

**Modernist Myths and Mothers:  
Jung and ‘Mythic Parallelism’ in Neil Gunn’s *The Silver Darlings***

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Abstract: This paper argues that although Neil Gunn’s 1941 novel *The Silver Darlings* has been examined in terms of what this paper terms ‘mythic parallelism’ on numerous occasions, few critics have taken cognizance of the extent to which *The Silver Darlings* is in dialogue with the work of C. G. Jung. At the beginning, the paper notes the disparity between Gunn’s continuing cultural presence and the lack of scholarly attention, then moves on to argue that the latest development in Scottish literary studies is an opportunity for Gunn’s work that has been missed. The paper then goes on to argue that the crux of Gunn’s ‘mythic parallelism’ is not simply his use of myth as a patterning device for his fiction, but lies in the ways in which myth was being re-interpreted in his contemporary environment. In regard to this novel, the paper argues, the key influence is C. G. Jung. While he has been noted as an influence often, no close comparison has been undertaken between the work of Jung and Gunn; this paper then goes on to show how the ‘mythic parallelism’ of *The Silver Darlings* is not based on an allusion to Celtic myth as the underlying pattern, but on an evocation of the developmental theory that Jung derived from *all* hero myths.

Of all the novels of Scottish Modernism (indeed, of all the works of Scottish Modernism) Neil M. Gunn’s *The Silver Darlings* has achieved the most lasting presence. In print continuously since it was published in 1941, it has been turned into a film, and more recently has been adapted for stage performance. Despite a decade of critical neglect, many of Gunn’s works continue to be in print with major trade publishers, a commercial and cultural presence which has largely outlasted academic interest in Gunn’s work.

Gunn’s reputation in academia is at something of a nadir. Having been seen worthy of an entire chapter devoted to his work in *The History of Scottish Literature* (1988), he is barely

included in the recent *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* (2007).<sup>1</sup> The reasons for such a remarkable decline are complex, but part of the explanation must be that while Scottish literary criticism has rediscovered and revalued a host of minor novelists, poets, and dramatists, it has been strangely content to let criticism of Gunn's work go fallow. The most recent development in the study of Scottish literature of the early part of the twentieth century is a growing trend of using the concept of modernism to describe the literature of the period, rather than the earlier term 'Scottish Literary Renaissance', a trend that relates Scottish writing to larger developments in continental Europe and the United States.<sup>2</sup>

In this vein, the chapter devoted to Gunn in *Scottish Modernism and its Contents* (2009) by Margery Palmer McCulloch links Gunn with Jung, but largely depicts Gunn as being primarily of interest as a historical novelist of the Scottish Highlands.<sup>3</sup> She argues that Gunn's 'fictional explorations of race memory and the collective unconscious [...] are part of [his] modern and modernist interest in myth', but ceases before explaining what the 'modernist interest in myth' actually represents.<sup>4</sup> This seems to lead to increasing imprecision during her discussion of Jung's work. Although her chapter is ostensibly about Gunn and Jung, her bibliography does not contain any works by Jung, which runs the risk of making the linking of Gunn and Jung appear tenuous, whereas an engagement with Jung's text would have made her argument far stronger. The same risk of imprecision recurs when she discusses *The Silver*

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<sup>1</sup> *The History of Scottish Literature*, ed. by Cairns Craig (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988); *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, ed. by Ian Brown et al., 3 vols (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Margery Palmer McCulloch's *Scottish Modernism and its Contents 1918-1959: Literature, National Identity and Cultural Exchange* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), discussed below, there is also her earlier *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939, Source Documents for the Scottish Renaissance*. Further, 'Scottish Modernism' was the title for 2009 Association for Literary Studies Conference. At the recent 2010 European Society for the Study of English Tenth International Conference, the panel discussing the period was titled 'Scotland, Europe and Modernism'.

<sup>3</sup> This characterisation is similarly found in her earlier book, *The Novels of Neil M Gunn: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987)

<sup>4</sup> McCulloch, *Scottish Modernism*, p. 115.

