

Brill's Companion to the Reception of Classics in International Modernism and the Avant-Garde

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The Wisdom of Myth: Eliot's "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth"

James Nikopoulos

No examination of the reception of the Greek and Roman classics by literary modernism can ignore T. S. Eliot's 1923 review, "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth." Its famous declaration that Joyce's novel utilizes the story of the *Odyssey* as a means of giving order to "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history" has been the starting point for discussions, not just of the classical legacy in early twentieth century literature, but for discussions of modernism as a whole.¹ Eliot's essay not only conditioned how we think of such paradigmatic modernist texts as *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*; it conditioned how we think of modernity, of myth, and of the ever-expanding reasons for why the two should ever have been paired together in the first place. It begs asking why.

"*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth" is one of Eliot's most anthologized works of prose, and for many years, it was the most influential response to *Ulysses*.² Most if not all examinations of Joyce's novel are in some way a response to it. Perhaps this does not seem surprising, even if most critics today assert that the "mythical method" Eliot describes pertains more to his own work in *The Waste Land* than to anything Joyce had ever written. In a letter addressed to the editor of *The Dial* one month after "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth" appeared, Eliot himself said that the piece was nothing to be proud of.³ To what then can we ascribe the enduring influence of such lamentable prose?

While the answer has to do, in part, with the fame of both the author and the subject of the review, we should not discount the essay's pithy wisdom either. For Eliot provides us with perhaps the most succinct description of the stereotypical idea of modernism's historical context: an "immense panorama of futility and anarchy." In doing so, the essay has helped to define an important organizing principle of the modernist era for critics. As inherently unclassifiable as modernist literature is, at the very least, we can make some sense

1 Eliot (1975), 177.

2 See Von Hendy (2001), 146.

3 Eliot and Haughton (2011), 289.

of it as a whole if we consider it to be the response to a period of history that seems to resist definitions.

In describing his times as futile and anarchic, Eliot essentially turns disorder into an organizing principle for an entire period of history. More specifically, disorder becomes the dominant aspect of contemporary history that modernism must respond to. Granted, Eliot was not the first person to have conceived of his times as chaotic. His originality lies, not so much in his assessment of the historical moment, but in his conception of the form of order he believes to be capable of counteracting the disorder of this moment. In labeling Joyce's Odyssean parallel a "mythical method," and in praising its ability to construct order out of disorder, Eliot transforms myth such that it becomes not just another literary device at an author's disposal but the personification of a series of values that directly apply to the modernist period overall.

That disorder should prove relevant to modernism comes as no surprise. For one, related terms like anarchy and chaos occupy prominent positions in the critical literature, including in Eliot's essay. To think of the present moment as "futile" and "anarchic" is not to think of it as an ordered stage in world history. The legacy of those first twenty years of the twentieth century, the culmination of which was the most destructive war in history, has permanently colored the modernist period with the hue of chaotic disorder. But it is not just about history. It is also about form. To many of the early reviewers of modernist literature, including to other modernist authors – Virginia Woolf comes to mind –, modernist literature seemed just as anarchic as the world it had sprung from. Early reviews of *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* are testament to this.⁴

"*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth" does more than simply reiterate that a dominant principle of the modernist world and its works of art was disorder, and with it chaos and anarchy. It turns this disorder into the organizing principle that all subsequent works of literature must follow:

In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him [. . .] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering,

4 Eliot addresses some of these reviews in his essay. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf likens Joyce's attempts to rethink the novel form as the "calculated indecency of a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows" (756). She compares Joyce to Eliot, both of whom, she argues, have spent so much strength "on finding a way of telling the truth, [that] the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition" (757). Quoted from Woolf (2000).

of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.⁵

As Eliot writes, the mythical method is “a step toward making the modern world possible for art . . .”⁶ If the point of all this is to elaborate an aesthetic that is apposite to modernity, then modernity demands an aesthetic that creates a form of order – as all art requires – while simultaneously reflecting the disorder of the times. But how can such a method create order while dramatizing disorder? Writers have found many solutions to this problem which do not necessarily involve the classical heritage.⁷ Our concern here, though, is why myth should be involved in one of these methods. A multitude of explanations has emerged: myth is sacred, it is communal, it appeals to a common tradition through recognizable narrative tropes and character types. One could go on of course. For our purposes, though, the focus will be on how myth can be used to turn disorder into an ordering principle.

Which is not to say that the modernist “mythical method” succeeds at ordering the disorder of contemporary history. For one, there are numerous “mythical methods” to speak of, not just across the spectrum of modernist literature, but even across the careers of individual modernist authors. This essay assesses what Eliot says myth is capable of doing when placed within new, modern contexts. In this way can we gauge why myth could have become so relevant to modernist literature as a whole, and to the idea of the modern world in general, to which modernist literature contributed no small part.

