

## Introduction : the Effacement of Myth

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Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu  
être triste pour ressusciter Carthage.<sup>1</sup>

This issue of the *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities* is comprised of seven compelling articles whose heterogeneous reflections on the notion of myth take in Homer and Hesiod, the druids and the Virgin Mary. What's more, they address the rewriting of various myths across a broad range of research areas, from medieval Irish to Scottish Modernism, and from incipient Romanticism to French feminism of the 1960s. Each avoids the pitfalls of seeing literature as a passive relayer of myths or as a simple debunker of them, instead engaging in complex debates on the reception and historicity of various strands of myth. These are some of the reasons why each article deserves to be read in its own right.

The notion of myth as a reinscription of the past *in the present*, of the other *in the same* is relevant across the articles, for instance for Ken Keir, who shows how 'modernist mythical writing thus becomes modern through the past'. This can be seen in the recurrence of myths both through retelling and the (re)appearance of archetypal figures. Both Keir's and Mark Ryan's contributions touch upon the concept of the archetype, a phenomenon with a strangely double nature as its significance is open to questioning and re-appropriation, while it nonetheless retains a certain timeless quality. Jung elaborates on this paradox:

The archetype in itself is empty and purely formal, nothing but a *facultas praeformandi*, a possibility of representation which is given *a priori*. The

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<sup>1</sup> Flaubert quoted by Walter Benjamin in the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 245-55 (p. 248).

representations themselves are not inherited, only the forms, and in that respect they correspond in every way to the instincts, which are also determined in form only.<sup>2</sup>

This tension between archetypal form and original creation means, for example, that even the purported timelessness of the figure of the Virgin Mary (in Thomas O'Donnell's article) or of the utterly primal 'drame solaire' (in Barnaby Norman's piece) serves to express the contemporaneity of the texts that these contributors address.

What's more, modern issues can be viewed through the lens of classical, medieval or even ancient myth, and the reinsertion of such myths into a new historical context allows for a new level of critical engagement. For instance, Ryan's reading of William Blake as arch myth-maker claims that 'in order to develop a new creative system it was necessary to clear away the classical mythological remnants of the past and challenge some of the more ancient systems of belief'. And as Yvonne Reddick's article shows, Ted Hughes's reference to the Grail legend in his river poetry subtly reflects ecological concerns, as well as providing a veiled response to the poet's feminist critics. The question of myth and feminism is approached head-on in Catherine Burke's piece, which explores a reinscription of patriarchal Homeric myth for the purposes of female empowerment.

These approaches to myth respond to the thought which lies behind the quotation featured in our call for papers: 'l'écriture commence, c'est sa *condition*, avec l'effacement ou la disparition des noms mythiques' (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe).<sup>3</sup> When referred to by the contributors, this statement was most often rejected, taken to be an assessment of literature's

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 12 – 13.

<sup>3</sup> In 'Agonie terminée, agonie interminable' in *Maurice Blanchot: Récits critiques*, ed. by Christophe Bident and Pierre Vilar (Tours: Farrago/Leo Schéer, 2003), pp. 439-49 (p. 448). Emphasis original. It should be noted that an alternative position is developed elsewhere in Lacoue-Labarthe's thinking apropos of the relation of literature to the gods (a relation not unlike that to myth). Discussing Jean-Luc Nancy's work '*Un jour les dieux se retirent...*' (Bordeaux: William Blake, 2001), he states orally (hence the ellipses): 'j'ai dit que ce n'est pas vrai, que les dieux ne s'en vont jamais, et la littérature ne commence pas quand ils sont... les dieux *sont* la littérature' (emphasis original). This section features at 1 hour 38 minutes of the film 'Entretiens de l'île Saint-Pierre' with Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Christophe Bailly, by Christine Baudillon and François Lagarde (Hors oeil, 2006), which can be found on the DVD *Proème de Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe*.

relation to myth, a level on which they rightly demonstrate it to be inaccurate. What's more, when seen as a simple rejection of myth as the other, this statement has dangerous implications, which are brought out elsewhere by Lacoue-Labarthe's regular co-author Jean-Luc Nancy, who warns against any self-affirmation of a non-mythical, atheist or secular mode of writing or thought.<sup>4</sup>

Such dangers are very real, and Nancy's vigilance should certainly be retained. However, the value of Lacoue-Labarthe's statement can perhaps be seen in another type of vigilance, if we approach it on a level going beyond the merely descriptive level where writing can, does, and will continue to engage with myth. This second level consists in the notion that myths should not be taken at face value, but rather approached as instances of rewriting and reinscription. This means that if a myth is stripped of its purportedly timeless qualities, historicized, and analysed, then it is already brought into relation with the contexts in which it is presented and received, and its singularity is diminished accordingly. Whilst this might appear to be little more than a question of readerly or critical procedure, the issue becomes more fraught when we realize the difficulty of fixing a stable boundary between such a diminishing and the effacement that Lacoue-Labarthe mentions. In other words, whilst rejecting myth risks being a violent gesture of exclusion, not doing so risks being an abdication of the responsibility to think critically. Matthew Moyle's article brings the latter risk into sharp focus with an exploration of the dangers inherent in blind attachment and adherence to a myth which resists the possibility of recontextualisation or modification. Lacoue-Labarthe (often together with Nancy, revealing the complexity of their relationship) wrote extensively on moments in literature and thought when this risk came to the fore, not

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<sup>4</sup> He writes: 'la Réforme et les Lumières, avec et malgré toute leur noblesse et toute leur vigueur, se sont aussi accoutumées à se comporter vis-à-vis du passé de l'Europe comme les ethnologues de naguère le faisaient envers les "primitifs"' in *La Déclosion (Déconstruction du christianisme, I)* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), p. 19.

least in Nazism,<sup>5</sup> in which he sees any resurgence of particular myths (of the god Odin or the corpus of Old Norse Edda texts, for instance) as less important than the people's self-identity (and auto-formation by itself) in the myth of Nazism, without the bonds and the relativizations of history.<sup>6</sup>

