο Γυναϊκών;
Πετάρισε η καρδιά.
Μπα, έφερνε ο ξένος στο σουλούπι σου.
Anyway, θα τα πούμε όταν γυρίσω.
Γι' αυτό σου αφήνω αυτό το μήνυμα.
Σου 'χω μαγειρέψει – ψυγείο και κατάψυξη.
Ζέστανε, όπως ξέρεις, στο φούρνο μικροκυμάτων.
Μ' ένα φιλί σε αναμονή,
Πηνελόπη.

[The taxi stopped suddenly. / The man popped out in hastes. / I kept staring from the balcony, puzzled. / Could that be you? Maybe you came back to catch me / before I leave for the Women's Congress? / The heart fluttered. / Nah, the stranger had your build. Anyway, see you when I am back. / That's why I am leaving you this message. / I've cooked for you – fridge and refrigerator. / Heat up as you know, in the microwave. / With a kiss on hold, / Penelope.] (Adaloglou 2013, 14)

It occurs that to be a feminist, denying to be "just a part of Adam's side", makes a woman no less willing to show affection to her man or to confess her need of *him*. From this point of view, the fact that Penelope discerns between duties traditionally ascribed to the male and/or those ascribed to the female communicates a message of a particular balance: all deeds and qualities useful for people and society are equally relevant.

In the two following sections we undertake a closer reading of Penelope's e-mails in form of a fragmented documentation of Penelopean *sexual performances*.

3.1.1 First Text

The composition of the "First Text" takes place right after the *mnesterophonia*, during which Odysseus did not kill all suitors, but only some of them. Odysseus' profile is thus protected from being stigmatised as a mere cold blood killer, in contrast to what seems to be the reason for his rejection by Penelope in post-war rewritings of his homecoming. In this case, Penelope's despair is being displaced from the fact that Odysseus has committed multiple crimes, to the realisation that there is no suitor left, so that he could flatter her, or better put, so that she could be flattered by him:

έφυγαν όλοι οι μνηστήρες,
άλλους τούς τέλεψες και κάποιοι λάκισαν.
Ούτε ένας, να κολακευόμουν έστω.

[My beloved Odysseus, / all suitors are gone, / some of them you finished off and some others quit. / Not even one left, so I could be flattered at least.]
(Adaloglou 2013, 10).

The vanity implied in these opening lines, along with the implied jealousy uttered with pejorative characterisations to describe a certain mistress of Odysseus, ascribes to Penelope negative qualities concerning weaknesses traditionally attributed to women:

Δώδεκα χρόνια έγλειφες τις γόβες της
κοντή κι αλογομούρα

[For twelve years you were licking her shoes – / horse-faced and short.]
(Adaloglou 2013, 10)

Besides the long time of Odysseus' absence, the emphasis on the alteration as depression of her own body demonstrates Penelope's still vanity-relevant worries about transience, i.e. her getting older. The ultimate corporeal deterioration characterised as "a pillage" introduces a discourse concerning Penelope's objectification opposite to a man's conquering force:

Στο μεταξύ μεγάλωσα,
σαν μεταλλάχτηκα,
κάθισε η περιφέρεια,
γιάγμα η κορμостаσιά μου.

[Meanwhile I grew old; / once I was transmuted, / the hips got lower, / my stature, a pillage.] (Adaloglou 2013, 10)

Penelope's confession about her owing Odysseus a favour, for him still desiring her, does therefore imply that Odysseus is thus doing her a favour as well, in that he is offering her the only chance to enjoy her otherwise unsatisfied lust. A certain sexual power relation is constructed upon Penelope's surrendering to Odysseus' desire for reasons of need, as she is reduced – or better, she reduces herself – to a mere object of male lust:

Γυρνάς και θέλεις γούστα.
Κι εγώ η μεταλλαγμένη υποχωρώ,
σχεδόν χρωστώ και χάρη.

[You come back and ask for pleasure games. / And me, the transmuted one, I succumb; / I almost owe a favour in addition.] (Adaloglou 2013, 10)

The oedipal scenario goes further, while Penelope shows herself as the object to motivate a possible rivalry between Odysseus and another man: by previously characterising Odysseus' concubine in such pejorative words, Penelope does confirm the stereotype of the jealous female partner, who is nonetheless conscious of this

weakness of hers; therefore, she wishes there were at least one suitor left, so that she could punish Odysseus only via another man, depending indeed upon his masculine power. This thought of hers about punishing Odysseus' for reasons of adultery may indeed be considered as a progressive step that Penelope dares, in contrast to the Homeric Penelope who allegedly supports her fidelity by all means, most likely entrapped within a reading of her myth according to certain moral principles.

Nevertheless, although this intention for punishment could be interpreted as a dynamic and decisive turn within the 21st century, taking into account feminist movements of all kinds, Penelope may still be regarded as subordinate, in that she needs the help coming from the outside, most significantly from a male subject. What is more, the sort of punishment is not explicitly described: is adultery committed by Penelope implied or would Penelope be equally satisfied, if the mere presence of a suitor would suffice in order to cause Odysseus' jealousy? From one point of view, Penelope does once again sexually objectify herself on her own, in that she implies a sort of adultery not in terms of a pure passionate love or a platonic flirt, neither an accident nor a fault or a sin, as usual in premodern literature, but she most probably admits consciousness of commitment.

From another point of view, Penelope is again foregrounded as a stereotypically weak female who finds delight in inferior instincts such as causing jealousy by fictive scenarios. In any case, Odysseus remains unpunished, and the *ex definitione* strong male may once again triumph over her, even with no defence.

3.1.2. Second Text

In her second text, Penelope regards Odysseus as a crafty "man of many ways", with respect to his many ways to seduce her, she accordingly admits the female sexually surrendering to the male, and verifies all in all the sexual power relation evident also in the "First Text": the male is capable to preserve his desire for the female (on his own), for which *she* is grateful to *him*.

Ξεγλιστράς, δεν χάνεις ευκαιρία.

[You slink, you miss no chance.] (Adaloglou 2013, 11)

Considering corporeal representations in the visual arts, the body normally shows what it is capable of. Nevertheless, Penelope describes the picture of her body even weaker, as time goes by, thus verbalising the transformation of hers into a figure of lower aesthetic value, far beyond the stereotypes of beauty that the Western patriarchal discourse might praise²⁴:

Όμως
ήσουν εδώ σαν ξέσπασε η μπόρα.
Το τεθλασμένο σώμα μου το λάτρεψες
τη σουρεαλιστική μου μορφή ασπάστηκες
αξιέπαινα συντήρησες τον πόθο.

[Yet / you were here, when the storm broke out. / My crooked body you adored / my surrealistic figure you kissed / remarkably you conserved the desire.] (Adaloglou 2013, 11)

Penelope, conscious of her body, achieves to verbalise what the observer of hers may possibly sense, and creates a kind of virtual reality to communicate to Odysseus, by verbally picturing her bodyscape. The need to create a virtual presence occurs in line with a noticeable pictorial turn in digital tele-communications (MMS, sexting, video-call, snapchat, and the like), which started to flourish in the first decade of the zeroes. In contrast to the contemporary use, however, instead of taking advantage of the pictorial facilities which her new medium is offering her through the application of various “filters”, Penelope prefers to most honestly verbalise the image of hers, breaking the rules against the stereotypes of ideal beauty that circulate in such media channels. It seems so, that Penelope uses her verbalised version of the MMS as an honest *image de conscience*²⁵.

4. Conclusion

Albeit with no trace of nostalgia for the ancient myth, but rather emphasising a contemporary facet of Penelope who returns updated, Adaloglou adds to the Penelopean myth in a way that breaks down the treatment of Penelope as the passive weaver of a mortifying shroud. Nevertheless, Adaloglou’s Penelope does not seem to represent any radical feminism either.

This (post)modern Penelope rather manages through her words and overall attitude towards language and representation, that foregrounds her way to knowledge of the self, to shed light upon the on-going relationship with the (absent) beloved Other. Though undermining the *Odyssey* as “a love story for happily married middle-aged people”, this Penelope manages reconciliation between phallogocentric tradition and antimasculinist progress. Most carefully humanised, the mythical heroine, follows the trends of contemporary times, and may now be considered something more than an attractive persona to the contemporary reader, by providing the possibility of emotional plausibility. For Penelope returns as an active, clever, intellect woman who does keep up to date and may thus keep on communicating her messages to the beloved Odysseus(es) through her new media, making the best out of her new herself.²⁶

Notes

1. Written in form of a word play, the term emphasises the linguistic connection between a woven *textus* (a woven texture, a textile in Latin) and contemporary concepts of a *text*. The terms *tex(t)ere* and *tex(t)ing* should be read in the same way.
2. cf. φρυκτωρία (Greek for “phryctoria”), the most ancient organised system for the diffusion of information, may be regarded as an ancestor of our contemporary internet (work).
3. On Penelope’s idealisation as a virtuous woman in post-Homeric tradition in antiquity and the middle ages, until the early modern era, see Stenmans (2013, especially 42-62; 66-91). For further relevant bibliography on Penelope in antiquity, Mactoux (1975), Katz (1991), Felson (1994), Papadopoulou-Belmehdi (1994), Zeitlin (1996), Clayton (2003).
4. On challenging the connection of weaving and programming practices, regarding the ancient loom as a digital machine that most likely motivated the development of mathematics, see Harlizius-Klück (2008; 2014).
5. Cf. Plant (1998, 23-25).

6. On how reformatting or remediating a text may affect rereading, see Plate (2011, 46), and Bouvier (2014, 706).
7. *Sexting* in popular contemporary media culture means to send sexually explicit photographs or messages. It all started with mobile phones, however, snapchats and short messaging applications are also available for tablets, laptops, even for desktop computers. On *sexual performances* in literary and cultural studies see Moi (1985) and Plate (2007).
8. Unless otherwise stated, the English translations are mine. As far as contemporary Greek literature is considered, Penelope, explicitly associated with new media technologies, is also found in the short story “Η Κατασκευή της Πηνελόπης” (“The Construction of Penelope”), in Kastrinaki (2002, 27-45).
9. Adaloglou (2013, 10-11). I have translated the Greek *γραφή* as *text*, for metapoetical reasons: In the Greek *γραφή* lie already, at least visually, both the art of writing (*γραφή*) and weaving (most adequately “sewing”, *ραφή*). The English equivalent mostly appropriate to interpret both terms can only be *text* (n.), literally signifying the written text, as well as the allusion to the Latin *textus* (cf. n. 1).
10. It is important to notice that the constellation of the poems does also reflect the new media reality as fragmentary and emphasises the contrast with traditional formalities in written communication. On a comparative reading of old and modern communication practices and conventions, see Simonis (2008, 430-431).
11. On *textus* as a symbol in literature see Scheid and Svenbro (1994), Nünlist (1998), Greber (2002; 2012), Wagner-Hasel (2006), Kuchenbuch and Kleine (2006). For a thorough elaboration on the metapoetical understanding of *weaving* in antiquity see Nünlist (1998), all relevant bibliography provided in Nagy (2017, esp. in §1), and Papadopoulou-Belmechi (1994; 2016) in relevance with the Penelopean weaving, Harich-Schwarzbauer (2016), and Harlizius-Klück and Fanfani (2017).
12. On the main approaches to *text* studies see Kammer and Lüdeke (2005, esp. 9-21).
13. See Kruger (2001, esp. “The Greek Web: Arachne and Philomela, Penelope and Helen of Troy”).
14. “[Pénélope] est l’auteur, la signataire du discours, elle en trace le graphe, elle en dessine le parcours. Fait puis défait ce tissu qui mime l’avance et le recul du navigateur. D’Ulysse à bord de son navire, navette qui lace et entrelace des fibres séparées de vide, des variétés bordées de crevasses. Brodeuse, dentellière, par puits et ponts, de ce flux continu coupé de catastrophes, qui se nomme lui-même discours. Au palais d’Ithaque, Ulysse enfin dans le bras de la reine, trouve la théorie finie de son propre μῦθος.” (Serres 1977, 197)
15. See n. 9.
16. cf. “άλλα σου τα στέλνω, άλλα σβήνω, άλλα φυλάγω στο προσωπικό μου αρχείο” [“some of them I send to you, others I delete, some others I save in my personal archive”] (Adaloglou 2013, 11). On the meta-poetical function of Penelope’s undecidability see Katz (1991).
17. See Bouvier (2014; 2016).
18. cf. Barthes (1977, 19-20).
19. cf. Moirai as spinners of destiny, and the function of Penelope’s web in the *Odyssey*.