Background

Eliot’s review first appeared in the November 1923 edition of *The Dial*. After having been serialized in *The Little Review* since 1918, *Ulysses* finally appeared in book form in February of 1922. *The Waste Land* was first published not long after in *The Criterion* on 16 October. Eliot was reading *Ulysses* bit-by-bit as he was working on his great poem of modern desolation. Much of what Eliot argues in “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth” finds its way into *The Waste Land*.

5 Eliot (1975), 177.

6 Eliot (1975), 178.

7 All the -isms of the avant-garde are attempts to do just this. From Symbolism to Dadaism to Soviet socialist realism, we find attempts at forming the literary arts into expressions of their particular context. Myth need not necessarily be a part of that.

Eliot thus had the question of how a work of art could maintain “a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” in mind long before he would formalize his ideas in his essay from 1923. Not only had he been reading *Ulysses* in serial form; not only had he been working on his own means of maintaining this parallel in *The Waste Land*, but he had the good fortune of experiencing the performance of such a parallel as part of an audience. In London in 1921 he saw a production of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. In a subsequent review, he praised the work for its “quality of modernity” and wrote of the music that it

did seem to transform the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life; and to transform these despairing noises into music.⁸

Eliot himself likens the “quality of modernity” that Stravinsky’s music possesses to *Ulysses*.⁹ While Eliot here does not speak of any ordering narrative, the way he does of Joyce’s novel, he does praise the *The Rite of Spring*’s ability to simultaneously evoke the modern and the archaic by grafting the “barbarity” of modern life onto the structured form of music. What is key for Eliot though, and what separates his idea of how modern life should be transformed into art from what an avant-garde movement like Futurism has to say on the topic, is that the artwork does not just place the sounds of the modern city into a musical order, but that the music uses its ability to create order in such a way that it brings out the affinity between modern cacophony and archaic primitivism. “Antiquity” thus comes across as part and parcel of the experience of “contemporaneity.”

If the rhythm of the steppes has as much to do with the roar of the underground railway as the peregrinations of Odysseus do with the meanderings of a Dublin Jew in 1904 – or the plight of Procne and Philomela does with a London barmaid for that matter – then this can only be because there is something about these earlier, more “primitive” experiences and stories, that remains within our own contemporary experience of the world. It is more than just literary reference – at least, this is what Eliot will go on to argue in his review.

But why should these examples of mythic allusion differ from what came a century earlier? Why does myth function differently in, say, Tennyson than it

⁸ Eliot (2014), 370.

⁹ Eliot (2014), 369.

does in Yeats? In part, as Eliot himself says, it has to do with what happened in the fields of anthropology and psychology by the time we get to 1923. That Eliot was influenced by these fields is well known. Any reader who peruses *The Waste Land's* notes finds Eliot's nod to Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" pays a similar tribute: "Psychology [...] ethnology, and *The Golden Bough*," Eliot writes, "have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago."¹⁰ Thus, when we speak of the background to Eliot's ideas on the mythical method, we are speaking to an interest in myth that is at least as indebted to anthropology as it is to modernist reception.

I will have more to say on anthropology's influence on Eliot's ideas a little bit later. For now, I merely want to acknowledge its influence as we move on to a preliminary question. We know that Eliot considered the fields of psychology and anthropology to have made myth into an acceptable "method" for modern art. But what remains to be seen is why myth should be not just acceptable as a method, but "necessary."

Why Does Modernity Demand a 'Mythical' Method?

Many have argued that the various mythical methods of Eliot, Joyce and others were part of how modernism responded to its artistic forebears and historical moment. Pericles Lewis writes that a "reliance on myth" was one of the many formal innovations, such as stream of consciousness and poetic prose, that modernists used as a means of revitalizing the novel form.¹¹ This was, he argues, one way of reacting to nineteenth-century realism and naturalism. Jonathan Greenberg, meanwhile, echoes those critics who see the mythical method as a reaction against the anarchy of Futurism and other radical breaks in artistic form enacted by such figures as F. T. Marinetti, Wyndham Lewis, and even Ezra Pound.¹² Others, such as Theodore Ziolkowski, point to the need in the early 1920s for something reassuring and familiar. As he writes: "The revitalized turn to antiquity in the early twentieth century can be attributed directly to the fears preceding and subsequent effects of World War I, which generated an urgent search for principles of order to compensate for the chaos of the immediate pre- and postwar years."¹³ Thus, we have three ideas, which are not

¹⁰ Eliot (1975), 178.

¹¹ Lewis (2004), 4.

¹² Greenberg (2011), 42.