To conclude these brief introductory remarks, the value of Lacoue-Labarthe's approach can be glimpsed in the realization that, in proposing the effacement of myth, he does not propose a wholly new mode of discourse, either. Such a utopian mythlessness would be – and indeed has been – the most potent of myths. His words in a different context can be of use in further defining this complex position:

Déconstruire [...] n'est pas non plus, de l'extérieur, avec un autre langage, abattre l'édifice pour reconstruire autre chose: nous n'avons plus, personne n'a plus, d'extériorité ni d'autre langage [...]. Il s'agit donc d'habiter l'édifice, puisqu'il n'y a nulle autre part où habiter. Mais il s'agit d'habiter l'édifice, pour, de l'intérieur [...] le laminer jusqu'à ce que l'une ou l'autre de ses parois devienne suffisamment diaphane pour laisser deviner la fragile image d'un dehors.<sup>7</sup>

The complex, deconstructive mode of effacement that Lacoue-Labarthe is proposing instead, then, can be found in and as the proliferation of literary reinscriptions of myth. For it is by repeating and deepening the act whereby myth is inscribed in the present that that very act might become exposed, exhausted, and effaced.

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<sup>5</sup> A further and not unrelated moment is that of early German Romanticism, especially in its relation to a mythologized antiquity, that of a golden age. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write that for the *Athenæum* group (which formed around the journal of that name created by the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, et al.), 'il s'agit de faire mieux ou plus que l'Antiquité: à la fois surpasser et compléter l'Antiquité dans ce qu'elle a d'inachevé ou d'inaccompli, dans ce qu'elle n'a pas réussi à effectuer de l'idéal classique qu'elle entrevoyait. Ce qui revient en somme à opérer la "synthèse" de l'Antique et du Moderne' in *L'Absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), pp. 20-21, 20.

<sup>6</sup> See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Le Mythe nazi* (1980; La Tour d'Aigues: Aube, 1991). These issues are explored in terms of Nancy's thinking by Ian James in 'On Interrupted Myth', *Journal of Cultural Research*, 4:9 (October 2005), 331-49. He writes: 'Myth [...] refers not simply to fabulous tales transmitted by tradition and should not be understood in the way we might more usually understand mythology. Rather myth, in this context, is that to which a political community appeals in order to found its existence as such and to perpetuate that existence as the intimate sharing of an identity or essence' (p. 340).

<sup>7</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe in 'La philosophie fantôme' (1991) in *Lignes*, 22 (May 2007), 205-14 (pp. 213-14).

**The Poet-Outsider and the Passion of Christ:  
Interlacing Myths in the Middle Irish Preface to *Cáin Adomnáin*.**

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**Abstract:** The preface to *Cáin Adomnáin* is a Middle Irish narrative added to a seventh-century law designed, amongst other things, to protect women. In this essay I intend to analyse the way in which the author of the preface is using and adapting the various mythic narratives available to him, both secular and Christian, in order to create an allusively complex justification for upholding the law. This is done by means of a hagiographical narrative concerning the author of the law, Adomnán of Iona, in which he receives the law from heaven at the request of his mother. The role of Adomnán's character has been interpreted as that of the poet-outsider or shaman and the preface has been viewed as an essentially secular narrative.

I argue that this is only half of the picture and that, in fact, the author is using the secular myth in order to paint the relationship between Adomnán and his mother as that of Christ and Mary at the Passion but in such a way as to avoid the charge of blasphemy. This parallel would have been prompted by the growing popularity of the Virgin Mary in the twelfth century, an obvious model to endorse a law designed to protect women. This discussion forms part of my MPhil thesis looking at the construction of women and femininity throughout the preface to *Cáin Adomnáin*.

The text known to us as *Cáin Adomnáin* is a composite one being composed of the Middle Irish preface, the focus of this essay; an Old Irish guarantor list; a Latin preface written in the ninth century; and finally the Old Irish law itself. This was the law that, in 697, the cleric St. Adomnán of Iona promulgated designed to protect innocents, that is clerics, women, and children, from harm in its various incarnations by exacting heavy fines from the perpetrators. As time passed the law came to be regarded as solely pertaining to women.<sup>1</sup> About four centuries later another cleric, probably working in the Columban foundation at Raphoe, wrote a preface to this text in which Adomnán's mother Ronnat forces him to extort the law from God by undergoing an extended period of mortification including taking nil by mouth and being left in a river for eight months. The torments have to reach such an extreme that he dies

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<sup>1</sup> Whitley Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé: The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London, [Harrison and Sons], 1905), p. 211

before God sends an angel to acquiesce to Adomnán's wishes. The role that the saint plays in this tale is similar to that of the poet-outsider, as represented by figures such as Finn mac Cumail, Amairgen, and Marbán. The similarity between this poet-outsider and Adomnán has lead Daniel Melia to see the saint's role as essentially shamanic.<sup>2</sup> I propose that the author of the preface of *Cáin Adomnáin* is not presenting a straightforward shamanic figure; rather I would see the use of the myth of the poet-outsider as a means by which to introduce the Christian myth of the Passion. This allows him to present the relationship between Adomnán and his mother as similar to that between Jesus and Mary; this in its turn is a productive parallel due to the centrality of women and motherhood in the tale and the rising importance of Mary in the Christian pantheon.

The figure of the poet-outsider occurs in myths concerning the nature and source of poetic inspiration and is most explicitly described in the lemma on the word *prull* (a poetic term for 'greatly' or 'excessively) in *Sanas Chormaic*. Here, Senchán Torpéist, that most famous poet, is accompanied on his trip to Man by a hideous youth who despite his appearance is the only member of the poetic party who can answer the challenge set by an equally hideous old woman. The role of this youth is made explicit when he is called the Spirit of Poetry: 'Dubium itaque non est quod ille Poematis erat spiritus' ('Therefore, there was no doubt that he was the Spirit of Poetry').<sup>3</sup> Patrick Ford has analysed this story, alongside a number of others, as representing the 'darker, mystical practice of poetry' and as pertaining to a concept of poetry originating in an extra-social, supernatural locus.<sup>4</sup> Although the arguments have been focused on the figure of the poet this does not preclude the idea that other knowledge might be accessed in the same manner, due in part to the flexible nature of

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Melia, 'Law and the Shaman Saint', in Patrick K. Ford (ed.), *Celtic Folklore and Christianity: Studies in Memory of William W. Heist* (California: McNally and Loftin, 1983), pp. 113-28.