20. For the significance of the *mnesterophonia*, i.e. the slaughter of the suitors, as a terminus *post quem* see below, section 3.1.1.
21. See *s.v.* *lap(pes)* in Kuhn (1970); see also Rubinstein (1984).
22. Smurthwaite (2006, 82).
23. I would like thank Dr. Milan Herold (University of Bonn), who made me look into possible obscene implications of these passages.
24. Corporeal representations challenging concepts of beauty are elsewhere uttered: “Ἡ Ελένη ἔκανε μαστεκτομή./ [...] με τσαλακωμένο μπούστο, φαλακρή./ Τι να ερωτευτεί ένας Πάρις;” [“Helen had a mastectomy./ [...] with a scrunched bosom, bald. / What should a Paris fall for?”] (Adaloglou 2013, 21).
25. Cf. Smurthwaite 2006, 79.
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The Zombie: a new myth in the making. A political and social metaphor

SARA MOLPECERES

Abstract

The zombie is a new myth which appeared in Western imaginary in the twentieth century and which gradually evolved into its present-day version: the apocalyptic zombie. This work aims to review the zombie myth's evolution and to offer some insight into why it is this new version of the myth the one we can find massively today in both artistic and non-artistic discourses.

Keywords: Zombies, myth, Rhetoric, Comparative Literature, social discourse.

1. Introduction

Despite the common prejudice that myths belong to a pre-rational stage of civilisation and that human beings in the twenty-first century cannot believe in myths, the fact is that myths can be widely found in our present-day cultural manifestations. Myths from Greek, Nordic, and Semitic mythologies as well as myths from literature or films can be traced in both high and popular culture today.

This fact leads us to think that myths return once and again because of our yearning to understand human nature and destiny. Regardless of the technological or scientific evolution of a given society, human beings still rely on myths. Thus, when dealing with the same problems human beings have faced for ages, twenty-first century men and women are rediscovering and adapting "old" myths; but also, on the other hand, when facing new experiences, twenty-first century human beings are creating "new" myths to explain and understand those new realities.

Human urge for myths is eternal, and that is due to the fact that, as contemporary theories of myth state, myths are not mere beautiful ancient narratives, but a way of thinking. Even more, as myths are a way of understanding reality, myths can become metaphors and extend their presence to fields and discourses other than literature or art.

Such is the case of the zombie myth, a "new" myth introduced in Western culture in the twentieth century. As any myth, it was updated and adapted; it evolved from what was called the voodoo zombie into today's apocalyptic zombie. This last formulation of the zombie myth is the most successful one, as it is the version which has transcended towards political, social or economic discourses.

The main goal of this article is thus to explore both the birth and evolution of the zombie myth and its ideological significance and metaphorical function in present-day artistic discourses and non-artistic discourses. In order to do so, within the theoretical and methodological framework of both Comparative Literature and Constructivist Rhetoric, we will analyse a corpus consisting on several literature and film works, as well as economic or political texts.

2. Myth within Rhetoric and Comparative Literature

In the twenty-first century, not only the study of myths, but also the very existence of new myths is constantly questioned. This questioning is related to the “traditional” definition of myth: since Plato, myths have been considered false and irrational tales (Vernant 1982, 170), inappropriate for rational and civilised human beings. Nevertheless, modern myth theories defy Plato’s view and argue that human beings are rational creatures, of course, but also symbolic creatures (Eliade 1983). In that sense, myths may be considered the manifestation of human symbolic thought. Thus, myths are inherent to human beings of all times and places, and capable of appearing in any kind of discourses—non artistic discourses included (Molpeceres 2014).

According to modern theories, myths are narratives (Weinrich 1979) we use to explain our surrounding reality and ourselves in a symbolic way (Eliade 1983), as these narratives are systems of symbolic elements—metaphors and symbols (Turbayne 1974). As manifestations of our symbolic mind, myths communicate social ideology to such an extent that they have great impact in social imagination and collective psyche (Molpeceres 2014). In addition, myths can be deconstructed in smaller symbolic units, mythemes (Lévi-Strauss 1979), which change and adapt to different contexts.

In order to undertake the study of modern myths, as we have already stated, we find the combination of Comparative Literature and Constructivist Rhetoric, as a theoretical and analytical framework, entirely appropriated. The study of myths is not unknown to the field of Comparative Literature. In the context of what has been defined as “the new paradigm” in Comparative Literature (Pujante 2006), authors such as Yves Chevrel (1989) or Pierre Brunel (1992) have pointed out the close connection between Comparative Literature and myth studies.

If we consider that the works of art, science, philosophy, or economy occurring in a society reflect to some extent the ideology of that given society (Pujante 2006, 92); following the new paradigm, Comparative Literature should focus, through the comparative analysis of those works, on the study of that society’s underlying ideology (Pujante 2006, 87).

In this way, Comparative Literature becomes a perfect pair with another discipline, History of Ideas, as both study how cultural ideas, concepts or themes evolve through time and are shaped in different times and places. At this point myth comes into play, as those cultural ideas are usually embodied by myths (Molpeceres 2014, 68). Thus, if, according to Jung (1999), myths and archetypes are activated when needed in a particular society, then the study of myths will allow us to discover and understand the fears, worries, desires, and aspirations of that society.

Taking another step in our argumentation, if myths may appear in any kind of discursive construction, we find ourselves in the field of social discourses, and that is the domain of Rhetoric. Particularly relevant to our approach of myth is a perspective in rhetorical studies called Constructivist Rhetoric. The core concept within this perspective is that ideologies and social representations are constructed by our discursive practice as humans; that is, they emerge in the process of being addressed and explained by us in our discourses (Pujante 2016).

In that vein, the aim of Constructivist Rhetoric is to discover, through discursive analysis, the writer's underlying ideology in a given text. This discourse analysis is based on the close examination of textual lexicon and structures, and particular attention is given to metaphors and other rhetorical figures, as they are one of the most persuasive instruments in order to transmit ideology (Goatly 2017).

Persuasion is related to myths. Since we understand and explain reality through narratives and myths, myths can convey social ideology. Besides, myths are made of interwoven symbolic elements (the mythemes), which can be used as metaphors in social discourses. The more mythical elements or metaphors used in a discourse, the more persuasive that discourse will be, as myths appeal to our unconscious cognitive frames (Molpeceres 2014, 86).

As can be appreciated, both the existence of new myths and their study are completely justified if we take into account modern conceptions of myth. In addition to this, a framework combining Comparative Literature and Constructivist Rhetoric highlights the connection between myths and deep social and ideological structures. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to study the presence of myths in both artistic works and social discourses.

3. The Zombie Myth

After what has been said, one could consider the zombie as a new myth. Pierre Brunel (1999) has already considered it as such by including the zombie in his *Dictionnaire des Mythes d'Aujourd'hui*. Nevertheless, in the following section of this article, we will explore the zombie bearing in mind the modern definition of myth already discussed. We will therefore consider the evolution of this myth through three stages (voodoo zombie, pulp zombie, and apocalyptic zombie), and will try to explain this evolution as well as the zombie myth's different mythemes and their meaning.

3.1. The Voodoo Zombie

The earliest written trail of the word "zombie" dates from 1765, from a French text describing Africa (Gras 2010, 16). Nevertheless, according to Brunel (1999, 889), the term comes from Antillean Creole language and appears in France in 1832; a century later the word was considered of common usage in French. In the same vein, the term seems to have been introduced in English language in the early nineteenth century (ODE 2003, 2052).

The first cultural context of the zombie myth is located clearly outside the boundaries of Western civilization (Haiti), and related to voodoo and to the Bocor character, the voodoo sorcerer (Gras 2010, 19). The Haitian zombie myth entered American public consciousness in the late 1920s and early 1930s, after the United

States Marines invaded Haiti in 1915 (Shanks 2014, 2). After the invasion, American soldiers, expatriates, and missionaries gradually returned home bringing with them “tales of strange voodoo ceremonies and mysterious bokors and even rumors of zombies” (Shanks 2014, 3).

The most famous example of those narrations—and key piece in the introduction of the voodoo zombie myth in Western imaginary—was explorer William Seabrook’s work *The Magic Island* (1929). In the best-known chapter of the book, “Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields”, Seabrook stated that he had found in Haiti a folklore tale which “sounded exclusively local—the *zombie*” (2016, 93). According to Seabrook, the zombie was:

a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life [...] a servant or slave, occasionally for the commission of some crime, more often simply as a drudge around the habitation of the farm, setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens. (Seabrook 2016, 93)

In that chapter, Polynice, Haitian farmer and Seabrook’s confidant, argued that, far from superstition, zombies were in fact very real:

They exist to an extent that you whites do not dream of, though evidences are everywhere under your eyes. [...] At this very moment, in the moonlight, there are *zombies* working on this island [...] we know about them, but we do not dare to interfere so long as our own dead are left unmolested. (Seabrook 2016, 94)

In fact, Polynice himself led Seabrook to a group of zombies working on a cane field, and what Seabrook saw impacted him profoundly: hieratic figures, speechless people of void eyes working under the orders of their keeper, a young black woman named Lamerchie (2016, 102). Yet, for Seabrook, this phenomenon was not related to magic, but to drugs: “zombies were nothing but poor, ordinary demented human beings, idiots, forced to toil in the fields” (2016, 102) in a state of lethargic coma after the administration of drugs (2016, 103).

In her seminal work about Haitian folklore, *Tell My Horse* (1938), anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston explained the process of zombification:

Maybe a plantation owner has come to the Bocor to “buy” some laborers, or perhaps an enemy wants the utmost in revenge. He makes an agreement with the Bocor to do the work. After the proper ceremony, the Bocor [...] rides after dark to the house of the victim. There he places his lips to the crack of the door and sucks out the soul of the victim and rides off in all speed. Soon the victim falls ill [...] and in a few hours is dead. The Bocor [...] is in the cemetery but does not approach the party [...] At midnight he will return for his victim.

[The victim is] given a drop of a liquid, the formula for which is most secret. After that the victim is a Zombie. He will work ferociously and tirelessly without consciousness of his surroundings and conditions and without memory of his former state. (Hurston 1995, 458-459)

Notwithstanding, after meeting herself a real zombified woman named Felicia Felix-Mentor, Hurston (1995, 470) rejected the possibility of magic, and considered zombies the result of a process in which the Bocor used drugs to induce an apparent death and then, after the burial of the false dead, the Bocor woke the victim and submitted him/her to his will.