¹³ Ziolkowski (2008), 18.

necessarily mutually exclusive: myth as a means of 1) breaking away from literary predecessors 2) hedging on the more radical breaks made by other modernists, and 3) shoring up the fragments of a world falling away into chaos.

All of these ideas are plausible, even if there are objections to be had with each.¹⁴ What is certain, though, is that those who turned to myth did so as part of a perceived necessity. Modernism did not merely want to do something differently but believed that its historical circumstances demanded that things be done differently. We see this sentiment canonically expressed as far afield as Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto in 1909 and Eliot's comments in his review of *Ulysses*. Eliot had said something similar two years prior in his essay on the Metaphysical Poets:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results.¹⁵

Virginia Woolf's "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," which she wrote in 1919 and delivered in 1924, presents perhaps the most canonical modernist take on this idea of necessity: "On or about December 1910 human character changed," she says.¹⁶ As a result, literature too must change. How so exactly? That depends on who is writing. Woolf's ideas are not Joyce's (after all, she called *Ulysses* "indecent").¹⁷ What is certain though, is that there is something about the contemporary moment that makes it more complex, more anarchic, and as a result, more disquieting than what came before. As we have seen, the catch word used to describe both the times and the literature that sought to reflect these times is oftentimes pretty straightforward: chaos.

"*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*", in fact, begins by referring to what earlier reviewers saw as the essentially "chaotic" nature of Joyce's novel. Note, though, that Eliot's review does not argue against this early criticism, at least not directly.

14 Ziolkowski himself acknowledges that the turn to myth seems counterintuitive considering that World War I exposed the extent to which the old guard of elites, who had been reared on the Greek and Roman classics, had directly marched the world to its ruin. (2008), 19.

Terry Eagleton, meanwhile, has argued that "the modernists' preoccupation with an ancient and underlying structure is at odds with their fascination with the chaos of a rapidly changing world." Quoted from Zajko (2004), 315.

15 Eliot (1975), 65.

16 Woolf (2000), 746.

17 Woolf (2000), 756.

He begins his essay as a response to Richard Aldington's recent review, which Eliot says "treated Mr. Joyce as a prophet of chaos" a charge which was not new.¹⁸ Valéry Larbaud's influential early review of *Ulysses* stresses the "structure" of the novel in part as a direct response to an earlier piece by Holbrook Jackson, which unapologetically labels *Ulysses* "a chaos."¹⁹ Like Larbaud, Eliot feels the need to counter this accusation, but he does not directly refute it. As he says, if *Ulysses* comes across as "formless" then there is a good reason for that, and it has all to do with our expectations from a novel, not from any weakness in Joyce's work. Eliot writes that if *Ulysses* is "more formless" than the novels of "a dozen clever writers," it is because these other writers are unaware of the extent to which the traditional novel form has become "obsolete": "If [*Ulysses*] is not a novel, that is simply because the novel, instead of being a form, was simply the expression of an age which had not sufficiently lost all form to feel the need of something stricter."²⁰

Eliot does not directly counter Aldington's claim that Joyce is "a prophet of chaos," because what Eliot most objects to is not that Aldington calls the book chaotic but that he calls Joyce a "great undisciplined talent." Notice where Eliot places the emphasis. Eliot has no problem with this idea that the novel projects an idea of chaos. His problem is that others claim the book to be chaotic in its handling of the theme of chaos. For if the times are indeed chaotic, they demand that the modern writer project this chaos into his or her work. As Eliot says, in the creation of a work of art, "you are responsible for what you can do with material which you must simply accept."²¹

The novel, as it was then, says Eliot, died with Flaubert and James. This is because the forms that had been so relevant to their times no longer prove relevant to a civilization that comprehends such complexity and that is living through such anarchy. What we need is a new narrative method, says Eliot, or to put it differently, what we need is "myth": "Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward that order and form which Mr. Aldington so earnestly desires."²² Thus, the "mythical method" will make narrative art possible once again as a vehicle for depicting modernity. It is the form that depicts chaos without being overcome by it.

18 Eliot (1975), 175.

19 Slote (2009), 65.

20 Eliot (1975), 177.

21 Eliot (1975), 177.

22 Eliot (1975), 178.

The real question then is why myth. To fumble at some kind of answer, let us now take a look at what exactly is involved in a literary method that involves myth. Or to put it more precisely, let us examine what purpose myth can serve for a literary artist bent on depicting the futility and anarchy of contemporary history without falling prey to it.

What is This So-Called Mythical Method?