<sup>3</sup> *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, ed. by Osborn Bergin and others, 5 vols (Dublin: Hodges and Figgis, 1907-1913), IV (1912), p. 94.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick K. Ford, 'The Blind, the Dumb, and the Ugly: Aspects of Poets and their Craft in Early Ireland and Wales', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 19 (1990), 27-40 (p. 40).

the Irish concept of *senchas*. This concept covers both lore and law, as one of the largest law texts in medieval Ireland is known as the *Senchas Már* and aetiological tales concerning the naming of geographic features are known as *Dindsenchas*, that is lore of place-names; these tales are recorded in prose as well as verse. Robin Chapman Stacey has seen Caratnia as fulfilling a similar role for the jurist; in the beginning to the *Gúbretha Caratniad*, he ‘would appear to be conceptualized in the tale not as a mere functionary or agent of the king, but as one whose wisdom transcends ordinary human knowledge in that it stems from the otherworld’.<sup>5</sup> Thus Adomnán’s access to law is not outside of the native imagination.

The figure of the poet-outsider works in a state of tension between his liminal position on the outside of society, which gives rise to his poetic genius, and the centrality of poetry to the working of settled society. While Joseph Nagy was formulating this idea with reference to Finn he was not unaware of the similarities between the *fénnid* who has rejected society and the churchman who should, ideally, turn his back on the world of men: ‘Their poetry [that of the hermits and ascetic saints], like the nature verse that we find in the Fenian tradition, expresses not only a love of nature but also a strong preference for a “savage” life in the wilderness, as opposed to a comfortable life in human society’.<sup>6</sup> This rejection of the worldly is not confined to the hermits and ascetics but finds its expression in the entire body of the church in the late-eleventh-century Gregorian reform.<sup>7</sup> Thus, there would appear to be a fundamental connection between these two types of person, poet-outsider and cleric, which is being played upon in Adomnán’s presentation.

The myths concerning the poet-outsider, such as that of Caratnia and Amairgen, are in essence initiatory myths where the poet undergoes a transition from ignorance to inspiration.

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<sup>5</sup> Robin Chapman Stacey, *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. 151.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (California: University of California Press, 1985), p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 116.

The transition that Adomnán undergoes can be seen in this light; it conforms to Ford's analysis that such narratives 'demonstrate an evolutionary process, as it were, whereby the opposition is realised as a "before" and "after" condition: eloquence is born of dumbness, vision of blindness and radiance of loathsomeness'.<sup>8</sup> Eloquence arising from dumbness is particularly applicable to Adomnán, as has been noted by Stacey, for it is in reply to Loingsech's insult, *bodur amlabor* 'deaf and dumb one', that Adomnán enters dramatically into the public sphere of performative speech.<sup>9</sup> The change wrought in Adomnán by his tortures is analysed by Melia as indicative of his shamanic character, as it is only after he communicates with God that he has access to his wondrous powers.<sup>10</sup>

The details of the torture also seem to give support to the connection between Adomnán and the shaman. In discussing the *imbais forosnai* and similar practices Ford has concluded 'the essentials of these various rituals include the ingestion of uncooked food, lying down, and sleeping - or at least going into some state with eyes closed.'<sup>11</sup> This process is enacted in the tortures of Adomnán: he is given a flint stone to stave off his hunger pangs, an un-food which paradoxically sustains him for eight months. At the end of that time he is buried in a stone chest, which both forces him to lie down (the angel tells him 'éirigh súas' 'get up', which implies his supine position) and takes away his sight. Furthermore while he undergoes this 'death' we are told that slime bursts forth from his head: 'roimidh salchur a chin dar a chlúasaib immach' ('the slime of his head broke forth through his ears').<sup>12</sup> This is similar to the young Spirit of Poetry in his hideous form: 'intan tra dosbereal amér foraéadan nomebdais srotha doghur brén triaclúasaib achúil siar' ('when he would put his finger on his

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<sup>8</sup> Ford, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Stacey, p. 142.

<sup>10</sup> Melia, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> Ford, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Kuno Meyer, *Cáin Adamnáin: An Old-Irish Treatise on the Law of Adamnán* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), pp. 8-9.



forehead a foetid stream of pus would break out through his ears and down his back’).<sup>13</sup> Adomnán, then, is taking on this role of the hideous poet-outsider, with slime bursting from his head and the ability to speak and see taken from him, in order to undergo the transformation into a far-sighted and mystically empowered giver of law.

Yet despite this, it is in the figure of the female helper that we find that the author of this preface is using this well-known secular myth for his own, more Christian, ends. The transformation that the shamanic poet undergoes is usually mediated by a female figure. The *prull* narrative in *Sanas Chormaic* is centred around the poetic exchange between the daughter of Ua Dulsaine, who is being sought throughout Ireland, and the hideous youth. This tale has been seen as an initiatory journey by Ford as she ‘is a kind of *alma mater* of poets, a personification of the feminine genius of poetry’.<sup>14</sup> This figure also occurs in the tale of Amairgen, whose sister presides over his first speech and then helps him undergo his death-by-proxy.<sup>15</sup> Finn, too, has his character fixed, in terms of his poetic function, thanks to the female aid he gains in his fosterage; in the *Boyhood Deeds* his fosterers are the two women Bodbmall and Líath Lúachra, who have great affinity with nature and a supernatural swiftness, coupled with a knowledge of poetry: ‘Thus, the world of Finn’s early youth is dominated by females, centred on *fénnidecht* [service in a warrior band], and imbued with the numinous: for Bodbmall is not only a *benfénnid* [female warrior] but also a *bendruí* [female poet]’.<sup>16</sup> All of which seems to resonate with the initiatory female character of shamanic myth. However it is clear that if we are dealing with a narrative in which the central character undergoes a death in order to gain access to mystical knowledge and that death is watched over by a female character, specifically his mother, and this narrative is being written in

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<sup>13</sup> Whitley Stokes, *Three Irish Glossaries* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1862), p. 36. Translation is my own.