Following the same vein but almost fifty years later, ethnobotanist and anthropologist Wade Davies (1985, 187) explained in his work *The Serpent and the Rainbow* the nature of the drugs used by the Bocor in the zombification process—tetrodotoxin and *datura stramonium*.

After what has been said, a clear image of the first version of the zombie myth can be drawn. Its main mythemes would be a) the concept of the “living dead”, a corpse brought back to life; b) voodoo and a magic sorcerer; c) non-Western cultural context; d) the lack of free will of the zombie, as it is a “brainless being”; e) slavery and otherness; f) corpses that, far from being corrupted, are fit for hard labour.

As can be appreciated, the voodoo zombie is neither a narrative about human beings fearing death, nor a tale of aggressive flesh-eaters. Quite on the contrary, the voodoo zombie is a myth about abuse of power, oppression and loss of individuality.

Particularly insightful is the influence of Seabrook’s *Magic Island* in popular literature and film history. On one hand, it inspired some pulp fiction stories; as we shall see. On the other hand, Seabrook’s work was also the source for the first zombie film, *White Zombie*, directed by Victor Halperin in 1932, and classic film *I Walked with a Zombie*, directed by Jacques Tourneur in 1943—thanks to journalist Inez Wallace’s articles, inspired by Seabrook’s work (Palacios 2010, 30-33).

The zombie’s success may be proved by the fact that between 1932 and 1943 another eight films on zombies or other “living dead” were produced (Moscardó 2009, 10-20). Some of these films followed the model of the voodoo zombie, but others mixed the myth with different traditions rooted on fantasy, horror or science fiction.

Notwithstanding, the two films mentioned (*White Zombie*, and *I Walked with a Zombie*) are the most remarkable pieces among zombie films of that period. Both films are worth commenting, as they are an example of why the zombie myth resonated with American psyche. Both stories are located in the Antilles and feature zombified strong black men working as slaves, but also, and this is a novelty, zombified white women—the Bocor’s or the plantation owner’s love interests.

Thus, it is not only that Americans saw their own colonialist anxieties and racial tensions projected in the zombie myth (Shanks 2014, 2), but also the fact that the myth: represents the potential for a reversal of the racial status quo and the loss of white privileged. It presents the reader or viewer with the possibility of the enslaver becoming the enslaved; it exploits the subconscious fears and anxieties inherent in a society stratified by race and gender and it threatens to undermine that social hierarchy. (Shanks 2014, 4-5)

3.2. The Pulp Zombie

Between the voodoo zombie and the present-day version of the myth, the apocalyptic zombie, there is a middle step, “the pulp zombie” (Palacios 2010, 167-197).

After Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie*, the figures of zombie films increased steadily—twenty-six zombie films were produced between 1943 and 1968 (Moscardó 2009, 20-39). Furthermore, the presence of zombies in popular literature was massive in the late 1920s, early 1930s and 1940s, when zombies reigned in American pulp fiction (Palacios 2010, 171); but a decade later, in the 1950s, pulp literature began to decline. Nevertheless, the zombie myth found an even most successful medium in comic books (Palacios 2010, 184), particularly in Entertainment Comic (EC) series such as *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, or *The Haunt of Fear*.

At this stage of the myth's development, the changes in its structure were continued and reinforced: on the one hand, the zombie was mixed with other creatures and turned into a rabid and hungry monster; on the other hand, mythemes as the non-Western cultural context, the voodoo magic, or the figure of the Bocor were gradually substituted by other options.

Let us take, for instance, a panoramic view on some pulp zombie tales published between the late 1920s and 1940s. Some of the first pulp zombie tales adhered to the original myth, as "Jumbee" (1926), written before the publication of Seabrooks' work, or Seabury Quinn's "The Corpse-Master" (1929), the first zombie short story directly inspired by Seabrook (Shanks 2014, 7). Other pulp stories featured modified versions of the myth, as "The House in the Magnolias" (1932), by August Derleth and Mark Schorer, or "The Song of the Slaves" (1940), by Manly Wade Wellman.

"The Song of the Slaves" is particularly interesting, as it differs greatly from the model. The story takes place on a slave boat sailing from Africa to Charleston, and the main character is a slave trafficker whose slaves threaten him with coming back from death as zombies and kill him (which they actually do). "Though you carry me away in chains, I am free when I die. Back will I come to bewitch and kill you" (Wellman 2014, 354).

Other examples of pulp stories differ from the voodoo model even more: in "The Dead Who Walk" (1931), by Ray Cummings, or "The Man Who Loved a Zombie" (1939), by Russell Gray, we find ourselves in idyllic American towns, idyllic, at least, until their dead residents come out of their graves.

Another pulp short story which contributed to the evolution of the zombie myth is "Herbert West—Reanimator," written in 1922 by H. P. Lovecraft. The story deals with a doctor, West, obsessed with overcoming death artificially (Lovecraft 2005, 24). West creates an "animating solution" which works successfully in animals. Nevertheless, when used in humans, the solution appears to be less effective, and West's "experiments" come back turned into horrific and violent creatures. As West learns that the "fresher" the corpse the more mentally capable the creature, he even kills a man in order to reanimate him. In the end, the most intelligent of West's creatures leads the others, rabid savages, to take revenge on their creator, whom they slaughter and eviscerate.

There are some elements of this story which will be incorporated to the zombie myth: in the first place, the classic science fiction motif of the Mad Doctor—which is related to the myth of Faust. The origin of the zombie is now, therefore, science instead

of magic; but a sort of “illegitimate” science, as we are talking about practices that go beyond natural laws (and are somehow punished).

On the other hand, the “creatures” that come to life do not resemble full human nature anymore, but are described as rabid animals and blood lusting monsters—“the nauseous eyes, the voiceless simianism, and the daemoniac savagery” (Lovecraft 2005, 34). We deal in this case with a paradigmatic change: the “zombie” is no longer a being deserving pity, but a creature to be afraid of. The real menace is not the Bocor, but the abominable creature, which now is both a bloody killer and a flesh-eater (Lovecraft 2005, 33).

Notwithstanding this, *Herbert West–Reanimator’s* creatures do in fact share some motives with the original zombie, two, in particular: the emphasis on the “revivification of the dead”, and the lack of will of the reanimated creature. Let us remember that only the last one of West’s reanimated beings seems to be intelligent, yet the others act “less like men than like unthinkable automata guided by the [...] leader” (2005, 53).

But let us now move to the 1950s, when pulp fiction success decreases and zombies are transferred to comic books. In this decade a science fiction classic novel is published, *I am Legend* (1954), by John Matheson, a work whose influence on the zombie myth’s transformation is undisputable (Palacios 2010, 181). *I am Legend* is set on a post-apocalyptic world in which the main character, Robert Neville, is the last man on earth. All human beings (but Neville) have been infected by a bacterium and, after death, they had come back to life as vampires (Matheson 2010, 146).

Even though Neville survives by killing all infected creatures he finds on his way, the fact is that we have two very different kinds of “creatures” in *I am Legend*. On the one hand, the vampires, and, on the other hand, those infected but alive, that is, actual living people which in turn will become vampires once they are dead.

The first “creatures”, the vampires, present mythemes belonging to both the vampire myth and the voodoo zombie myth: as vampires, they need blood, hate garlic, stay away of daylight, and are killed by wooden stakes. As zombies, they seem sort of brainless—“Their brains are impaired, they exist for only one purpose” (2010, 171)—and moved by survival instinct—“There was no union among them. Their need was their only motivation” (2010, 13).

Besides of the living dead of *I am Legend*, another two narrative elements of Matheson’s work will be incorporated to the future apocalyptic zombie. First, the concept of the “horde”, which will be key element in George A. Romero’s zombies—Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* is clearly influenced by Matheson (Palacios 2010, 330). Second, the apocalyptic setting, the collapse of Neville’s civilisation.

3.3. The Apocalyptic Zombie

After pulp zombie glorious days in the 1930s and 1940s, and despite the zombie’s allure in the comics of the 1950s, zombies seemed to fade into some cultural obscurity for two decades, until George A. Romero’s film *Night of the Living Dead* made its debut in 1968 (Shanks 2014, 2).

After that transitional state (the pulp zombie stage), in which the Zombie myth was reconfigured, we find a new kind of zombie in Romero. In fact, Romero is said to have reinvented the concept, creating a new archetypal monster (Palacios 2010, 330). This new creature assimilates the living dead concept with elements from different monsters and genres (Palacios 2010, 331): the radiation as the origin of the plague, from apocalyptic science fiction; the loss of individual identity, from alien films; the zombie's visual aesthetic, from EC comics; the contagion trope, from vampire lore; the flesh-eater nature, from the ghoul, and the brainless condition, from the voodoo zombie.

It is worth noting that in *Night of the Living Dead* the word zombie is never mentioned—the creatures are referred to as “ghouls.” As Romero (2016, xix) explains:

We never thought of the creatures in our film as “zombies” because, like everyone else at the time, we believed “zombies” to be those bug-eyed, soulless beings that wandered the fields in Haiti. Our monsters were flesh-eating corpses acting on their own, not commanded by a sorcerer, and they were ordinary people, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. In that sense, I guess we *did* create the modern “zombie”. But we never used the word. In my second film, *Dawn of the Dead*, after much had been written about *Night*, I did use the word, eagerly and gratefully.

But *Night of the Living Dead* not only features the new zombie model, it also introduces other new mythemes into the myth. Due to some sort of radioactive contamination from a space probe, the recent dead are coming back to life in a rural town of Pennsylvania, and behave as brainless flesh-eaters. Running away from the “ghouls,” a group of very heterogeneous people are trapped in a rural farmhouse sieged by the dead. In a short period of time, they fight among themselves, the dead enter the house and devour all of them but one.

As can be appreciated, in addition to the “new” kind of creature, the plot of *Night of the Living Dead* features a new origin for the zombie (science, a trope to be more widely developed in following films). In addition to this, we have another new mytheme: the conflict between survivors, that is, human beings which are struggling to survive, but in the process they display the most abusive and sociopathic behaviour (Palacios 2010, 333).

Two more mythemes should be considered in addition to those already discussed (they do not appear clearly in *Night of the Living Dead*, but will become key elements in Romero's following films): the contagion/virus element and the concept of the zombie horde, which entails the apocalyptic setting.

Monsters usually act as symbolic projections of our frustrations (Asma 2009, 191), and if we consider Romero's six zombie films (the *Living Dead* series), it becomes clear that they are symbolic transcriptions of the failure of the American Dream (Pérez Ochando 2013, 36).

Romero is pessimistic about the “virtues” of civilization and uses his films as a vehicle for his critical point of view. If we consider *Night of the Living Dead*, released six months after the assassination of Martin Luther King, we can see how, at the end of the movie, Ben, the sole survivor and an African American character, is killed not by

zombies, but “by a posse of white, redneck, good-ole-bous” (Romero 2016, xix), which reminds of the Ku Klux Klan and civil militia’s lynching (Pérez Ochando 2013, 46).

Since the times of the voodoo zombie, one of the most important functions of the myth was to expose the ways of racial oppression. Romero reaffirmed this connection and set the problem in the context of American racial tensions.