First and foremost, it is a means of establishing “order.” It does so by making spatial and temporal connections. Thus, the “method” functions in a manner not dissimilar to how allegory does (in a letter that preceded Eliot’s review by almost a year, Ezra Pound explicitly links Joyce’s methods in *Ulysses* to medieval allegory).²³ In allegory what is depicted is presented in a manner that links it to some pre-existing, known, structure. As a result a reader is forced to connect the wanderings of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus through Dublin to those of Odysseus and Telemachus across the Mediterranean. The simultaneity of this process is how order can be achieved. Or, as one critic puts it: “The mythical method solves the chaos-unity dilemma by allowing the co-existence of surface chaos and subsurface unity.”²⁴ The “surface chaos” is the depiction of chaotic modern life, while the “subsurface unity” is provided by the story of Odysseus. A “new” story about a couple of Dubliners thereby achieves “unity” through its connection to an identifiable story and its characters.²⁵

Of course, new questions arise. Unity with what exactly? To equate a contemporary narrative with a pre-existing one is not merely about unifying the contemporary story with its predecessor. It is about unifying the contemporary story with a certain set of values that its predecessor’s tale evokes. Greek myth occupies a foundational position in Western culture. Homer, in particular, is generally considered the starting point for narrative in the

23 See Pound (1985), 406.

24 Brooker (1989), 549.

25 The ability of the same mythic stories to apply across time periods and cultures is a topic that has found new vitality as of late through the work of evolutionary literary criticism. Lisa Zunshine seeks to account for this with a concept from cognitive evolutionary psychology and anthropology which recognizes our innate tendency to grant essences to things. Blakey Vermeule connects the portability of characters to the cognitive psychological concept of mind reading, while Brian Boyd refers to the way stories reinforce core values of groups.

See Zunshine (2008); as well as Vermeule (2010); and Boyd (2009).

Western world.²⁶ Therefore, the first value to speak of is quite simply that of prestige, and by this I mean a kind of literary prestige, what we could call an early form of cultural capital. From the *Aeneid* to the myriad medieval foundational romances associated with Troy on into the twentieth century, European and non-European literature alike have been connecting their own contemporary literatures to Homer's prestige. The particulars of this prestige and what it means to a contemporary writer's own work vary as one shifts contexts, and this is no different in modernism. Generally speaking though, we notice the ambivalent results of setting up a modern subject in connection with Homer. As William B. Worthen has noted, what happens is that the contemporary subject is simultaneously "dignified" and "diminished" through contrast, diminished in comparison with Homer, whose cultural significance was acquired over some three thousand years, and dignified because to set up such a contrast implies that the contemporary subject and its predecessor share a kind of symbolic structure.²⁷

Homer is doubly significant, though, because the *Odyssey* is both a classic of Western literature and a canonical version of a set of myths. The dignity of myth is part of Homeric literary prestige, but it brings with it a host of values that raises its significance beyond that of a literary classic. For as Rita Felski says, in perhaps the most succinct formulation of what myth does, "myth is culture masquerading as nature."²⁸

Which means that at one point in time a myth held a deeper – i.e., beyond just 'literary' or 'artistic' – significance to a certain community. Usually this significance is interpreted as religious, hence why many distinguish myth from fable by its early involvement with ritual. Myth though, is also remarkably fluid. The same myths transform as one traverses space and time. The result of this is that, as Dennis Donoghue writes, myth is a local truth that becomes perennial, eventually acquiring the status of wisdom.²⁹ Thus in pairing *Ulysses* with Bloom, the contemporary subject is forced into comparison with a series of values associated with literary prestige and mythic wisdom, the effect being a diminishing and a dignifying of the new in light of the old.

Pericles Lewis writes that the effect of these mythical patterns on the modernist text is to elevate the modern work's characters into figures of

26 As Harold Bloom famously said, "Everyone who now reads and writes in the West, of whatever racial background, sex or ideological camps, is still a son or daughter of Homer." See Bloom (1975), 33.

27 Worthen (1981), 173.

28 Felski (2009), 28.

29 Donoghue (1997), 214.

world-historical importance, in a way not dissimilar to what Dante does in *The Divine Comedy*.³⁰ Thus, the mythical method imbues the modern work with a set of values that traverse spatial boundaries, even as this work presents a narrative very much grounded in the particulars of the local, à la Joyce's Dublin. Likewise, the mythical method forces the contemporary subject into dialogue with its predecessor in a way that connects the presentness of the modernist text to the timelessness of the myth.³¹ The extent to which this method historicizes the myth depends upon whom you ask. There are those critics who argue that many modernists used myth as a means of evading secular time and history, while other critics say the opposite, and yet others delineate according to the author.³² David Spurr, for example, argues that Joyce's use of myth is historicized while Eliot's own methods place myth "apart from history."³³