<sup>14</sup> Ford, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> *The Book of Leinster, formerly Lebar na Núachongbála*, ed. by Richard I. Best et al, 6 vols (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1954-83), II (1956), pp. 435-36. Translation to be found in Ford, pp. 28-30.

<sup>16</sup> Nagy, p. 101.

strongly Christian context, the parallels to the Passion of Christ must have been obvious to the contemporary audience.

What function, then, is the Passion myth performing in the context of the *Cáin*? Around the time of its composition, there was a growing popularity in the veneration of Mary, the mother of God, in two important areas: her role as *mediatrix*, intercessor with God and her com-passion at the crucifixion in which she played an important role in the salvation of the world.<sup>17</sup> By alluding to these roles in the presentation of the relationship between Adomnán and his mother the author grants the promulgation of the law a greater weight and the Marian image of the perfectly loving and nurturing mother gives a strong emotional resonance to the law; Bitel has noted with regard to the presentation of mothers in the *Cáin* that they are protected ‘not because mothers bore babies to patrilineages, but because everyone owed a debt of affection to mothers for the pregnancy, labour, and nurturing they performed and a debt of worship for embodying all the same sacral principles as the Virgin Mary herself’.<sup>18</sup>

One of the first instances of Mary as a *mediatrix* is found in Paul the Deacon’s translation of the Theophilus legend in the ninth century where she is described ‘que intercedit pro peccatoribus, refrigerium pauperum, mediatrix Dei ad homines’ (‘she who

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding the date of composition of the preface, there is no space currently for a more involved discussion. In Ryan’s analysis of 1936 it was held to have been written c. 900 and this is the date that Melia and Bitel, among others have used. However in her translation of 2001 Ní Dhonnchadha gave the preface a later date, writing that ‘the hagiographic material [...] was added to it in the late-tenth or early-eleventh century’ in ‘The Law of Adomnán: a translation’, in ed. T. O’Loughlin *Adomnán at Birr: AD 697; Essays in Commemoration of the Law of the Innocents*, pp. 53-68 (p. 53), which places the text in the Middle Irish period. I would argue for a twelfth century date of composition, still within the Middle Irish period. However space precludes a more detailed discussion.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Marie Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 106. While Bitel is articulating something similar to my proposition she sees the allusion to Mary as working in a more general sense; Mary and all of womankind are linked by the fact that they were mothers. This is a view common to the mid-to-late Middle Ages and the obvious basis for much of what the author to this preface is doing. However I am arguing that the connection in this text, between Ronnat and Mary, is much more specific, deeper, and more integral to our understanding of different characters’ actions throughout the preface.

interceded for the sinners, refuge of the poor, intercessor with God for mankind').<sup>19</sup> Yet although the title *mediatrix* was not to come into common use until the twelfth century, there are hints that this aspect of the mother of God was productive in Ireland before that. In the two longer poems by Bláthmac, dated by Carney to the mid-eighth century,<sup>20</sup> he rounds off his first poem by asking three petitions from her which she can get from her son, presumably by using the maternal relationship that formed the basis of her ability to mediate in later centuries. This role is the one that is most explicitly referred to in *Cáin Adomnáin*: in the Latin preface of §33 she and Adomnán engage in a joint imprecation to her son 'Maria filium suum apud Adomnanum circa hanc legem rogavit' ('Mary besought her Son on behalf of Adomnan about this Law').<sup>21</sup> In the preface itself once Adomnán has resurrected Smirgat she says 'Ní fetur nech síu nó tall doneth bóidiu nó trócuiríe immum agh Adamnán 7 Mairei húag-ingen ic a gresacht a hucht muintirei nime' ('I know no one here or yonder who would do a kindness or show mercy to me save Adamnan, the Virgin Mary urging him thereto on behalf of the host of Heaven').<sup>22</sup> This does not demonstrate her ability to coerce her son, but it does define the power of Mary as being wielded indirectly. Furthermore the reversal of roles in the two quotations highlights the way in which the author subtly draws parallels between Adomnán and Christ, and Ronnat and Mary. Here, Mary uses her power of intercession with Adomnán and not her son. Conversely, before the resurrection of Smirgat there is no reference to Mary and the only female who is forcing any action is Ronnat; indeed, she is the one who urges Adomnán to do the kindness, not any supernatural agent: 'Sóithis Adamnán fri bréitheir a máthar [...]' ('At the word of his mother Adamnan turned

<sup>19</sup> Robert Petsch, *Theophilus: Mittelniederdeutsches Drama in Drei Fassungen Herausgegeben* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1908), p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> *The Poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan together with the Irish Gospel of Thomas and A Poem on the Virgin Mary*, ed. by James Carney, *Irish Texts Society*, 47 (Dublin, 1964), pp. 45-6.

<sup>21</sup> Meyer, pp. 24-25

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

aside [...]’).<sup>23</sup> Thus, a certain equivalency is set up in the minds of audience between Ronnat and Mary.

This link is furthered when we consider that both Ronnat and Mary have a hand in the death of their sons. In the case of Ronnat, she organises the tortures that Adomnán has to undergo; for Mary this role is highlighted in one of Bláthmac’s poems in which he sees the crucifixion as *fíngal*, or kin slaying, on behalf of the Jews because they are Jesus’ maternal kin (*maithre*).<sup>24</sup> *Fíngal* is often described as one of the more horrendous crimes in the laws and as such has an emotive force in educated circles even if the reality is quite different. A parallel with Christ based on kin slaying has been suggested for Caratnia and the same could be said of Adomnán.<sup>25</sup> The mothers’ parts in the slaying are hinted at in the text: ‘Is í pían roathirriged leissi dó 7 ní sochaide do mnáib dogénad fria mac’ (‘This is the change of torture that she made for him, and not many women would do so to their sons’).<sup>26</sup> The crucial point here is that she is causing pain to her son. This directly contravenes the role of mothers, as set out in the preface, as life givers and nurturers; the text says ‘not many’, literally ‘not a multitude of women’, would do so to their sons. Does this mean, then, that Mary and Ronnat are the two standing apart from the crowd? As has been shown, Ronnat is the driving force behind the freeing of the women of Ireland and it is the manner in which she does it that links her again to Mary.