*Darlings*, where she talks of a mode of fiction Gunn ‘developed through the use of Celtic mythology and Jungian explorations of racial memory and the collective unconscious as well as through influences from the modernist fiction of Proust’.<sup>5</sup> The issue with McCulloch’s argument at this point is that it seems to posit a relationship between Jung’s collective unconscious theory and a number of contemporaneous occult and pseudo-scientific theories of ‘racial memory’ without exploring that relationship. Furthermore, McCulloch does not explain why the use of such interpersonal theories of memory in Gunn’s work is *modernist*, even when working alongside Proustian influence, since such theories were also used by many to support backwards-looking, nationalistic anti-modernism.<sup>6</sup> Simply introducing what here is termed ‘mythic parallelism’ (the construction of a plot or character which follows the structural pattern of myth) would not *of necessity* make a work modernist, even if works such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* use the same method, nor would it make it anti-modernist, even if mythology was used as a substitution for modernity.

Reading an instance of ‘mythical parallelism’ as specifically modernist requires an analysis of which of several modernist re-readings of myth are appropriate. Many accounts of Gunn’s work have noted the importance of myth, but few have remarked upon what aspect of modernist thought is reflected in this attention to mythical parallelism. McCulloch identifies one of the key, if not the pre-eminent, interpreters of myth in the early twentieth century in C. G. Jung, but a more rigorous explanation of how the Jungian influence works in Gunn’s work is necessary. Such an explanation must first justify the mention of Jung by showing that the influence affected Gunn’s writing, and then address the complexity of modernist mythic parallelism: that a way of writing which seems to make the modernist artwork dependent on the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>6</sup> The uses of pagan mythology by Nazi Germany, and particularly Himmler and the SS, for instance.

ancient story is, simultaneously, an act of re-writing (the myth becomes re-interpreted through the modernist work) and is also facilitated by several acts of re-writing (such as Durkheim's, Freud's, or indeed Jung's) of the importance and meaning of myth. Modernist mythical writing thus becomes modern through the past. This mythical parallelism therefore relies on a double contextualization: there is first the intertextual link implicit in the *writing* of the piece (what T. S. Eliot referred to as the 'mythic method' in his account of *Ulysses*), and also the further contextualization which provides the parameters of the intertextual link.<sup>7</sup> Whereas in many accounts of modernist use of myth the first contextualization is well-explored, the second is often neglected.

The same is true for the existing accounts of Gunn's work. Mythic parallelism in *The Silver Darlings* has already been discussed in detail. The novel is essentially a *Bildungsroman*: we follow the main character, Finn MacHamish, from birth through to the moment when he hears friends sneaking up to play a prank on him the night before his wedding. Critics have already identified the possibility of a mythic parallel between Finn and Finn MacCoul, the legendary warrior and hunter of Celtic myth:

And here we have it: the key to recognising the archetype which in Finn Gunn was re-creating. For Finn MacCoul was, according to legend, both a slayer of monsters and a magician. He was a poet, too; and he was a chief of the Fianna of Leinster, a leader among a nomadic people – hunters! – in the heart of primitive forests, the strange bewitching world of trees, foliage, fronds.<sup>8</sup>

The mythic parallel in *The Silver Darlings*, though, does not match the description we have here: Finn is a fisherman, a sulky teenager who occasionally executes great feats of bravery, an introspective and thoughtful adolescent who acts more often as a loner than a leader. He is not a warrior, and rather than being a great poet, he is a shy teller of one story. This radical

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<sup>7</sup> See T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (London: Harvest, 1975)

<sup>8</sup> Isobel Murray and Bob Tait, *Ten Modern Scottish Novels* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1984), p. 49.

disjunction, however, between the myth that Gunn seems to allude to and *The Silver Darlings* does not reflect a failure on Gunn's part. Gunn was sufficiently aware of Celtic myths that he could, had he wanted to, have made Finn into a gregarious leader, skilled in the hunt and with his fists (the perfect parallel of Finn MacCoul) but he chose not to.<sup>9</sup> Rather, he seems to be using a reference to a hero from Celtic myth to summon the myth of the hero *in general*, specifically the Jungian interpretation of the hero myth, found in *Symbols of Transformation*.