One wonders how exactly a reliance on Homer then differs from a reliance on the Bible. In many ways it does not – in 1923, myth held a significance for Eliot that would later be filled by his reawakened Christianity. Yet, while both Western myth and the Judeo-Christian tradition are culturally significant to the West in a way that is both artistic and that goes beyond the aesthetic, the mythic tradition is by this point in Western history a secular one. Claudia Corti puts it nicely when she writes that myth survives as a type of value, a system recognized to all but no longer believed in.³⁴ As such, it seems particularly relevant to a world that has been "disenchanted of its gods," as Max Weber famously said of the period.³⁵

At the same time, to label the modernist period as secular has become something of a cliché, not to mention of an oversimplification. Scholars have begun to demonstrate just how relevant the Judeo-Christian heritage remained for many modernists.³⁶ Eliot represents perhaps the most obvious example of a writer for whom Christianity was most certainly not irrelevant to modernity.³⁷ At the same time, that myth could be flexible enough to appeal as much to a deeply observant Christian like Eliot as it did to writers who were decidedly

30 Lewis (2004), 49.

31 Preston has argued that Eliot's mythical method is merely a renaming of the "ancient and antimodern" practice of biblical typology. What Eliot was doing, she writes, falls within the tradition of early theologians, "who endorsed classical figures as typological prefigurations of Christian ideals." See Preston (2011), 16.

32 See Von Hendy (2001), 136.

33 Spurr (1994), 267.

34 Corti (1996), 148.

35 Kim, "Max Weber."

36 For example, see Lewis (2010).

37 See, for example, his most definitive statements on this subject: Eliot (1976).

less so, like Joyce, is testament to the tremendous flexibility of myth as a system of values.

I am using the term "flexibility" here in a particular way. For myth as a series of narratives has always been adaptable and open to modification. What I mean here has less to do with the structures of the stories and more to do with the values the modern idea of myth could summon. An educated European may have known Homer as well or (probably) better in 1800 than in 1900, but he or she certainly did not think of Homer in the same way. While theories and discoveries in the burgeoning fields of philology and archeology helped change how we think of the Homeric epics from a historical perspective, the even newer fields of anthropology and psychology began to affect our understanding of these epics from the perspective of myth. To call the *Odyssey* a set of myths meant something very different in 1923 than it did in 1823. In "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" Eliot writes that the field of psychology and works of anthropology like *The Golden Bough* "have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago."³⁸ Thus, if the mythical method is apposite to the modern experience, it is because of psychology and anthropology. Let us look at what these fields contributed to the modernist understanding of myth, at least, according to Eliot.

Anthropology and Psychology: Mythical Methods to be Emulated

Eliot's influences from anthropology are well documented, both by scholars and by Eliot, who pays tribute to Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* in the footnotes to *The Waste Land* and Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in both his poem's footnotes and the review of *Ulysses*. The work of Weston and Frazer, not to mention that of Jane Harrison, Franz Boas, Émile Durkheim, and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, among others, had been rapidly transforming ideas of myth by the time Eliot sat down to review Joyce's novel. Factor in Sigmund Freud's writings – the Oedipus Complex is introduced in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899; *Totem and Taboo* appears in 1913 – and only then does one realize the tremendous emphasis being placed on the topic by the social sciences in the fifty-odd years prior to Eliot's essay. The methodologies of these writers influenced Eliot's conception of myth, and in so doing, helped to impart a series of values on the idea of myth that was far less formalized before Frazer, Weston and their ilk. If the mythical method was not possible before these thinkers, it is because myth was not previously thought of in the same way.

³⁸ Eliot (1975), 178.

What Eliot had in mind when he conceived of his method was myth according to the methodology of Frazer and many of these early anthropologists. This methodology is quite simply one of comparison, “in which the myths and rituals of diverse peoples [...] are dramatically juxtaposed for the purposes of illustrating cultural similarities (and sometimes, cultural differences).”³⁹ In a sense then, the mythical method that simultaneously juggles contemporaneity and antiquity is really just the same methodology of cultural comparison that Frazer and others practiced, only translated anew for the purpose of revitalizing literary allusion. Frazer’s method was to seek out patterns across cultures and in so doing, force the myths of various communities into dialogue with each other. Frazer was also influenced by Charles Darwin. His work not only argues that cultures were linked through their early stories, but that these myths had evolved from primitive tales associated with rituals into more symbolic forms of narrative. Thus in juggling contemporaneity and antiquity with myth, a literary artist not only ties the contemporary subject to a mythic predecessor, but implies that the contemporary subject is part and parcel of a long trajectory of cultural evolution that connects the present moment to the entire prehistory of human storytelling.