Both Mary and Ronnat need the death of their sons in order to fulfil the salvation they have initiated. In the case of Mary she is the means by which the world is saved, as Cú Chuimne put it around the year 700: ‘per mulierem et lignum mundus prius periit|per mulieris virtutem ad salutem rediit’ (‘before the world died through a woman and a branch/through

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *The Poems of Blathmac*, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> Stacey, p. 151.

<sup>26</sup> Meyer, pp. 8-9.

the virtue of a woman it was brought back to salvation’);<sup>27</sup> in the case of Ronnat she is the driving force behind much of the narrative and initiates Adomnán’s quest for the law: ‘Ced ed ón’, or issi, ‘ba maith do gori-se, acht noch n-í sein mu gori-sae, acht mnáu do hsóerad dam [...]’ (‘Even so,’ she said. “Your dutifulness was good; however, that is not the duty I desire, but that you should free women for me [...]').<sup>28</sup> This role of the mother directing the actions of the son is in agreement with the growing popularity of Mary’s compassion and her central position in the salvation narrative. Arnold of Bonneval was one of the first to expound Mary’s role in salvation beyond merely being the means by which Christ entered the world by giving her an important role to play at Calvary. She is seen to ask for the salvation of the world ‘Maria Christo se spiritu immolat et pro mundi salute obsecrat, Filius impetrat Pater condonat’ (‘Mary sacrificed herself in spirit for Christ and beseeched him to save the world. The Son brought it about and the Father allowed it’), as Ronnat asks for the freeing of women.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, in this final moment, mother and son are united in purpose ‘Movebat enim eum matris affectio, et omnino tunc erat una Christi et Mariae voluntas, unumque holocaustum ambo pariter offerebant Deo: haec in sanguine cordis, hic in sanguine carnis’ (‘For the will of his mother moved him and then in all things the desire of Christ and Mary was one, and they both equally offered one holocaust to God: she in the blood of her heart, he in the blood of his body’).<sup>30</sup> The unification of purpose between Adomnán and Ronnat can be seen in the subtle shift of speaker, from Ronnat who asks her son ‘you should free women for me’<sup>31</sup> to Adomnán when he is haggling with the angel, saying: ‘Nocho n-érus [...] co

<sup>27</sup> David Howlett, ‘Five Experiments in Textual Reconstruction and Analysis’, *Peritia*, 9 (1995), 1-50 (p. 19).

<sup>28</sup> Meyer, pp. 4-5, translation modified.

<sup>29</sup> *Patrologia Latina*, ed. by Jacques-Paul Migne, 221 vols (Paris, 1844-65), CLXXXIX (1854), col. 1727A, in *Patrologia Latina: The Full Text Database* <http://pld.chadwyck.co.uk> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> July 2010].

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Meyer, p. 5.

rosóertar mná dam’ (‘I will not arise [...] until women are freed for me’).<sup>32</sup> It is only when he has taken his mother’s quest for himself that the angel relents.

The main conceit of the preface to *Cáin Adomnáin* is that women, all women, are mothers and life givers and thus should be preserved from harm. This is made explicit in §4, ‘Ar is [s]ruith máin máthair, maith máin máthair, máthair nóeb 7 escop 7 fírián, tuillem flatha nime, tustigud talman’ (‘For a mother is a venerable treasure, a mother is a goodly treasure, the mother of saints and bishops and righteous men, an increase of the Kingdom of Heaven, a propagation on earth’).<sup>33</sup> Thus, when the author of the preface was seeking to create an unassailable authority for the *Cáin* he did not rest satisfied with a merely God-given authority but wove throughout the text images of the highest mother, Mary. Mary is the mother of all, as is noted in the Latin preface, and the whole of womankind is united with Mary and Christ using Mary’s ambiguous position as a member of the human race and the divine family: ‘quod grande peccatum qui matrem 7 sororem matris Christi 7 matrem Christi occidit’ (‘for the sin is great when any one slays the mother and the sister of Christ’s mother and the mother of Christ’).<sup>34</sup> Mary’s part in the salvation of humanity is used as a model for a woman to be the instigator of women’s freedom reflecting the central Christian myth of humanity’s liberation, the Passion of Christ. In order that this sensitive yet powerful image can be utilized the author never directly addresses it but rather alludes to it in his presentation of the secular myth of the poet-outsider and his female initiator. The *Cáin* has been characterized as ‘a deliberate attempt to establish a more peaceful society’ and it does so by fusing native secular and foreign Christian myths, just as the law’s promulgation is characterized by cooperation between kings of the world and clerics of the Columban community.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘Preface’, in O’Loughlin, ed., *Adomnán at Birr: AD 697. Essays in Commemoration of the Law of the Innocents* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), p. 9.

## **The Other Night: The Archaeology of Myth in the Writing of Mallarmé and Blanchot**

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Abstract: In twentieth century Mallarmé scholarship there are two books which famously deal with 'le drame solaire' as a key element of Mallarmé's literary production. The first is Gardner Davies's *Mallarmé et le drame solaire*, and the second *La religion de Mallarmé* by Bertrand Marchal. Davies provides readings of poems by Mallarmé which stage the solar drama and is guided in these readings by his interpretation of the principle of *transposition* in Mallarmé's work,<sup>1</sup> which is seen for instance in 'Théodore de Banville', where the poet speaks of '*La divine transposition, pour l'accomplissement de quoi existe l'homme*' which '*va du fait à l'idéal*'.<sup>2</sup> According to this reading the sunset is a central motif in Mallarmé's work because it enacts the movement of negation through which natural phenomena are destroyed in their existence and subsequently resurrected ideally in the poetic work. The poetic Absolute would correspond to the success of this transposition.<sup>3</sup>