Thus, novels such as *The Silver Darlings* are not fundamentally anti-modern tales relying on an evocation of archetypal patternings of life, but works which utilize contemporary readings of the importance and meaning of myths.<sup>10</sup> Rather than being an escape *from* modernity, mythical parallelism reflects an engagement with psychoanalysis, one of the key theories that gave rise to the modernist *episteme*.

Gunn's interest in psychoanalysis has been remarked upon at times, but as yet, no thorough-going investigation has been written.<sup>11</sup> Gunn destroyed a large amount of his notes and other papers in 1960, remarking in a letter to George Bruce 'What an orgy was had yesterday morning burning old MSS and trash of that ilk!', further commenting that 'a bloke some while back got some of my typescripts for a catalogue or something'.<sup>12</sup> While such a blasé attitude to his own papers reflects a remarkable lack of egotism on Gunn's part, it makes the researcher's task difficult. What remains in the National Library of Scotland thus represents a fragmentary

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<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, the figure of Roddie in *The Silver Darlings* seems far closer to Finn MacCoul than Finn MacHamish does.

<sup>10</sup> One could include with *The Silver Darlings* those of Gunn's novels which are also centrally concerned with the persistence of mythic patterns into the modern day (*The Silver Bough* (London: Faber, 1948) or *The Well at the World's End* (London: Faber, 1951)), but also Edwin Muir's *The Three Brothers* (London: Heinemann, 1931), with its heavily psychological reading of the impact of the Reformation, Eric Linklater's *Men of Ness*, and *A Scots Quair*, by Lewis Grassic Gibbon (London: Jarrolds, 1946).

<sup>11</sup> For example, *Neil M. Gunn: The Man and the Writer* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1973), ed. by Alexander Scott and Douglas Gifford, wherein numerous contributors make the link, though none pursue it. Interestingly, a footnote to Andrew Noble's chapter reads 'A wealth of fruitful material would almost certainly emerge from a deeper study of Gunn in relation to Jung's psychological and religious thought' in 'A Fable of Freedom: *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*', pp. 175-216, p. 216.

<sup>12</sup> Neil M. Gunn, letter to George Bruce, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1960, Acc. 4989, National Library of Scotland.

picture of the later part of Gunn's career and his life after the end of his career, but the notebooks that remain in deposit 209 contain numerous references to Jung. These notebooks contain at most a few thousand words, and have been used by scholars before, but no-one has yet made a systematic exploration of the strong Jungian influence evident in these fragments.

Jung is also mentioned by name in Gunn's published work. *The Drinking Well*, for example, contains the following discussion of Jung's collective unconscious theory: 'We inherit an aptitude for a certain pattern, just as a chemical solution may be said to hold an aptitude for a certain pattern in the sense that in given conditions it will precipitate crystals of a known form'.<sup>13</sup> Gunn also has a character in this conversation say, 'Jung does not say that you precipitate *national* mental crystals', which runs counter to McCulloch's claim that Gunn was interested in *racial* memory (*DW*, 184; Gunn's emphasis). There is not room enough here to give a full exploration of Gunn's engagement with Jung, but there are sufficient allusions and references in the work to assume that *The Silver Darlings*, published in 1941 was, like *The Drinking Well*, written at a time when Gunn was meditating on psychoanalytic theory.<sup>14</sup>

Jung interpreted the hero-myth as being a reflection of the growth of the individual. The key dynamic underlying the hero-myth and individual development, Jung argued, was the relationship with the mother: 'The heroes are usually wanderers, and wandering is a symbol of longing, of the restless urge which never finds its object, of nostalgia for the lost mother'.<sup>15</sup> This sentence could just as easily serve as a summary of the structure of *The Silver Darlings*. Initially, Finn is in total possession of his mother. His father is killed before he is born, abducted by the

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<sup>13</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *The Drinking Well* (London: Faber, 1946), p. 184. Hereafter *DW*.