On another level, in his second zombie film, Romero explored the possibilities of other social and political meanings of the myth. Thus, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) deals with the ill effects of capitalism, in particular obsessive consumerism. The image of the zombie horde in the shopping centre speaks for itself. Yet an even more disturbing situation is that of the living ones in the zombie apocalypse, seeking refuge in the shopping centre, enjoying hedonistically all goods available and forgetting that the dead are at the gates.

In Romero’s zombie film of 1985, *Day of the Dead*, what is left of the United States government and military force is hidden in a fortified military base, in which scientists (including Dr. Logan, a Mad Scientist) are experimenting with zombies in order to find a cure for the zombie menace. As expected, the film shows how inhuman human beings can be, with strong emphasis on how power devours the real monsters: barbaric military forces, fanatics, and political institutions (Pérez Ochando 2013, 73).

A further step is taken in *Land of the Dead*, Romero’s fourth zombie film, released in 2005 and focused on class inequality: American social class system is threatened by a horde of zombie “proletariat”. The plot is set in Pittsburgh, where a society based on a sort of caste system has been created. Outside the city, the zombies await their moment and begin to show signs of intelligence, particularly Big Daddy, an African American zombie and former petrol station attendant. It will be Big Daddy the one to lead the blue-collar army of living dead into battle.

In the film it seems clear that the zombie attack is in some way a class revolution. Poor people survive the assault and as they are fleeing the city the zombie horde leaves them alone. The wealthy (and white) ruling classes, on the other hand, are massacred.

Let us remember that the zombie is a metaphor for otherness, be it based on race (the voodoo zombie), gender (*White Zombie*) or social class. In *Land of the Dead* the zombie horde represents the oppressed masses, the victims of wild capitalism; the most terrifying menace for the economical and political elites (Pérez Ochando 2010, 122).

Less political and social implications can be found in *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009), films featuring the classic conflicts between survivors, and the depiction of human beings as much more destructive creatures than zombies.

After *Night of the Living Dead*, fascination with zombies continued through the 1970s and early 1980s and faded somewhat in the 1990s (Shanks 2014, 1). It is also worth noting that in 1980s the voodoo zombie reappears thanks to Wade Davies’s novel, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985), and to Wes Craven’s film of the same name, premiered in 1988. Thus, both versions of the myth coexisted in the same decade with similar success. In literature, several novels following the voodoo model were

published in this decade, but, at the same time, other creatures were filling the space the zombie had once occupied (Palacios 2010, 348-349).

Notwithstanding, the zombie myth re-emerges stronger at the turn of the millennium (Shanks 2014, 1). According to Moscardó (2009, 3-5), between 1968 and 1999, 140 zombie films were premiered; in the years between 2000 and 2009, nearly 140 zombie films were produced, including well-known films such as *Resident Evil* (2002); *28 Days Later* (2002) and *28 Weeks Later* (2007); Zack Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* (2004); Canadian zombie satire *Fido* (2005); Robert Rodríguez's *Planet Terror* (2007); *I am Legend* (2007); or *Zombieland* (2009).

Although the tendency seems to decrease in the 2010s, several examples of the zombie myth's pervasive presence may be mentioned: some instalments of the *Resident Evil* phenomenon (which includes videogames, films, novels, and comics); *The Walking Dead* television programme (2013), based on the graphic novel created by writer Robert Kirkman and artist Tony Moore (2003-); the film *World War Z* (2013), based on the novel written by Max Brooks (2006), also author of *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003); romantic zombie film *Warm Bodies* (2013), based on Isaac Marion's novel (2012); *Pride, Prejudice and Zombies* (2016), based on Seth Grahame-Smith's 2009 graphic novel; *The Girl with All the Gifts*, based on M. R. Carey's novel (2014); or South Korean film *The Train to Busan* (2016).

Particularly worth noting is the non-English speaking European contribution to the zombie myth in the last two decades, with films such as French production *La Horde* (2009), German *Rammbock* (2010), Norwegian *Dead Snow* (2009) and *Dead Snow 2* (2014), or Spanish *REC* (2007) and *REC2* (2009); and zombie literature, such as Italian anthologies *Spaghetti zombie* (2015) and *Cronache dalla Resistenza* vol. 1 (2013) and vol. 2 (2015); or, in Spain, zombie sagas such as *Apocalipsis Z* (2008-2010), written by Manel Loureiro, and *Los Caminantes* (2009-2016), by Carlos Sisi.

4. The Apocalyptic Zombie as Socio-political Statement

It can be inferred from the previous section that the apocalyptic zombie seems to be the most successful version of the myth: in the last two decades this version has been not only present in mainstream popular culture, but also in non-artistic discourses, as we shall see.

In addition to this, zombie genre is so pervasive that even literary classics such as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* or Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* have been zombified (and turned into *Quijote Z* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*); and the limits between fiction and reality have been broken when, in several cities, fans of zombie culture, disguised as zombies, celebrate "World Zombie Day" and organise "Zombie walks."

The key to understand the apocalyptic zombie phenomenon is to explore the sociological meaning of each one of the mythemes merging in this version of the myth. One of the new mythemes at the core of the apocalyptic zombie is the origin of the zombie plague. In that sense, magic has been replaced by science, and the virus is the most used trope to explain the existence of zombies. Whether the result of an experiment

gone awry (*28 days after*), or a biological high-tech warfare out of control (*Resident Evil*), the virus mytheme, Weinstock reminds (2016, 286), clearly reflects “contemporary anxieties concerning both germ warfare and pandemics such as AIDS, the Ebola virus, Bird Flu, and Swine Flue,” not to mention the extended paranoia about “corporate greed or government manipulation” (2016, 284).

An even worst scenario is that in which the virus is some sort of Mother Nature’s doing: an angry Mother Nature “regulating” life on earth and eliminating the most parasitic specie of all, us. If we consider the graphic novel *The Walking Dead*, it can be appreciated that animals do not suffer the “zombie’s disease” (Kirkman 2003, vol. 1, no. 1, 2). Furthermore, after the zombie outbreak, nature seems reinvigorated: thus, the main character of Spanish zombie novel *Apocalipsis Z* is surprised by how strongly plants and vegetation are reclaiming the empty city (Loureiro 2013, 282).

Another mytheme to consider is the “living dead” nature of zombies. This mytheme has been consistently maintained through the different stages of the evolution of the myth; and although in some modern examples it has disappeared, as in *28 Days Later* or *28 Weeks Later*, it can be widely found in most of the narratives of the apocalyptic zombie.

Our all-time obsession with revenants reflects the alluring but nevertheless repressed narcissistic desire for everlasting life (Asma 2009, 317, note 18). In addition to this, the zombie distinguishes itself from other revenants, as the vampire, in its aesthetic appearance (Palacios 2010, 12); thus, the dismembered, putrid, and decayed body of the zombie adds to our desire for everlasting life, our fear of aging and losing our youthful beauty (Fernández Gonzalo 2011, 48).

The zombie differs from the vampire not only in its appearance, but also in a fundamental element: while the vampire is a myth about maintaining individual identity after death, the zombie, on the other hand, is a myth about depersonalisation. When becoming a zombie, the person is reduced to a follower, a mere piece within the zombie mass, the horde. In this vein, Pérez Ochando reminds us that (2013, 119) zombie life after death is terrifying as we are afraid of uniformity, of identity loss. Furthermore, to our globalisation anxieties, we must add the fear of mass control, as the zombie is a brainless being unable to understand, explain or judge the surrounding world (Fernández Gonzalo 2010, 18). In the end, let us not forget it, the brainless being trope of the zombie myth is the only mytheme shared by all three versions of the myth.

As the zombie mind is null and void, it is the zombie body the one guiding the monster. The body, that old enemy of Western Cartesian thought, is the one in control, reminding us, humans, how material and physical our very nature is. Along with the body, the ravenous instinct, as the zombie is motivated not by the desire of power or wealth, but by hunger. A pointless hunger (if we consider the fact that no food can nourish the zombie) which reminds us of the compulsive and mindless consumerism of the living (Pérez Ochando 2013, 90).

Notwithstanding, a variation on the mytheme deserves to be commented: some contemporary zombie narratives feature intelligent zombies. Romero’s Bub (the docile zombie used in laboratory research in *Day of the Zombie*), or Big Daddy (the zombie

leader of *Land of the Dead*) were the first examples. To them can be added “R”, main character of the zombie romance *Warm Bodies*, novel in which zombies gradually recover themselves mentally and physically, some years after the zombie outbreak.

A particular case is Kieren, main character of British zombie television series *In the Flesh* (2013-2014). After a cure for the zombie disease has been discovered, former zombies, now “Partially Deceased Syndrome” sufferers, are integrating into society. Taking to the extreme the zombie’s “otherness” already discussed, Kieren and other “cured” zombies are harassed and threatened by their neighbours, and, in such a way, *In the Flesh* is a clear metaphor of race, gender or class discrimination.

Another zombie mytheme aimed at social criticism is the fact that the zombie apocalypse means the collapse of capitalism. This implies not only that survivors must forget the old capitalist ways and opt for subsistence economy (as it can be appreciated in the first volume of *The Walking Dead*), but also that they may find their long-established rights (or privileges) at a stake, as we see in *World War Z*:

America was a segregated workforce, and in many cases, that segregation contained a cultural element. A great many of our instructors were first-generation immigrants. These were the people who knew how to take care of themselves [...] It was crucial that these people teach the rest of us to break from our comfortable, disposable consumer lifestyle even though their labor had allowed us to maintain that lifestyle in the first place. Yes, there was racism, but there was also classism. You’re a high-powered corporate attorney. [...] The more work you do, the more money you make, the more peons you hire to free you up to make more money. That’s the way the world works. But one day it doesn’t. [...] And suddenly that peon is your teacher, maybe even your boss. For some, this was scarier than the living dead. (Brooks 2007, 175)

This novel is another sample of the subversive power of the zombie apocalypse, along with the scenario discussed in Romero’s *Land of the Dead*.

One last mytheme to be considered is the already mentioned “group of survivors” in the apocalyptic zombie narrative. Concerning this issue, Robert Kirkman, writer of *The Walking Dead*, declared in the first volume of the series that “Good zombie movies show us how messed up we are, they make us question our station in society... and our society’s station in the world” (2003, vol. 1, no.1). Hence the fact that, for Kirkman, human characters are more important than zombies, as he is interested on exploring “how people deal with extreme situations and how these events CHANGE them” (2003, vol. 1, no.1).

In that sense, Kirkman opposes two kind of human groups, on the one hand, the group led by the series main character, former sheriff deputy Rick Grimes, a “democratic” group in which civilized rules remain; and, on the other hand, those groups led by the hero’s great antagonists, which are not the zombies, but abusive leaders such as “The Governor” or Negan, both depicted as violent dictators that keep their “families” alive in exchange of total submission.

5. The Zombie Myth in Social Discourses

Thus far, we have explored the zombie myth taking into account its presence and evolution in artistic discourses. We are now poised to approach the myth in a very different medium, social discourses.

In a previous section of this article (section 2), it was stated that myths are complex symbolic systems formed by mythemes, which may function as potential metaphors to be used in any kind of discourse.

Let us consider, for instance, the zombie myth in the scientific field. In 2013, researchers in New Mexico announced they had created “zombie cells,” namely “near-perfect replicas of mammalian cells that can perform many of the same functions despite the fact that they’re not actually alive” (Freeman 2013). In this case, the mytheme of the zombie myth underlying the metaphoric relation is that of the “living dead” nature.