In Maurice Blanchot's readings of Mallarmé this conclusion is fundamentally put into question. The work of the negative cannot arrive at a final resolution and the work turns to an interrogation of its origin.<sup>4</sup> Blanchot does not explicitly deal with 'le drame solaire' as a motif in Mallarmé's work, but he does make an interpretation of the myth of Orpheus the 'displaced centre' of *L'espace littéraire*.<sup>5</sup> Of interest in this essay is that this reading takes the Orpheus story as a kind of solar myth, and 'littérature', in the particular sense he understands this word/activity, is confronted by the *other* night, the night which the Orphic text contemplates as it fails to resolve itself in the calm of the *first* night.<sup>6</sup> In this essay, I will begin by turning to *La religion de Mallarmé*, the second book dedicated to 'le drame solaire' in Mallarmé's work, in order to suggest a proximity with Blanchot's reading of the myth of Orpheus. By

<sup>1</sup> This interpretation can be found in the introductory pages to *Mallarmé et le drame solaire* (Paris : José Corti, 1959). See also 'Mallarmé's commitment to "Transposition"', Gardner Davies in *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 26 1989 Jan-April pp 52-70.

<sup>2</sup> *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 'Pléiade', 1945), p. 522 (emphases original). For further comments on 'transposition' see especially 'Crise de Vers', pp. 360-68 (p. 366ff.).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the sonnet 'Victorieusement fui le suicide beau...' *Œuvres complètes*, p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> On this subject see Ian Maclachlan, *Roger Laporte: The Orphic Text* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), p. 7: 'In this failure of self-coincidence, the reflexive moment of the Orphic text no longer consolidates its integrity as a work, but becomes instead a movement towards the other'.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris : Gallimard, 'essais', 1955). Cf. the prefatory remark: '*Un livre, même fragmentaire, a un centre qui l'attire: centre non pas fixe, mais qui se déplace par la pression du livre et les circonstances de sa composition. Centre fixe aussi qui se déplace, s'il est véritable, en restant le même et en devenant toujours plus central, plus dérobé, plus incertain et plus impérieux. Celui qui écrit le livre écrit par désir, par ignorance de ce centre. Le sentiment de l'avoir touché peut bien n'être que l'illusion de l'avoir atteint ; quand il s'agit d'un livre d'éclaircissement, il y a une sorte de loyauté méthodologique à dire vers quel point il semble que le livre se dirige ; ici, vers les pages intitulées Le regard d'Orphée.*'

<sup>6</sup> Blanchot does not refer to the Orpheus myth explicitly in these terms, i.e. he does not call it a solar myth. The linking of the Orpheus myth with the disappearance of the sun at the end of the day is, however, clear from the first paragraph of 'Le regard d'Orphée': see *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 225.

making this rapprochement I hope to suggest another perspective from which to consider both Blanchot's writings and 'le drame solaire' in Mallarmé's texts. If we see 'le drame solaire' as the site of the recollection of an originary trauma repressed until its resurgence in the work of Mallarmé (and if we pay attention to Blanchot's reading of Orpheus as a solar myth) then we can use it as a means to account for Mallarmé's significance in Blanchot's work. From this perspective, it will be argued, we can gain a fuller understanding of Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé as a site of passage to what he calls the 'l'autre nuit'.

### 1. *The Origins of Mythology*

In 1988 Bertrand Marchal put forward a striking thesis.<sup>7</sup> He focused his attentions on one of Mallarmé's marginal works which, being a translation from the English of a work of Comparative Mythology, had been subjected to little critical analysis. The work in question is *Les Dieux antiques*, a translation and subtle transformation of the Rev. G. W. Cox's *A Manual on Mythology in the Form of Question and Answer*.<sup>8</sup> The *Manual* is animated by the enthusiasm of a neophyte discovering and spreading the deep truth of a new science evangelically. The new science is Comparative Mythology and the deep truth is the revelation of a single root for the overlaid and disparate mythologies of the Indo-European cultures. Marchal summarizes this discovery as follows: 'tous les mythes, dans leur complexité contradictoires, sont réductible à quelques phrases primordiales qui évoquent l'éternel conflit de l'ombre et de la lumière, du jour et de la nuit, ou les amours contrariées du soleil et de l'aurore'.<sup>9</sup> The new science, undertaking a kind of archaeology of mythology, had, when it brushed away the dust, uncovered a unique source in the eternal battle between light and dark, and the forgotten origin of all myths was recalled in its truth as a solar

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<sup>7</sup> In *La religion de Mallarmé* (Paris : José Corti, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> *A Manual of Mythology in the Form of Question and Answer* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1867). *Les dieux antiques* is included in the *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 1157-1278. Cox's work is an introduction to mythology in which he drew on and vulgarized the ideas of Friedrich Max Muller. Marchal frequently refers to the book in terms of a vulgarization of more sophisticated, scholarly, ideas. For Marchal's attitude towards Cox see the section 'Un certain George William Cox' in *La religion de Mallarmé* (Librairie José Corti, 1988), pp. 136-38, where we read, for example: 'Cox n'est rien d'autre qu'un habile vulgarisateur' (p. 136).

<sup>9</sup> *La Religion de Mallarmé*, p. 114.



drama. So, for example, the story of Orpheus' descent into the underworld is easily reinterpreted to disclose its primordial meaning:

We see the lovely evening twilight die out before the coming night; but when they saw this, they said that the beautiful Eurydike (Eurydice) had been stung by the serpent of darkness, and that Orpheus was gone to fetch her back from the land of the dead. We see the light which had vanished in the west reappear in the east; but they said that Eurydike was now returning to the earth. And as this tender light is seen no more when the sun himself is risen, they say that Orpheus had turned round too soon to look at her, and so was parted from the wife whom he loved so dearly.<sup>10</sup>

For Cox, therefore, the Orpheus story allegorizes the primordial existential situation of man confronted with the death of the sun at the end of the day. This meaning has, however, been lost as the mythological figures themselves take on life and obscure this reading. We might say that in this movement allegory is lost to drama.