Because of this, myth provides an author with a remarkably succinct means of imparting timeless and universal qualities upon his subject matter. However, it was not just about making connections across cultures in time; it was also about connecting the present moment to something buried below the strata of human consciousness, both on the cultural and the individual level. Which is why the other dominant value of myth that the social sciences promoted was one of recovery. If mythology dramatizes an aspect of life that is more universal, then this can only be because it seeks to get at a level of culture that is deeper.⁴⁰ It was Freud who made famous the idea that myths adumbrate society’s collective unconscious, that like our dreams, they are symbolic narratives that offer clues to our hidden pasts. But he was not alone in pressing this point. Lévy-Bruhl, whom Eliot read in 1914 while at Harvard, argued that myth was a “repressed element of modern consciousness.”⁴¹ To get at myth was thus to recover something long since hidden, both within ourselves and within our communities. Eliot says something similar when he writes that *The Golden Bough* can be read as an entertaining collection of myths, “or as a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation.”⁴²

39 Manganaro (2009), 81.

40 See Donoghue (1997), 209.

41 Spurr (1994), 270.

42 Eliot (2014), 370.

If myth is therefore something that moves across time from community-to-community, transforming and being transformed initially as a primitive element of human culture, then it is by definition an inchoate phenomenon. It speaks to the fluid nature of cultural and individual formation.⁴³ As such, myth is never complete. Even if it represents something fundamental about human identity that does not change drastically. One of the most popular ideas about myth for modernism was that it allows modern man to maintain a rapport with the “primitive” and/or “savage” within himself and within his culture. Recall that Eliot expresses a similar idea in his review of *The Rite of Spring* back in 1921. While the narrative of a myth may alter, its significance as a primordial aspect of human identity that is universal, despite its particularities, remains stable.

Now, primitivism per se, i.e., the ascribing of positive value on what is deemed archaic and thus less ‘civilized’ and less ‘rational,’ was not something Eliot promoted. One sees this sentiment advanced more by a D. H. Lawrence, which is part of the reason why isolating a single “mythical method” that applies across the board to modernism is so problematic. However, while Eliot may never have been a primitivist, the value of myth as a lens through which to tap into the primitive is something Eliot is citing when he speaks of ethnology and *The Golden Bough* making the modern world possible for art. Which is why primitivism is not one of the values that make Eliot’s mythical method valid for modernity, even if it is a consequence of the value of recovery, which is essential to Eliot’s idea of the mythical method.

The problem with recovery is that it is essentially backwards-looking. For a literature bent on “making it new,” as Ezra Pound famously said, what value does the recovery of the hidden past hold? Here an understanding of the difference between the kind of anthropology practiced by a Frazer and the kind practiced by a Weston proves useful. As Andrew Von Hendy discusses, modernism oftentimes misconstrued *The Golden Bough’s* message, which was not to celebrate the savage underpinnings of human culture but to laud civilization’s evolution out of magic and superstition and into the light of science and reason.⁴⁴ Too often Frazer’s work was grouped in with the likes of Weston, for whom the primitive vestiges of culture were a cause for celebration. If Frazer was a child of the Enlightenment who lamented the enduring influence of religion, then Weston was a spiritualist and a mystic.⁴⁵ Eliot himself paired these

43 This then contradicts Eagleton’s argument. See note 13 above.

44 Von Hendy (2001), 135.

45 Coyle (2009), 161.

two up in his notes to *The Waste Land*, but as Michael Coyle aptly puts it, in doing so, Eliot's poem suggests "that what defines modernism is the tension between Frazer's and Weston's positions."⁴⁶

The mythical method asserts that the primordial past is worthy of recovery, even if it does not legislate why that is. To a primitivist, this past represents something vital and positive that has been eroded over time by the "civilizing" bulldozer of modernity. To those less enamored with the "savage" in our collective unconscious, the recovery of myth is more about dramatizing the simultaneity of varying times and cultures through symbolic structures. Either way, myth appeals to a set of values that places it above the merely literary. Sacred to some and passé to others, myth cannot help but call to mind the continuum of human culture across communities and centuries. At least, it cannot help but do so now that the likes of a Frazer and a Weston have come along. So says Eliot.

With myth, then, we come as close as possible to juggling the urge to "make it new" with the necessity to ground one's literature in tradition. That myth can perform such an unwieldy task for a writer has to do with its nature as something fully formed and yet perpetually being reformed. It juggles between the present and the past, the local and the universal, because it is always reaching beyond itself. As it harks back to the primitive, it points forward in time to the long process of evolution and adaptation it has undergone. As it comments on specific cultures and communities, it simultaneously highlights structural similarities that tie it to "similar" myths in other cultures. Likewise, as it presents itself as a system of secularized symbolic narratives, it reminds us that the secular and the sacred are fluid concepts.