Another example, now within medical discourse, has to do with American CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). In 2011, CDC launched a “zombie” campaign urging American citizens to be prepared in case of an emergency:

There are all kinds of emergencies out there that we can prepare for. Take a zombie apocalypse for example. That’s right, I said z-o-m-b-i-e a-p-o-c-a-l-y-p-s-e. You may laugh now, but when it happens you’ll be happy you read this, and hey, maybe you’ll even learn a thing or two about how to prepare for a *real* emergency. (Kahn 2011)

For the occasion, several posters featuring zombies were issued, and even a graphic novel entitled *Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic*. Obviously, the zombie mytheme used here as a metaphor is the virus mytheme, along with the apocalypse mytheme.

Let us change subject and focus on another different discourse, this time computer science discourse, where the term “zombie” is used in computer security. In that sense, a “zombie machine” is a computer infected by a “bot”, a type of malware “that allows an attacker to take control over an affected computer. [...] Since a bot infected computer does the bidding of its master, many people refer to these victim machines as “zombies” (Norton, s.d.). As can be seen, in this case the metaphorical relation is based both on the zombie virus/infection mytheme and on the “brainless nature” mytheme (which entails control over the zombie).

A very interesting use of the zombie metaphor can be found in economy. In 2011, the *Global Minotaur: America, Europe and the Future of the Global Economy*, written by economist and former Minister of Finance for Greece, Yanis Varoufakis, was published.

Explaining the 2008 financial crash, Varoufakis (2013, 190-191) uses the term “zombie bank,” that is, a bank collapsed but brought back to “life” by national banks or governments:

In a typical zombie-movie setting, the un-dead banks drew massive strength from our state system and then immediately turned against it! Both in America and in Europe, politicians are quaking in terror of the very banks which, only yesterday, they had saved. (2013, 165)

There are three different zombie mythemes here: the virus, the “living dead” nature of the zombie, and the rabid hunger of the monster (dead banks turning against nations and “devouring” them).

A particular use of the zombie metaphor in American media is related to what has been called the “Prepper” movement (a group of individuals getting prepared for the capitalist system collapse). In an interview with *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Joel Skousen, American “survivalist” author, explains how to be prepared in case the apocalypse happens. One of his advices is to run away from the big cities, as they are “infested with unoccupied zombies” (Duclos 2007). Skousen equates financial collapse to zombie apocalypse, and, again, we find the conception of the zombie as a threatening “other” subverting the economic and political system.

This connection is intensified if we consider the way immigrants are depicted in the media. For instance, Gutiérrez Sanz (2017) has pointed that Spanish journalists usually describe immigrants with lexicon belonging to the zombie lore. Thus, the metaphorical construction of the immigrant and the metaphorical construction of the zombie is the same: horde, infection, hunger, rabid instinct, etc.

In the same vein, in an interview with *Forbes*, Jared Krushner, Donald Trump’s son-in-law, admitted one crucial strategy in Trump’s campaign: to “map voter universes [...] identifying shows popular with specific voter blocks in specific regions” (Bertoni 2016). Through the data, they discovered that, depending on their native state, many of *The Walking Dead* viewers were people worried about immigration (Bertoni 2016), maybe because of the metaphorical connection between zombies and immigrants.

One last usage of the zombie myth worth mentioning is the presence of zombie-related metaphors in political discourses, particularly in the 2012 United States presidential election. In 2011 a private e-mail with an image of Barack Obama depicted as a zombie (Zombama) shot in the head was released by Virginia Republican Party. It said: “We are going to vanquish the zombies with clear thinking conservative principles and a truckload of Republican candy...” (Kumar 2011).

Clearly, the Republican party was comparing Obama’s followers with brainless zombies. This was not a new metaphor, as in 2010 Jason Mattera, conservative activist and author, had published *Obama Zombies. How the Liberal Machine Brainwashed my Generation*.

The Democrats stroke back and metaphorically defined Romney as a zombie as well. During the campaign, many Facebook accounts were open with a “Zombie Romney” in their profiles, including one in which the republican candidate was depicted as a brain-eater zombie about to devour a baby.¹

A subtler attempt was Josh Whedon’s YouTube video about “Zomney.” In this video, Whedon, film director and Obama supporter, explains the future Republican Zombie Apocalypse, while he is storing canned foods:

Romney is ready to make the deep rollbacks to health care, education, social services, and reproductive rights that will guarantee poverty, unemployment, overpopulation, disease, rioting—all crucial elements in

creating a nightmare zombie wasteland. But it's his commitment to ungoverned corporate privilege that will nosedive this economy into true insolvency and chaos. The kind of chaos you can't buy back: Money is only so much paper to the undead. The one percent will no longer be the very rich—it will be the very fast... [...] If Mitt takes office, sooner or later the zombies will come for all of us. (Whedon 2012)

6. Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, the necessity of defending the existence of new myths and their study was stated. Taking as the starting point a modern definition of the myth, along with the consideration of myths within the fields of Comparative Literature and Constructivist Rhetoric, it is evident that new myths are possible and that their study is of the utmost importance, as myths embody cultural ideas and convey social ideology.

As a myth, the zombie was introduced in Western imaginary in the twentieth century, but since then it has evolved apace. In each one of its three versions, the zombie's mythemes are related to profound social and psychological concepts, from otherness to economic collapse, from rabid consumerism to social revolution. Furthermore, the present-day version of the myth, the apocalyptic zombie, seems to particularly resonate with our unconscious minds. That is due to the fact that this myth, unlike any other, reflects our society. It is hardly surprising, then, that this persuasive myth is pervasive not only in artistic works, but also in very different social discourses.²

Notes

1. This Facebook account can be found in: https://www.facebook.com/Mitt-Romney-is-a-Zombie-277149302345992/?hc_ref=SEARCH&fref=nf [Last accessed 15 September 2017].
2. This article is part of the "Constructivist Rhetoric: Identity Discourses" project (RECDID), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competition and European FEDER Funds (FFI2013-40934R, Period 2014-2017). URL: www.recdid.blogs.uva.es

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Religious Rites and Female Spirituality in Cinematic Adaptations of Cinderella

ELISABETH S. WEAGEL

Abstract

Since the 1970s, fairy tales like Cinderella have been criticized for negatively acculturating women, but this reading fails to account for an inherent spirituality which is necessary to understanding the Cinderella tale. Reconnecting the story to its numinous roots reveals Cinderella as a subjective and active being who claims her own life. With the assistance of her fairy godmother (a representation of the feminine divine) and her deceased mother, Cinderella goes through a religious rite, which leads to her individuation and, ultimately, apotheosis.

Keywords: Cinderella; fairy tales; religious rites; female religious experience, Luce Irigaray

Respect for the order of the universe, the question of our relation to the divine are not irrelevant and can help us in the task of seeking a personal and collective identity.

-Luce Irigaray

1. Introduction

Cinderella may be the most well-known fairy tale in the world. It is a story that has been told across cultures for hundreds of years, and continues to be a ubiquitous subject for books, films, operas, ballets, and various other story-telling mediums. But despite its continued popularity, Cinderella also bears a negative stigma. Beginning in the 1970s with an article by Marcia R. Lieberman and continuing into the present, fairy tales have been criticized for negatively affecting women's acculturation (383-95). Heroines, such as Cinderella, are seen as passive creatures who wait for someone else to come and turn their lives into something better. If that someone is a prince, all the worse because of how it reflects on the female sex as incapable and reliant on men. Such a reading is understandable, but it is also problematic. In Cinderella specifically, it obscures the power and purpose of female relationships within the story. Where many have read Cinderella as a tale of a woman who is acted upon and turned into a princess through a prince who pulls her out of obscurity, I argue that Cinderella's marriage to the prince is made possible through a coming-of-age ritual which is assisted by her deceased mother and/or a magical helper who is representative of the feminine

divine. By ignoring these matrilineal relationships and their associated rituals, readers are effectively turning over female power to the male characters. Resurrecting the numinous implications of Cinderella and foregrounding the female element therein reveals Cinderella's subjectivity.

Disney's live-action *Cinderella* (2015) and MGM's *The Glass Slipper* (1955), which have commonalities and differences that create an interesting dialogue, constitute the principal texts of this analysis. Though a spiritual reading of Cinderella can be (and has been) grounded in socio-historical context, I instead take a more mythological approach, using the work of Luce Irigaray as a framework. For Irigaray, female identity is understood, preserved, and created through the organic union of body, spirit, and nature. Since the Cinderella tale exists at the crossroads of these three elements, Irigaray is particularly helpful in elucidating the significance of the tale, which is lost when they are ignored. Her thesis regarding the need for women to experience love of the same, or to have positive female-to-female relationships, and the paucity of such because of female competition is emblemized in the Cinderella tale.

This article foregrounds the Mother Goddess, matrilineal connectivity, and female spiritual progression, but it is not meant to suggest that the female supersedes the male. To the contrary, the goddess does not exist *instead* of a male god, but *in conjunction* with a male god. They are a pair: the Mother Goddess and the Father God. This story focusses on the Goddess and on matriarchy because it is a woman's story, but as will be seen, the female and male ultimately coalesce as they reach the apex of their spiritual development. This coalescence does not constitute a dissolving of individual identity in favor of a single identity, but rather a unified identity that is created through the combining of two fully developed subjects.

Contrary to the many readings that decry Cinderella as a model for female passivity, I argue that the Cinderella tale holds within it a message of female majesty. Where Armando Maggi proposes that "our contemporary clinging to 'classical' tales is also the product of a cultural conformity that struggles to free itself from a past narrative that doesn't concern us any longer," I counter that not only is it relevant, it is needed (159). Cinderella is the myth that elaborates the personal power that emerges through positive female-to-female relationships as well as demonstrating the harm caused by negative female-to-female relationships. It denotes the necessity for subjectivity to precede romantic union. After centuries of telling it and loving it, Cinderella has not lost its relevance, but we may have lost perspective in our reading of the tale. A return to its numinous and female core can reawaken our understanding, and help us in our own search for an individual and collective identity.

2. The Question of Agency

Many scholars criticize the help that Cinderella receives and her consequent transformation, saying that it evinces her objecthood. She has been categorized among folklorists as an "innocent persecuted heroine," someone who passively waits to have her poor circumstances changed for her (Bacchilega 1-12). Speaking more generally, Nancy L. Canepa says that "typical fairy-tale heroes often passively await the determination of their destiny by others, most commonly magical or supernatural beings.

As objects in a mysterious web of friendly or hostile transcendent forces, they do not construct their fate, but undergo it” (201). According to this understanding, Cinderella is not only passive, but has no power to affect the course of events in her life. Maggi argues that Cinderella’s agency is problematic because her “responsibility in her own transformation is questionable,” suggesting that she needs to carry out the transformation herself in order to be a subject (155). However even in Basile’s “The Cinderella Cat,” wherein Zezolla kills her stepmother and uses manipulation and cunning to win the prince, she still has a magical helper assisting her in her efforts. If the aid of a magical helper cancels a character’s agency, as Maggi suggests, then no Cinderella can be redeemed as an agent because it would require a fundamental change to the story, after which it would no longer be Cinderella. But the proactive Zezolla indicates that a subjective Cinderella and a magical helper are not mutually exclusive.