In *La Religion de Mallarmé*, Marchal's argument develops as a complex interrogation of Mallarmé's writings. He takes Mallarmé at his word when, in a prefatory note to *Divagations*, the collection of prose poems and journalistic contributions published in 1897, he remarks that 'les Divagations apparentes traitent un sujet, de pensée, unique'.<sup>11</sup> Marchal coordinates these writings with *Les Dieux antiques* to argue that Mallarmé's œuvre can be properly understood as an obsessive return to the originary anguish of man confronted by the eternal tragedy of nature.<sup>12</sup> If we add to this that Christianity has, Marchal argues, served only to 'sublimate' this anguish,<sup>13</sup> then we feel his argument lock step with some of the most powerful and

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<sup>10</sup> *A Manual of Mythology*, p. xv.

<sup>11</sup> *Igitur/Divagations/Un Coup de dés*, S. Mallarmé, ed. B. Marchal (Gallimard, 2003), p. 79. Translations from this work are my own.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that Marchal marks a departure here, within the work of translation itself, from Cox's text. While Cox tends to see the history of mythology as a groping towards the true God of Christianity, Mallarmé's focus on the trauma of an original anguish consecrates it as a primordial sacred experience toward which Christianity blocks a return passage (*La Religion de Mallarmé*, p. 161).

<sup>13</sup> See *La Religion de Mallarmé*, p. 160: 'Or si la religion tend de plus en plus à se confondre, aux époques modernes, avec une conscience morale qui identifie la divinité au souverain bien, Mallarmé rappelle ici que la fiction religieuse n'est pas d'abord ni essentiellement une morale, mais un dispositif

influential discourses of the twentieth century. The reading deploys Freudian strategies as it attempts to indicate the site of the reawakening of an originary trauma.<sup>14</sup>

The second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were marked and, in some ways characterised by, an archaeological tendency in the human sciences. When, in the latter half of the nineteenth century archaeology was constituted as an academic discipline, the famous excavations of Heinrich Schliemann at Troy and Arthur Evans on Crete were motivated by an overwhelming desire to interrogate the mythic origins of the West. These obsessions motivated other discourses as well, and so the Comparative Mythology of Max Muller and Cox sought to uncover a primordial experience which was hidden and distorted by the very stories which it had inspired. Marchal's argument in *La religion de Mallarmé* tends to inscribe Mallarmé in this archaeological tradition. He frequently suggests this tendency throughout the book.<sup>15</sup> This archeological/psychoanalytical return to an originary trauma repressed or covered over by the myths which would represent it may be understood in a more general context of concern for the origin in the human sciences. I would suggest that this concern did not disappear as the twentieth century progressed, but if anything it was further aggravated. I would argue therefore that Marchal's reading of Mallarmé is not in conflict with Blanchot's, and that the evocation of the solar myth of Orpheus in *L'Espace littéraire* tends to add weight to

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imaginaire, naturellement inconscient, qui a pour fonction de dériver ou de sublimer une angoisse originelle que l'homme est incapable de supporter.'

<sup>14</sup> Marchal's reading constantly uses psychoanalytic vocabulary to diagnose 'le drame solaire' in Mallarmé's work as the return of a repressed, originary trauma. Cf. p. 364 : 'Par rapport à la nature où l'homme moderne peut se retremper au mystère de l'origine, la société apparaît, nous l'avons vu, comme une instance de refoulement'. Cf. also pp. 245, 390.

<sup>15</sup> On this subject see for example p. 242: 'La critique théâtrale de Mallarmé a donc une fonction archéologique qui en fait le complément nécessaire d'une poésie essentiellement vouée à élucider [...] le mystère de l'homme' and p. 297: 'Toute l'entreprise mallarméenne est bien une entreprise de récupération', 'il y a donc un trésor à exhumer, sous les ruines d'une religion à l'abandon.' See also p. 331.

Marchal's argument.<sup>16</sup> It is in the context of an aggravation of the problem of the origin that I would like to approach the work of Maurice Blanchot.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. *The Turn/Towards the Other Night*

'Pourquoi cette tendance?', Blanchot asks in 'La littérature et l'expérience originelle':<sup>18</sup>

Pourquoi Mallarmé [...] ? Pourquoi, au moment même où l'absolu tend à prendre la forme de l'histoire, où les temps ont des soucis et des intérêts qui ne s'accordent plus avec la souveraineté de l'art, où le poète cède la place au littéraire et le littéraire à l'homme qui donne voix au quotidien, au moment où par force des temps, l'art disparaît, pourquoi l'art apparaît-il pour la première fois comme une recherche où quelque chose d'essentiel est en jeu [...] ?

These remarks come at the end of a passage in which Blanchot reflects on the end of art as it was famously announced by Hegel in his *Aesthetics*<sup>19</sup>. What does it mean to say that 'through the force of time art disappears'? For Hegel it means that Spirit has attained a level of historical development such that the artwork is no equal to the task of containing the content it would be required to communicate. Art has reached its internal limit and the very thing which it cannot do without as an art-work, its sensuousness, now makes it incapable of fulfilling the spiritual task of the age. It is left to philosophy to articulate the historical development of Spirit as it becomes the only sphere able to comprehend the age, attaining historical completion in Absolute Knowledge. This passage to the Absolute may be coordinated with one experience of

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. The discussion of the night and the *other* night in 'Le regard d'Orphée'. For more on Blanchot's distinction see 'Le piège de la nuit' in *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 219-24.