If myth achieves a kind of wisdom, it is because wisdom is a kind of knowledge that relies on belief. As such, it is the kind of knowledge that is incomplete and that depends on its incompleteness to maintain its identity. For wisdom that no longer needs that leap into the dark crosses the border into knowledge, and loses that mystic quality that defines it as something beyond the completely knowable. What underlies the relevance of the mythical method to modernity has to do with this, with the notion that myth is a kind of story that becomes wisdom, and thus, depends on incomplete knowledge. In this sense too can we think of myth as perpetually inchoate, and happily so.

46 Coyle (2009).

The Incomplete Knowledge of Myth

The concept of myth as a form of incomplete knowledge is also evident in another modernist work, though one that relies on a different mythical method: Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912). The novella concerns a famous author named Gustav von Aschenbach who embarks on a holiday to Italy, where he encounters a Polish teenager named Tadzio. Aschenbach's early fascination with the boy's beauty soon gives way to obsession, to the point that Tadzio becomes a kind of idol for the German writer, an image of perfection. As an idol, Tadzio comes to take on Platonic ideals of beauty; he becomes a work of art, and his status in Mann's work is constantly balancing between that of mortal and god, reliant as much on the momentary nature of the boy's youthful charms as on the mythic quality of artistic beauty that transgresses death. Watching him from afar, as he does, Aschenbach compares the object of his veneration to Hyacinth, the beloved boy Apollo accidentally killed and then immortalized with the eponymous flower that sprang from his blood.

Just after Aschenbach makes this comparison, he proceeds to expatiate on the relationships of those who only know each other as strangers – Aschenbach spends most of the story admiring the boy's image from a comfortable distance. "Nothing is more bizarre," he says, than such a relationship. The participants feel something akin to "hysteria" as a result of their never being fully satisfied, even if "a tense mutual esteem" forms the basis of their connection: "For people love and honor someone as long as they cannot judge him, and yearning is a product of incomplete knowledge."⁴⁷

This passage equates myth with the reverence we have for those we admire from afar. For to mythologize someone is, in a sense, to rest content with knowing that person with the eyes alone. In a sense that, to know something as mythic, whether it is a person you desire or a story a community tells itself, is to take something out of the realm of the knowable. To mythologize is to force a permanent distance. Likewise, to participate in the dissemination of myth is to perpetuate the valorization of distance in storytelling. What one is dealing with is a desired impossibility, the impossibility that presents itself as aesthetic. As such, it is not static. It can adapt and change and be reinterpreted, but it can never be grasped.

The question that arises then is why this should be so pertinent to modernism? Or to put it another way, why does this aspect of myth-making, which is not exclusive to modernist aesthetics, make art "possible" in the modern

⁴⁷ Mann (1998), 339.

world? I believe we can get at an answer by considering the irony that arises from considering myth along the lines of incomplete knowledge.

“Irony,” because Eliot describes the “mythical method” as a quasi scientific means of establishing order. He writes that those who employ this method “will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations.”⁴⁸ Never mind that the comparison is not apt. The point is not that Eliot’s method is a science exactly, but that the method participates in the spread of knowledge by disseminating that which is perpetually being verified by posterity. If another writer who uses the “mythical method” is not imitating Joyce, it is because the method makes use of an understanding of myth, to which Joyce never enjoyed the exclusive rights. In a similar way, a physicist’s work with the theory of general relativity dovetails off of a discovery Einstein elaborated, not off a creation he invented.

That such a comparison is at all not laughable has to do with the way the new social sciences were verifying supposed “truths” about the relationship of myth to culture. The irony of this is that any phenomenon that requires incomplete knowledge comes across as inherently un-scientific in nature, which is not to say anything controversial. After all, this was basically what the Enlightenment had to say about myth. Romanticism then fired back in objection, helping to rehabilitate the dignity of myth, hence why modernism’s positive appraisal of myth oftentimes seems like a reworking of the Romantic legacy. What then should we make of modernism’s well known embrace of both myth and science, since one could argue plausibly that the mythical legacy had as much an influence on modernist literature as did the emergence of new technologies and advances in such fields as physics and evolutionary theory?⁴⁹

Though even an interest in myth speaks to an interest in science. For Eliot, the “mythical method” is valid because of the new social sciences. To think of pre-modern storytelling as the evolution of ancient fertility rites is to imbue aspects of human experience with a kind of scientific formality. Another way of putting it is that the values Eliot seeks to connect to his mythical method are not divorced from scientific values, foremost among them being the confidence that one can get to know phenomena by studying their