In *The Glass Slipper*, though Ella is outspoken and at times aggressive, she is not the ruthless character that Zezolla is. Preceding her ritual transformation, Ella holds a personal invitation to the ball in her hand and a prophecy that she will live in the palace in her heart, but she makes no attempt to go. Unlike other iterations, she does not lament that the reason is lack of something to wear. She does not lament at all, convincing herself that she is happy to be alone. This is a change from the opening scene where she so determinedly attempts to force her way into the group. Though this may seem like a regression into a more passive person, I suggest instead that it is part of her becoming a virgin in the Irigarayan sense, becoming aware of her spiritual and gendered identity (*Key Writings* 151-52). Her frequent visits to the woods take her out of the masculine space of the village and into the feminine space of nature, beginning her process of personal discovery. Irigaray stipulates that

the whole universe of relations—to oneself, to the other gender, to others, to the world—is expressed in various ways by woman and man. *She* lives much more in an interweaving of relations with other subjects or with nature; *he*, in contrast, builds himself his own world: with tools, objects, laws, gods, and he bends others to an order created by him. (*Key Writings* 151)

Ella’s hesitation to go to the ball reflects a shift from the masculinity of trying to control her social situation toward the female fluidity of interweaving relations. But she has swung a little too far in the opposite direction, and her fairy godmother steps in to help her navigate (Figure 1).

In *Cinderella*, Ella seeks to undergo the transformation on her own terms. She resurrects her mother’s dress and refits it so she can wear it to the ball. Brief mention is made of the help she receives from the mice, who roll spools of thread towards her. This might be compared to the birds in *Three Wishes for Cinderella* (and other versions) who assist Cinderella in picking out the lentils so that she can attend the ball, but it seems more about satisfying devoted Disney fans who expect as much because the mice make the dress in the 1950 animation than about Ella’s connection to nature. It is, nevertheless, an improvement on her character’s degree of agency since the animated

Cinderella is not involved in the dressmaking at all, while the live-action Ella heads the project. Ultimately, though, her own efforts are not enough, but this is not

necessarily proof of objecthood. The aid Cinderella receives is not a mark of her passivity, rather it is an essential rite of female-to-female communion that propels Cinderella in her spiritual development. Her mother and magical helper do not overrule her, but assist her in her individuation, which is to say the maximization of her own subjectivity.

3. The Question of Predestination

The assistance of a magical helper is not the only thing that calls Cinderella's agency into question. In the Grimms' version, Cinderella loses her slipper because it gets stuck in the pitch that the prince scatters on the stairs, but other tellings have no such explanation for Cinderella losing her slipper, which is described by Perrault as "fitting her as if it had been made of wax" (Ashliman). It seems unlikely that a shoe so well fitted would slip off her foot so effortlessly. *Cinderella* accounts for it by having her lose her shoe earlier on in the night, and having the prince place it back on her foot, indicating a loose fit. In every case, the shoe is the only thing to remain after the magic ends without any explanation as to why that is. In *The Glass Slipper*, Ella is under the impression that she is wearing borrowed (even stolen) clothing; nevertheless, when everything else is "returned," she keeps the shoes. The persistence of the shoes past midnight in combination with one falling off implies an intentionality—not on the part of Cinderella, but on the part of her fairy godmother, making the shoe a symbol of divine intervention.

The question then becomes, is this a tale of Calvinistic predestination? Would Cinderella live in the palace no matter what choices she made because it is the path that some higher power has elected for her? Heidi Göttner-Abendroth argues in favor of this view, calling Cinderella a tale of classical ultimogeniture (142-43). However, the fact that the great majority of tellings emphasize Cinderella's goodness seems to suggest that such is not the case. *Cinderella*, for example, insists that her move to the palace and marriage to the prince is the result of her courage and kindness. The correlation between these attributes, and even her being assisted by a magical helper at all, is emphasized by the test presented by her fairy godmother, who first appears as an old woman in rags. A similar test is given by the fairy godmother in *Cinderella* (1914). In this version, she first approaches the stepfamily begging for food. When they spurn her, she turns to Cinderella, who procures some for her. This speaks against a case of ultimogeniture since all the women in the family were given equal opportunity to assist the disguised fairy godmother and thereby earn her assistance.

Though other films do not include a test, the goodness by which Cinderella is so often characterized seems to speak toward that being a prerequisite for her positive development. The Grimms emphasize this in their literary version through retribution inflicted on the stepsisters by birds pecking out their eyes, but this scene is almost never found in screen adaptations. Much more common in cinematic tellings is a general forgetting of the stepmother and stepsisters. They are neither punished, as in Grimms, nor are they forgiven and brought to the palace, as in Perrault. A notable exception is found in *Ever After*, wherein penance is paid by the more malicious stepsister, Marguerite, as well as the stepmother, who are both sentenced to being

palace servants, while the nicer stepsister, Jacqueline, marries a worker in the palace and presumably lives a happy life. This is a unique reworking of both the Grimms' divine punishment of the wicked and Perrault's redemptive forgiveness.

When the stepsisters and stepmother appear in court and have charges laid against them, Marguerite and the Baroness are immediately condemned to slavery in the Americas, "unless," as the queen says, "someone will speak for you." As the Baroness looks around, the first insert shot is of da Vinci, who has served as a Christ figure throughout the film, and would therefore be an obvious intercessor. But he neither moves nor speaks. In this scene, the Savior role shifts from da Vinci to Danielle. Her voice is heard first (as if coming from the Heavens) and all the people in the room bow as the camera reveals her figure. In this moment, Danielle becomes her stepfamily's advocate with the *mother*, deferring to the golden rule as her system for judgement: "Your majesty, all I ask is that you show the same courtesy to them that they have bestowed upon me" (1 John 2:1, see also Matt. 7:12). The hierarchy herein presented again speaks to the conclusion of the tale being a reward for goodness, rather than the fulfilment of an inevitable destiny.

This model receives some opposition in *The Glass Slipper* wherein Ella is impetuous and feisty. The archetype of Cinderella as meek, long-suffering, and kind is challenged by this incarnation, who insists that she will one day live in the palace, and who responds to unkindness with name-calling and even physical aggression, rather than turning the other cheek. The combination of the prophecy and Ella's bad temper initially suggests that merit is not a factor in the course her life takes—it is predetermined. Were that the case, community and ritual would have little meaning in this version of the tale. But nuances in the film reveal that Ella's tempestuous spirit is incompatible with her truest self and as her identity is revealed, so is her capacity for kindness. Whereas Disney's Ella seems unable to be anything but kind, MGM's Ella chooses and develops kindness over time. This is made possible as she develops meaningful relationships.

Of course it is an imperfect metaphor. Within the story there is only one prince, which means only one woman becomes a princess. However, Cinderella is not a symbol of the one lucky enough to be noticed or chosen, as is so often thought. She is everywoman. Just as with her, it is within the power of each woman to create a positive female-to-female community, seek out the divine, and thereby become divine herself.

4. Women-Amongst-Themselves

Many fairy tales with a female protagonist also have a female antagonist, and many scholars have argued that the result is a polarized view of women, in a manner similar to the way women have been historically associated with either Mary (the pure and virtuous woman) or Eve (the vile seductress). But adhering to such a rigid reading has a trapping effect, disallowing the tale to work its magic. The story is neither a description of what women are, nor a prescription of what they should be. Instead, it is a demonstration of the possibilities inherent within certain socialities. Irigaray suggests that when women meet they "look for the secret of their identity in one another," but rather than finding it, they often "merge into one another or become rivals" because

they cannot perceive their personal status (“Women-Amongst-Themselves” 192). The failure to find one’s own identity through interactions with another woman and the subsequent enmity is a common theme in fairy tales with a female protagonist. Kay Stone notes that the sense of competition begins when girls reach puberty and thereby become opponents in the search for a mate. This, she says, is when “Rapunzel is locked in the tower, Snow White is sent out to be murdered, and Sleeping Beauty is put to sleep” (46-47). Cinderella is unique in this respect because while on the one hand it exemplifies female rivalry through the stepmother and stepsisters, on the other it demonstrates the opposite—women successfully finding the “secret of their identity” through their association with one another—what Irigaray calls “women-amongst-themselves.”

Though the stepmother and stepsisters have a female-to-female sociality, Cinderella is the only one who succeeds in discovering her truest identity. Through her positive association with other women, Cinderella not only extricates herself from oppression, but secures a life that far exceeds her expectations. By contrast, the stepmother and stepsisters are in a kind of frozen state, unable to move forward in their own process of becoming, because, as a result of their rivalry, they are a hindrance to one another. What happens instead is women-*against*-themselves, a deterioration of both the group and the individual, resulting in the mutual destruction that Irigaray says is the outcome of rivalry among women.

Cinderella is sympathetic to the challenges of forming positive female-to-female relationships. In this telling, the stepsisters are left as single-dimensional archetypes, but the character of the stepmother is given shape. Where Cinderella responds to hardship with kindness and courage, the stepmother responds with bitterness, which drives her sense of competition. Very little is known of the stepmother’s life before she marries Cinderella’s father. She is never referred to by name in the film, but, it is worth noting, both the name and occupation of her late husband are stated. Thus even before her second marriage there is a sense that she is in a shadow. This shadow is made darker within the new family context, where she learns that her place is secondary to both Ella and the deceased wife that preceded her. She thus appears in the film as a forgotten woman. Marie von Franz identifies the forgotten goddess as a common fairy tale archetype (28). Though the stepmother does not have magical powers, she exhibits a similar behavior to that observed by von Franz. According to her, the forgotten goddess is epitomized by a fairy who is marginalized, such as the thirteenth fairy in “Briar Rose.” In response to being left out, the fairy places a curse on the baby princess. In like manner, the stepmother becomes more pointedly cruel to Cinderella after overhearing her new husband express his love and longing for his departed wife to his daughter. Since Cinderella and her mother draw the father/husband’s attention away from the stepmother, she views them as rivals.

The stepmother’s story in *Cinderella* is nicely contrasted with the opening of *The Glass Slipper*. In this film, Ella is also a kind of forgotten woman. Ella is alienated from her community. In the opening scene, the camera moves through the village as people in brightly colored clothing prepare for the return of the prince (Figure 2).

When the camera settles on a large fountain, Ella emerges from behind it, effectively separated from the group by this stone obstacle, and isolated in her own frame. As she watches a group helping a man hang a garland, she responds by smiling, nodding, and pointing her finger, as if she is a part of the interaction, but no one notices her. She eventually decides to walk around the fountain, and try to merge herself with the group. Though she finally shares the frame, she is still separated by her dull and dirty clothing. In response to the question “what do you want?” She replies, “I only want to help.” She is willing to do anything, even clean up. But the group turns away, keeping her out of their circle. Once fully rejected by the group, she stops vying for admittance and begins to retaliate. Like the stepmother in *Cinderella*, Ella acts badly in response to being forgotten.

The stepmother exemplifies a woman who has become her own obstacle in her self-actualization, whereas MGM’s Ella shows how she is able to overcome hindrances to that process. The latter never rejects the inner impulse to be a part of a community. Even in her bad temperament, Ella continues to strive to become part of the group. By contrast, the stepmother chooses instead to isolate herself. In *The Glass Slipper*, after the prince comes through the town, Ella lies to her stepsisters about having seen him pass. Her lie is not motivated by a sense of competition, but by a desire to feel comradery. She wants to be included, but instead her stepsisters (who *are* motivated by competition) call her bluff and laugh at her. Again she acts out. But when, in the woods, she meets Mrs. Toquet and is treated kindly, she softens. This is what she has been looking for. The stepmother, however, is not moved by Cinderella’s kindness toward her. She becomes more cruel as time goes on, to the point that Cinderella’s spirit breaks, and she, too, no longer feels that she can engage positively with the women around her.