<sup>14</sup> *Wild Geese Overhead* (1939), for instance, contains remarks on psychoanalysis, while *Second Sight* (1940) discusses the phenomenon of 'second sight' in psychological terminology. After *The Silver Darlings*, both *The Drinking Well* and *The Lost Chart* mention Jung by name, and Gunn's autobiography *The Atom of Delight* contains quotations from Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*. In the same year as *The Silver Darlings* (1941), Gunn published an article 'On Destruction', which discussed Freud's concept of warring life- and death-drives.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1956), p. 205.

British Royal Navy in a brutal (and fatal) press-ganging at sea. His only parental bond as he grows up is therefore with his mother. The key events of the novel are all variations on the theme of journeys, which take Finn progressively farther from his mother, and are always followed by an infantile return to his mother. In Jung's theory, the mother becomes imbued psychologically with negative feelings on the part of the child, becoming the (in)famous Terrible Mother:

In order not to become conscious of his incest wish [...] the son throws all the burden of the guilt on the mother, from which arises the idea of the 'terrible mother'. The mother becomes for him a spectre of anxiety, a nightmare.<sup>16</sup>

This theory seems to be the source of the structure of Finn's maturation. His mother, Catrine, is literally the centre of his life, the point to which he returns over and over again, and Catrine begins to be perceived by Finn as a menacing influence as he ages. Gunn takes care to show the genesis of her behaviour which works together with her son's projections to make her the embodiment of the Terrible Mother. The following reading of *The Silver Darlings* will attempt to read Finn's growth in the light of this part of Jungian theory.

Gunn initially depicts Finn as a child plotting to free himself from his mother. The most important of these plans is his hunting a butterfly, which leads him out of the maternal and familiar, into the 'outside world': 'He began to go on, away from home, away, away from that place where his mother was, in a strange mood that was near to tears and yet far from them'.<sup>17</sup> Understandably, four-year old Finn is filled with a sense of adventure, as well as suffering from fear. This is the period, Jung argues, when 'mother should be exchanged for the world', yet Finn feels incredible insecurity (*PU*, 255-56): '[H]e went a little blindly, in great sadness, in pity for himself, and with a terrible longing for his mother that yet had in it something alien and withdrawn' (*SD*, p. 93). This is the first of Finn's journeys, the beginning of his life as a heroic

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<sup>16</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, trans. by Beatrice M. Hinkel (London: Routledge, 1919), p. 147. Hereafter *PU*.

<sup>17</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *The Silver Darlings* (London: Faber, 1941), p. 91. Hereafter *SD*.

voyager. Again, though, his mother stands in his way. Reacting to her husband's disappearance into the sea:

‘And when I’m big I’ll go to sea, too, and be a skipper.’

‘Mama does not want you to go to sea. You must never go to sea. Do you hear? Never.’

‘Why?’ He was astonished at her vehemence.

‘Because I don’t want you to. Because people who go to sea get drowned. The sea is an angry and cruel place. You must promise me never to go to sea’  
(*SD*, 144).

Finn tests this boundary: without going to sea, he does go to the shore, and ends up being cut off from the land by an incoming tide. This scene occurs, we are told, when ‘Manhood [is] troubling [Finn’s] body with its premonitions of things to come’ (*SD*, 176). His development, throughout, is linked to his becoming a voyager, a fisher in the fleet that follows the herring shoals around Scotland’s coast and into the isles. The first of these voyages ends up in the Atlantic, with its protagonist near to death through lack of drinking water. Coming across an island, Finn scales the cliff and brings water down to the crew. Gunn describes Finn appearing at the top of the cliff ‘like an immortal youth’ (*SD*, 316).

In Jung’s theory of the hero’s struggle with the terrible mother, ‘Whoever vanquishes [the] monster has gained a new or eternal youth’ (*PU*, 156). In a novel which uses a realist mode of presentation for its modernist psychological concerns, Gunn cannot introduce an actual monster (just as Joyce could not have an actual Cyclops in *Ulysses*), so Finn’s struggle with the ‘terrible mother’ must revolve around his voyages, his moments of bravery, wherein he proves himself. Gunn’s choice to describe Finn as ‘like an immortal youth’, is one of the strongest indications of the influence of Jungian theory on the novel.