48 Eliot (1975), 177.

49 The extent to which science and technology have been singled out for their influence on modernism can be gleaned by a quick glance at the many works on the subject. Recent examples include Henderson (2007) and Albright (2006).

component parts.⁵⁰ According to Eliot, the mythical method relates to science because its primary virtue is that it organizes the component parts of cultural history. Myth organizes the origins of human culture into recognizable narrative forms. As such, it provides a literary artist with the means by which to get at the macrocosm through the microscopic. This is especially important for a modernist, whose anarchic times threaten to sabotage his stories with unredeemable chaos. Myth allows a modernist to dramatize the essential of contemporary history by revealing to readers what is happening on the atomic level of daily experience. For a writer like Joyce working on a novel like *Ulysses*, which attempted to get as close as any work ever had to the minutiae of experience, this is no small tool with which to labor.

If myth can serve to organize the chaos of experience it is because it remains recognizable on the macrocosmic level despite the fact that the microcosmic details of the story change and grow as one moves from context to context. As Han Blumenberg has put it, myths are distinguished “by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and by an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation.”⁵¹ But it is more than about recognizing a basic story or character type. Though a myth may alter over time and across communities, its overarching values of transcendence and impermanence rest stable. Because it advertises its incompleteness, myth presents itself as perpetually open to revision when change is necessary. This is perhaps the core value of mythic structure, and it is a value we can connect to the scientific principle of peer review, the major difference being the extent to which old ideas quickly become obsolete when advances in science emerge. In myth, the new builds off the old without extinguishing it. The microcosmic elements grow and adapt to a changing world, which is nonetheless dramatized by a larger mythic narrative whose basic storyline is made to comment on the present through slight alterations in its details.

Myth advertise its incompleteness by promoting itself as wisdom, not as dogma or law.⁵² In this way can the mythical method be an artistic

50 The rise of a science of myth in the nineteenth century turned myth into a descriptive phenomenon that could also be reductive. Anthropology sought to describe the various myths around the world and, in the process, explain them (reduce them to certain principles, practices, tropes), while simultaneously using them to explain aspects of primitive culture (such as religious practices).

For a related discussion see Kennedy’s analysis of mythos and logos (2006), 252.

51 Blumenberg (1985), 34.

52 Bell: “For modernist mythopoeia is a way of combining radical relativity with the apodictic nature of conviction.” (1997), 4. Bell argues that modernist myth-making allows

“scientific” method that nonetheless refuses to become natural or social law. As Blumenberg says, “myths are not ‘holy texts,’ which cannot be altered by one iota.”⁵³ Not that Judeo-Christian narratives have never been altered for the sake of aesthetics. But when an artist modifies the story of Adam and Eve, it is not the same as modifying the story of Prometheus. To modify the former is to alter what has always been perceived as essential to the story. To modify the latter is to participate in what has always been deemed essential to that story: adaptation being part and parcel of what makes myth so relevant across space and time.⁵⁴ Art does not tolerate rigid formalities for long, especially if the movement indoctrinating these structures is one that defines itself in part according to its rejection of previous rules.

But how does this tie in with disorder? Which is another way of reiterating our problem: Why is myth particularly relevant to modernism?

Transcendence and impermanence contradict each other. To transcend means to be above and beyond the reach of that which is impermanent. Myth is an interesting animal in that it retains both traits. It transcends the community it arose from by being fundamentally amenable to change. As such it creates order out of the disorderly passing of time. It provides a structure upon which culture constructs its narratives. Change need not be conceived of as disorderly. After all, the dominant European narrative up to the twentieth century was one of progress towards Enlightenment – as *The Golden Bough* asserts. But in the modernist period, as this narrative started to be challenged, in particular as a result of the devastation of World War I, change starts to seem much less orderly. The result is that the present moment seems a chaos, a “difficult” place where futility seems to reign where progress once did. Is this an oversimplification? Of course it is. But then Eliot’s comment on the “panorama of futility and anarchy” is one of the most famous oversimplifications in modern literary history. This does not mean that it lacks any semblance of truth though either. For writers bent on presenting radical breaks in literary form as the necessary consequence of the chaos of contemporary history, the only kind of order that is tenable is one that advertises its own disorder. And myth, which is disorderly in its mutability, in the values that stick to it like so much window dressing,

the modern artist to work with certainty without shirking the uncertainty of modern relativism.

53 Bell (1997), 4.

54 This topic is of course more complicated than how I present it here. After all, the Pentateuch is a series of oral tales collected over time. The issue is one of canonization. Whereas Greek myth loses its status as truth in Western culture, the Hebrew Bible does not to the same extent.

is nothing if not the kind of ordering principle that disorders the very value of order itself. Or to put it another way, in myth disorder acquires its own special brand of dignity.

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