5. The Communion of Saints

In *Cinderella*, her religious rite is incited by her own action. When, as her stepmother and stepsisters depart for the ball, she falls to her knees in front of the large trellis in her front garden. There, bent as if in prayer, she weeps and tells her mother that she can no longer keep her promise because she no longer believes. The manner in which she approaches this place indicates that it has been used for such purposes before. It has already been defined as one connected to Ella’s parents. It is where she sat when her father gave her a paper *papillon*, and her mother watched as she and her father danced up the walk. It is the place where Ella and her mother would come to greet her father when he returned from his trips. As a result, it is associated with, and representative of, the familial unity that Cinderella experienced as a young child. But when she approaches this place on the night of the ball there are no bright colors, no smiling faces, no parents. She kneels alone and in the dark.

The low-key lighting in this scene has a religious quality (Figure 3). There is a sense of godliness in the pure and focused light that illuminates Ella’s back and part of her face. The effect is similar to that within an old cathedral, which is dim except for shafts of light coming through the windows. It exhibits both the glass seen through darkly and the clarity on the other side of it, Ella’s limited vision contrasted with the

eternal vista available to her mother and fairy godmother (see 1 Cor. 13:12). This garden is Ella's tabernacle, and the pre-determined way in which she approaches the trellis suggests that it has functioned as such for a long time. It is noteworthy that, though she has a strong relationship with each parent, when she kneels before this altar, she speaks specifically to her mother. This is not a case of favoring one parent over the other, but rather a circumstance to fit the moment of life that Ella is in. She appeals to her mother because it was a promise to her, specifically, that Ella felt she could no longer keep.

This critical moment for Cinderella recalls the Grimms' Cinderella, who goes to her mother's grave each day to pray. In both versions, the grave is a site of growth. In the Grimms' tale, Cinderella plants a hazel branch, which grows into a beautiful tree. And in the film, the trellis-turned-altar is covered with flowered vines. As each of these Cinderellas kneels in communion, the flora becomes a bridge between living and dead. In an analysis of the Grimms' tale, G. Ronald Murphey calls this experience the "communion of saints," drawing from the *Mirae Caritatis* which defines the communion of saints as "nothing else but a mutual sharing in help, satisfaction, prayer and other good works, a mutual communication among all the faithful, whether those who have reached heaven..., or who are still pilgrims on the way in this world" (100). In the Grimms' tale, a bird perched in the tree responds to Cinderella's supplications by bestowing her with gifts. But the utterance of the film's Cinderella seems at first to be met with silence. Having expressed her doubt, Cinderella leaves the sacred site, and it is in this moment, as she reaches the back garden, that the response comes. Her fairy godmother appears, as if by the mother's direction.

6. The Fairy Godmother as Goddess

The role of the fairy godmother in helping Cinderella through her spiritual development is established early on in *Cinderella*, though its religious significance is somewhat masked. Where the Brothers Grimm wrote that the parting wisdom of Cinderella's mother to her daughter was to "be pious and good," Ella's mother leaves her with the theologically neutral advice to "have courage and be kind" (qtd. in Maggi 155). And when Cinderella asks her mother "who looks after us?" the response is not "God" but "fairy godmothers." Thus an initial reading may yield an interpretation of the film as areligious, stripped of the spiritual and mythic grandeur so integral to the fairy-tale genre. However, closer analysis reveals threads of spirituality woven into the fabric of the film, through the mother-godmother-daughter triad.

The mother has a spiritual presence in Ella's home, but the fairy godmother manifests physically—not in place of the mother, but in addition to her. As Murphey notes, the godmother is traditionally a secondary mother who cares for the child when the mother is unable to. Within a Christian context (from which the concept of the fairy godmother in Cinderella would have emerged), she is also the overseer of the child's religious instruction and guidance (Murphey 93). Accordingly, in *Cinderella*, the fairy godmother comes when Ella is experiencing her moral crisis to give her guidance and renew her faith. She thus fulfills the role of the Christian godmother, but her role is much grander than what is stipulated by that human assignment. If this story is to be

read allegorically, then the fairy godmother is more than a person (or fairy) acting as proxy for the mother. She is the *god* mother, which is to say the Mother Goddess, who descends and uses the powers of Heaven to assist Cinderella.

The relation of the fairy godmother with a title and role as noble as that of the Mother Goddess may at times seem counterintuitive, both because of the manner in which she engages with nature and because of her frequent onscreen representation as a foolish woman. Irigaray maintains that “the feminine divine never separates itself from nature, but transforms it, transubstantiates it without ruining it” (*Key Writings* 167). According to this idea, the fairy godmother’s use of natural elements to provide Cinderella with a carriage and footmen is within the sphere of the feminine divine. Yet Maggi argues that the fairy godmother’s “intervention is a clear deformation in the natural order of things” because she has to “compel nature to collaborate in her plan” and she converts natural species into something else (Maggi 153). Additionally, in *Cinderella*, the fairy godmother is posed as a ridiculous figure. She is absent-minded and not completely competent in her magical abilities. In *The Slipper and the Rose* (1976), she is a skilled enchantress, but her powers are limited, thereby stifling the Mother Goddess’s omnipotence. Such representations exacerbate the sense that she is manipulating nature. Yet in the films of Méliès and Kirkwood, as well as in the 1947 USSR production, *Zolushka*, the fairy godmother is serene and elegant. Kirkwood’s fairy godmother even wears Grecian-style clothing, which gives her a goddess-like presence. In these films, she does not have to wrestle with nature. The animals and vegetation obey her command, and their limited time in an altered state (they will change back at midnight) suggests that they are lending themselves to the ritual. As such, it truly is a case of transubstantiation that does not ruin the genuine article, and not a deformation of the natural order. Ultimately, regardless of whether she is portrayed as silly or majestic, she fulfills her mission of assisting in the ritual, and it is in that act that her core essence is evinced.

7. Ritual and Transformation

Before Ella comes down the steps in her mother’s dress, the fairy godmother is already in the garden, waiting. She does not announce herself until after Ella’s prayer, and then she does not reveal herself until Ella has passed a test. Though Ella has just told her mother that she cannot continue to have courage and be kind, she immediately sets aside her sorrows and responds to the needs of this stranger, thereby exhibiting both courage and kindness. Beginning with this moment, Ella’s identity is clarified through this divine interaction. Such revelation is the purpose of the rite. The pinnacle of the Cinderella moment.

The moment of transformation takes place in the middle of the film, so not only is it thematically the fulcrum, but formally as well. Everything that comes before leads up to this moment, and everything that follows is a result of it. The film takes advantage of the liberties offered by CGI to relish in Ella’s transformation (Figure 4). Jack Zipes says there is a tendency in fairy-tale films to turn the tale into “melodramatic spectacle for spectacle’s sake,” but here the spectacle is used in support of the story and its themes (185). Just before the fairy godmother waves her wand to incite the

transformation, Ella asks her not to make a wholly new dress. Instead she wants her mother's dress to remain intact so she can feel her mother with her. The fairy godmother concedes, but she does more than simply repair it. The changing of the dress from the mother's pink to Ella's blue, signifies Ella's individuation. But just as each of the other transformed objects maintains a glimmer of their former selves, the dress remembers the old in its new construction. In like manner, Ella, though coming into her own personal identity, is still a vestige of her parents. Butterflies fly around Cinderella as she experiences her becoming, finally settling on her dress and slippers. As creatures who begin as one thing and end as another, their presence intimates that this moment in the garden with her fairy godmother is more than a make-over. She is transforming into her truest self. It is not simply a matter of an already-present internal goodness being reflected visually, but of the changes and development that begin at her very center expanding outward to reveal themselves externally. Though Maggi argues that there is no real "Cinderella moment," I argue that this is it (155).

After the Cinderella moment, Ella learns to stand up to her stepmother, and equally importantly she learns that doing so is in keeping with the promise she made to her mother. In some ways, Cinderella's promise led to her submitting to mistreatment. In seeking to be kind, she unconsciously follows the adage "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." She perceives her choice as consisting of two options: silent submission, or a form of retaliation that would sever her promise, thus weakening this tie that binds her to her deceased mother. But after she has gone through her ritual transformation, she becomes individuated, distinct from her mother. Irigaray stipulates that "the bond between mother and daughter, daughter and mother, has to be broken for the daughter to become a woman" (92). In Cinderella's case, this break does not come with her mother's death, but with her transformation and the consequential re-interpretation of the promise. Afterward, she stands up to her stepmother, learning a kind of courage that she lacked before, which carries kindness in her honesty and her willingness and power to forgive her trespassers. This reconnects her to her mother, which is the necessary follow-up to the initial break since "without a vertical dimension [female genealogy]...a loving ethical order cannot take place among women" (92).

8. The Veiled Goddess

In *Cinderella*, the feminine divine manifests as a woman with magical powers. She announces herself as the person of whom Ella's mother had spoken—her fairy godmother—not a figure talked about as a story for children, but an actual being who has been Ella's steward. In a grand display she transforms from a haggard beggar to a glorious enchantress. But like the Divine Mother herself, the presence of the feminine divine in Cinderella tales is sometimes much more understated. In *The Glass Slipper*, there is no majestic apparition, no "here am I." Instead the fairy godmother appears to Ella as an ordinary woman—Mrs. Toquet.

Mrs. Toquet's choice to keep her identity veiled is never explained, and for a portion of the film, the audience is led to believe, like Ella, that Mrs. Toquet possesses

no magical power. All through the film, the audience is made to understand that Mrs. Toquet is “borrowing” the dress, the coach, the slippers. Not only does she not try to prevent this belief, she encourages it. She tells Cinderella that she has to leave at midnight so the coachman can return to the palace on time to pick up his clients at one. But in a short and simple shot, that paradigm is unraveled. On the last stroke of midnight, the coach tips. Cinderella lies unconscious in the hay, back in her rags, and the camera pans left to reveal a pumpkin and mice next to her. When Cinderella wakes up she is in her own bed, and Mrs. Toquet, who is sitting beside her, reinforces the “logical” explanation. Only she and the spectator know the truth.

At the end of the *The Glass Slipper*, without ever revealing her divine identity, the fairy godmother goes back to where she came from. Through a dissolve, her body disappears into the macrocosm. The audience is never told where her place of origin is, only that she was a temporary visitor. She came to assist Cinderella in her ritual, and once her task was accomplished, she moved on. A detail from the film *Aschenputtel* helps to illuminate this moment in *The Glass Slipper*. In *Aschenputtel*, the fairy godmother uses magic to put Aschnputtel’s dress on the first time, but the second time, Aschenputtel puts it on herself. This subtle difference evinces that as Cinderella grows in prominence, the goddess retreats. This is not a case of one being made more important than the other—the goddess does not lose any of her glory in this process. What is happening instead, is that Cinderella is developing as an agent and increasing in glory—becoming a goddess in her own right.