Gunn deploys what psychoanalytic theory refers to as ‘the uncanny’ when on one of his voyages Finn meets a girl with the same name as his mother. The fantasy seems to offer him a

way of possessing his mother in the incestuous way that Jung describes as being at the heart of the struggle of the hero with the terrible mother ‘for the body of the mother, and through it for communion with infinite life in the countless forms of existence’ (*PU*, 127): ‘Finn now dreamed of her in the boat in the morning in a more intimate way than ever he had of Una. Catrine was like a sweet revenge and he felt very fond of her’ (*SD*, 401). Finn thus takes ‘revenge’ on Una, the girl he will eventually marry, for trying to draw him away from his mother and ‘infinite life’ as the ‘eternal child’, towards maturity and adult life. That he barely knows this other Catrine does not enter his mind. It would seem that what Jung refers to as ‘magical’ methods for achieving symbolic incest are at play in this passage (*PU*, 139).

Finn’s voyages repeat this pattern: the escape from Catrine, followed by the homecoming, where he becomes again the child. Catrine’s life has changed, however, and she marries Roddie, the skipper of the boat of Finn’s first voyage. This re-entry of a father figure seems to finally break Finn off from the maternal environment:

He was now completely detached from his mother and Roddie; felt he had no interest in them, never wanted to have anything more to do with them, had for them a cold distaste.

In this last month he was conscious of having aged a lot. He was barely twenty, but it was as if the very flesh on his bones had lost its softness and drawn taut and sinewy. (*SD*, 500)

With the awareness ‘of having aged a lot’, of no longer being a soft-boned child, and the new sense of ‘detachment’ from his mother, Finn has matured. This completes the heroic narrative that has been at work in this novel. Finn feels ‘Not the loss of his mother, but the loss of something from his own life. And even that was fading’ (*SD*, 526). After the struggle of separation from the mother, he finally seems to realise that the ‘terribleness’ of his mother was a result of his own process of maturation, an internal process, which leads to ‘the loss of something from his own life’.

Gunn has faced criticism for the gender politics of *The Silver Darlings*, most notably from Christopher Whyte in his essay 'Fishy Masculinities', where he was accused of ascribing to gender politics 'closer to that of European fascism than to any contemporary ideological conformation'.<sup>18</sup> It must be noted in response that in his construction of Catrine as a clingy mother, Gunn takes pains to show how her obstruction of Finn's voyages are a result of a traumatic event: the abduction of Finn's father when Catrine is only nineteen. Although the 'terrible mother' does appear, Gunn shows that the actual mother is sympathetic and human, and that the 'terror' exists only in the mind of her son. Whyte's argument can seem at times convincing because Gunn takes pains to show the sometimes unpleasant thoughts and feelings of a maturing male, but one should be aware that he is portraying the psychological reality described by Jung, not an objective, gender-political, reality.

Gunn's use of myth, then, in *The Silver Darlings* is not a simple case of allusion. Like *Ulysses*, important differences intervene between the myth and the novel. These difficulties (what we might call, following Derrida, *aporias*) are to a certain extent resolved when we view the mythic parallel in *The Silver Darlings* from the point of view of Jung's theory of the hero-myth's significance. Gunn's mythic parallel does not summon up the Celtic hero of legend as an ever-present a priori racial stereotype, but instead alludes to Jung's explanation of all hero myths. In doing so, he finds a way of turning a centuries-old form (the Bildungsroman) into a modernist epic through use of a specifically modernist mythic parallel, an example of the paradoxical, doubly-contextual rewriting inherent in the modernist use of myth.

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Whyte, 'Fishy Masculinities: Neil Gunn's *The Silver Darlings*' in *Gendering the Nation*, ed. by Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 49-68 (p. 66).