9. The Revealed Goddess

In G. Ronald Murphey’s Christian reading of the Grimms’ *Cinderella*, he understands the tale to be an allegory in which the prince represents Christ as the bridegroom (111). Consequently, Cinderella’s marriage to him and move into the palace become a symbol of her entrance into Heaven. *The Glass Slipper* emphasizes that the palace is a place she is destined for, and Ella clings to the prophecy. However, her vision does not extend beyond the palace. She knows she is meant to live there one day, but as her day-dream sequences suggest, she does not know to what end she is going there. This is another point where the tale diverges from orthodox Christianity, wherein entrance into Heaven *is* the end. It is significant that Ella considered the palace as an end also, until her fairy godmother, Mrs. Toquet, plants in Ella’s mind the question of what she will do when she gets to the palace. She imagines herself seated on a large throne. The mise-en-scène is sparse. The walls are blank, and there is nothing and no one around the throne. Suddenly to be there is not enough. She needs a purpose, a role (Figure 5).

The rite experienced during the Cinderella moment is propelling Cinderella forward to something much more grand and important. It is not just necessary in order to get her to the palace, but it is also a preparatory ritual for the crowning rite that comes with her marriage to the prince. Since both of the divinely powerful female figures hold the name “mother,” and like begets like, there is an implication that what they are is what Cinderella, herself, both is and will become. Thus the communion of

saints that Murphey identifies is not simply a means of other-worldly aid in entering the Kingdom as he suggests, but, perhaps more importantly, it is a pattern of women helping one another in a process of divine becoming. As Cinderella's true identity is revealed, first through the Cinderella moment, and later through her marriage, she experiences apotheosis.

Since one of the leading critiques of Cinderella is her perceived reliance on a man in order to ascend from obscurity, the circumstances of this latter transformation require some attention. The key here is to recognize that being assisted by or united with another individual does not necessarily diminish Cinderella's character or agency. To the contrary, the tale teaches that there is strength, not weakness, in community. As has been mentioned, many Cinderella films notably diffuse the tendency to look at women and men hierarchically. This is done both through revision of the father as well as through the development of the prince's character (particularly beginning with films made in the second half of the twentieth century). By giving more dimensionality to the prince, Cinderella also gains more dimension (and vice versa). Since this is not the prince's story, his own path to apotheosis is not as clear, and it may be tempting to assume that he is already in an exalted state. Some films, however, indicate that, though he lives in the palace (the allegorical Heaven), the prince is also still in a development process. The princes in *Three Wishes for Cinderella*, *The Slipper and the Rose*, and *Ever After*, in particular, are presented as overcoming their adolescence *through* their association with Cinderella. The result is that the prince and Cinderella become partners in assisting one another's progression. Irigaray stipulates that "man and woman must help one another in their spiritual development, without diminishing the singularity of each one" (*Key Writings* 157). So not only is such mutual beneficence possible, it is necessary and does not come at the expense of personal identity.

The pattern of Cinderella's progression beginning first within her female community, and then culminating in her matrimony, at which point she reaches the apex of her becoming, reflects the Irigarayan principle that love of the same precedes love of the other, and ultimately that love of the other propels both parties into divine transformation. Bruno Bettelheim compares Cinderella's years of servitude with the ancient honor of the Vestal Virgin, who looks over the hearth and serves the mother goddess. He observes that "with the change to a father god, the old maternal deities were degraded and devalued, as was a place close to the hearth. In this sense, Cinderella might also be viewed as the degraded mother goddess who at the end of the story is reborn out of the ashes, like the mythical bird phoenix" (255). He thus presents two readings of the text: Cinderella as Vestal Virgin serving the mother goddess *or* Cinderella as mother goddess herself. I propose that rather than reading the story as having two possible interpretations, it is better read as a progression. Cinderella begins as the virgin and later transforms into the goddess.

The Glass Slipper appropriately ends in the forest glade, where Cinderella first met the Mother Goddess, and also where she met the prince. In this version, he does not search the whole Kingdom for a girl he does not know how to find. Instead, he

looks for her in a particular place—their shared forest glade, where they have equal footing. Here, her transformation is completed as royal robes are placed on her shoulders—a mantle of her divine glory.

10. Conclusion

Every Cinderella film but one ends with the shared apotheosis of Cinderella and the Prince. The anomaly is *Zolushka*, which uniquely looks forward with a monologue by the old king, who tells the audience that Zolushka gives birth to a daughter, thus continuing the matrilineal line, and confirming that she has become a creatress of humanity both physically and spiritually. Divinity has been and will be passed from mother to daughter through the placement of the celestial crown by one generation onto the head of another.

Of course no Cinderella story is holistically representative of positive female-to-female relationships, the divine feminine, matrilineal connection, and female spiritual development. As is to be expected, each telling emphasizes different elements in different ways—some elements are excluded while others are included or new ones are added from version to version. And, like any story, this fairy tale is subject to human frailty, prejudice, and egocentrism. The imperfection of the storyteller is manifest in these tales. How does a mortal tell a story about what it means to become divine, especially if she does not see it as such? What is remarkable about Cinderella is that despite these varied influences, the themes of female power and spirituality emerging from female communities is largely consistent across classical tellings, particularly within cinema.

Choosing to focus on this common element over potentially contradictory minutia may be a form of what Maggi calls “contemporary readers of folk and fairy tales find[ing] in ancient versions what they wish to find—that is, the confirmation that ‘our’ Cinderella is an improved version of the ninth-century Chinese or seventeenth-century Neapolitan one—and discard the ‘dross’ of the tale” (160). He resists the impulse to turn Cinderella into something singular, and instead espouses an approach to fairy tales which welcomes the variety among tales of the same type. But while the variations are important, the elements that are most often repeated are more so. This is not referring to motifs of lost shoes or balls, but to relationships and personal development—the way the story draws together micro- and macrocosmic nature and foregrounds female spirituality.

Contrary to Maggi’s skepticism, I argue that there *is* dross to be found amid the hundreds of versions of Cinderella. It is a natural consequence of the struggle of the finite mind to comprehend all that the story has to offer. In his novel *Perelandra*, C.S. Lewis says, “Our mythology is based on a solider reality than we dream: but it is also at an almost infinite distance from that base. [This is] why mythology [is] what it [is]—gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility” (231-32). A woman’s divine becoming is the celestial strength and beauty of the Cinderella tale. There is something about it that feels eternal, something in how long it has lasted, and the way that it keeps drawing us back.

Irigaray declares that “[w]ithout rites and myths to teach us to love other women, to live with them, mutual destruction is a permanent possibility” (“Women-Amongst-Themselves” 192). A numinous and female reading of Cinderella allows it to function as such a myth. But as forty years of scholarship demonstrate, this is not a given. Cinderella’s potential as a myth that teaches women to love one another and help each other seek out the Mother Goddess and become “heirs of the kingdom,” is dependent on a pro-female allegorical reading of the story (Jas. 2:5). Since the films are not overt in their spiritual declarations, it becomes the task of the audience to extract these messages and teach them to one another. In this way, the positive female-to-female community established in the film is transmitted to the viewer. The wand (so to speak) is passed to us and we become helpers and participants in one another’s Cinderella moments.

FIGURES



Figure 1: (Left) Ella struggles to fit into the masculine city space. (Right) Ella finds community as she talks to Mrs. Toquet in the Forest (*The Glass Slipper* 1955).



Figure 2: Ella is isolated from the group (*The Glass Slipper* 1955).



Figure 3: Ella kneels at the trellis as she speaks to her deceased mother (Cinderella2015).

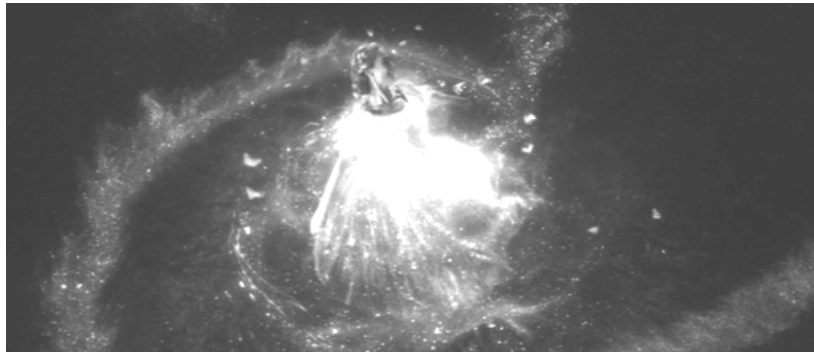


Figure4: Ella's dress changes from pink to blue(Cinderella2015)



Figure 5: Ella imagines herself at the palace(The Glass Slipper2015).

Note

1. This is an abbreviation of the author's master's dissertation at King's College London entitled "Transformations on the Silver Screen: Re-Imagining Cinderella as a Numinous Myth that Advocates Female Individuation and Spiritual Development."

Filmography

Cendrillon (Georges Méliès, Star-Film, 1899)
Cendrillon (Georges Méliès, Star-Film, 1912)
Cinderella (James Kirkwood, Famous Players Film Company, 1914)
Zolushka (Nadezhda Kosheverova and Mikhail Shapiro, Lenfilm Studio, 1947)
The Glass Slipper (Charles Walters, MGM, 1955)
Aschenputtel (Fritz Genschow, Fritz Genschow Films, 1955)
Three Wishes for Cinderella (Václav Vorlíček, DEFA and Filmové Studio Barrandov, 1973)
The Slipper and the Rose (Bryan Forbes, Paradine Co-Productions, 1976)
Ever After (Andy Tennant, Twentieth Century Fox, 1997)
Into the Woods (Rob Marshall, Disney, 2014)
Cinderella (Kenneth Branagh, Disney, 2015)

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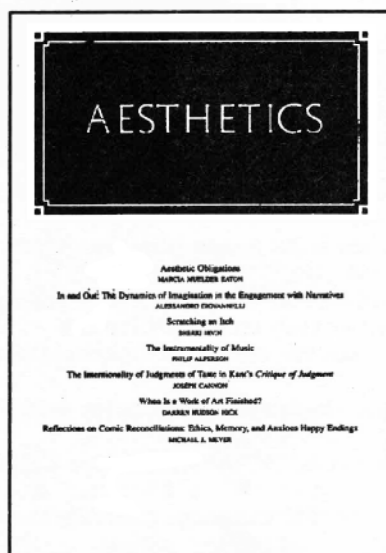
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13. Thomas Allmer, *Critical Theory and Social Media Between Emanicipation and Commodification*, London, Routledge, 2015, pp.213.
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Journals Received

1. *New Literary History*, Vol.48, No.2, Spring 2017; Vol.48, No.3, Summer 2017.
2. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol.74, No.3, Summer 2016; Vol.74, No.4, Fall 2016; Vol.74, No.2, Spring 2016.
3. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol.57, No.2, April 2017.
4. *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol.40, No.2, October 2016; Vol.41, No.1, April 2017; Vol.41, No.1A, July 2017.
5. *Comparative Literature*, Vol.68, No.1, December 2016; Vol.68, No.4, December 2016; Vol.69, No.3, September 2017; Vol.69, No.4, December 2017.
6. *Poetics Today*, Vol.38, No.3, September 2017; Vol.38, No.4, December 2017.

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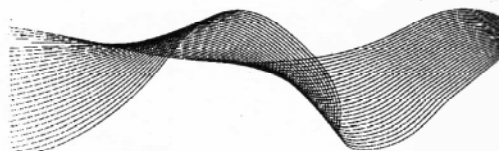
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