<sup>17</sup> For more on the question of the 'origin' in Blanchot's work, see the chapter entitled 'La question de l'origine: la loi, l'œuvre, le langage, l'imaginaire' in Michel Chantal, *Maurice Blanchot et le déplacement d'Orphée* (Saint-Genouph : Nizet, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 292

<sup>19</sup> See the *Aesthetics*, Vol. I. G. W. F. Hegel, trans. by T. M. Knox. (Clarendon Press, 1975) p. 11

the night.<sup>20</sup> We may take here, to illustrate this, another of Hegel's famous declarations, this time from his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*: '... the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk';<sup>21</sup> the passage to philosophy takes place at the end of the 'great Day's work of Spirit' which, Hegel says, progresses in its development, like the sun, from East to West.<sup>22</sup>

Now, Blanchot does not simply contest Hegel. What is remarkable for him is that on this limit, where the art work *should* withdraw, where by rights it is exhausted, something else *happens*. This is the fascination of 'littérature'.<sup>23</sup> Earlier in the book, in a section entitled 'Approche de l'espace littéraire', Blanchot wrote of Mallarmé's experience:

Il semble que l'expérience propre de Mallarmé commence au moment où il passe de la considération de l'œuvre faite, celle qui est toujours tel poème particulier [...] au souci par lequel l'œuvre devient la recherche de son origine et veut s'identifier avec son origine [...] Quand Mallarmé se demande 'Quelque chose comme les Lettres existe-t-il ?', cette question est la littérature même, elle est la littérature quand celui-ci est devenue le souci de sa propre essence.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In a section of *L'Espace littéraire* entitled 'Le dehors, la nuit', Blanchot gives a brief sketch of how he understands this first night: 'Dans la nuit, tout a disparu. C'est la première nuit [...] là s'achève et s'accomplit la parole dans la profondeur silencieuse qui la garantit comme son sens' (p. 213). And further on: 'Dans la [première] nuit [first night], mourir comme dormir, est encore un présent du monde, *une ressource du jour*: c'est la belle limite qui accomplit, le moment de l'achèvement, la perfection', p. 215 (my emphasis). The first night is the still, silent, space in which language recovers its meaning, and as such it is a resource of the 'day'. The Hegelian resonances of this stage of Blanchot's argument are clear.

<sup>21</sup> *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. by Allen W. Wood, trans. by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 23

<sup>22</sup> *The Philosophy of History*, G. W. F. Hegel, trans. J. Sibree. (Dover Publications, 1956) p. 103. I have written at greater length on these issues in an article published in *Parrhesia* 09 (2010), pp. 80-93. 'The Tragedy of Nature: The Sunset and the Destruction of Metaphor in the Writings of Mallarmé and Derrida'.

<sup>23</sup> 'Fascination' is Blanchot's word and it plays an important role in his writings as he analyses the predicament of the modern writer. On this subject see Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): "Fascination" is the name Blanchot gives to the movement of writing that, withdrawing from determinations of space and time, draws the reader, by virtue of its very powerlessness, into that *other* or literary space. There it affirms itself 'in the indeterminate milieu of fascination' (p. 137). See also Michel Chantal, *Maurice Blanchot et le déplacement d'Orphée*, p. 25

<sup>24</sup> *L'Espace littéraire*, pp. 43-44.

When Blanchot notes that as art disappears it in the same movement appears for the first time as ‘une recherche où quelque chose d’essentiel est en jeu’, the essential he speaks of is art’s own essence, that is to say, with ‘littérature’ art has begun to interrogate its own conditions of possibility, to be tormented by the question of what it *itself* is. For Blanchot, this is extraordinary and contradictory, and it forces the artwork into impossible and paradoxical movements. He describes this situation through a reading of the Greek myth of Orpheus.

### 3. *Orpheus*

For Blanchot the myth of Orpheus strangely describes the torment of the modern writer, despite its great antiquity. Reading the section entitled ‘Le Regard d’Orphée’ we should remember that the ‘day’ of which Blanchot speaks is the inter-subjective space of human action.<sup>25</sup> It is the place where actions have meaning, a meaning generated and guaranteed through their inscription in a historical context. The first night, as it was encountered above, belongs to this day, it is the rest that comes at the end of the day and it is complicit in the meaning through which the day contemplates and comprehends itself, in its *history*. As has already been noted, this night is coordinated with the historical accomplishment of the Absolute, it is the dialectical resolution of the day at the end of human history. When Orpheus descends to the underworld, into the calm of the first night, he follows his love who he may bring back with him to the ‘day’ provided he does not turn to look at her. Orpheus is therefore tormented by an unquenchable desire. He *must* have Eurydice and bring her back to the ‘day’ but he *must not* turn to contemplate her, he cannot have her

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<sup>25</sup> For Blanchot’s comments on the ‘day’ see ‘La littérature et la droit à la mort’ in *La Part du feu* (Paris : Gallimard, 1949), pp. 291-331.

according to the strictures of the day; that is to say he cannot ascribe meaning and inscribe her in the historical context. She disrupts this context, and this is why Blanchot says that: 'She is the instant when the essence of night approaches as the *other* night.'<sup>26</sup> The *other* night 'appears' as the ever receding, ungraspable origin of the work; impossible to integrate in the work, it works towards its disintegration, or *désœuvrement*, to use Blanchot's term.<sup>27</sup>

The modern writer, at least the modern writer who is attentive to the essential demand of the work, finds himself in Orpheus' predicament.<sup>28</sup> In an earlier essay, 'La littérature et le droit à la mort,' Blanchot made more specific use of Hegel's work to indicate this Orphic obsession. 'Literature' uses language; this is an extremely obvious statement, so obvious that it can very easily go unquestioned, but what happens when 'littérature' begins to become aware of this and to wonder what is going on when it uses a word to name something? In an early section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel wrote of people who consider that they have an unmediated access to the sensuous world:

They speak of the existence of *external* objects, which can be more precisely defined as *actual*, absolutely *singular*, *wholly personal*, *individual* things... this existence, they say, has absolute certainty and truth. They *mean* 'this bit of paper on which I am writing – or rather have written – 'this'; but what they mean is not what they say. If they actually wanted to *say* 'this' bit of paper which they mean, if they wanted to *say* it, then this is impossible because the sensuous This that is meant *cannot be reached* by language, which belongs to consciousness, i.e. to that which is inherently universal.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 171

<sup>27</sup> 'Appears' is a problematic word in this context as the one thing the *other* night does not do it is to appear as such. It only appears in its disappearance and this is its terrible torment for the writer.

<sup>28</sup> It is not every writer who would find themselves in this torment. It is perfectly possible to write without being troubled by this turn, to write in and for the light of the 'day'.

<sup>29</sup> *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. G. W. F. Hegel, trans. J. N. Finlay. (Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 66.

‘Le langage’, says Blanchot in ‘La littérature et le droit à la mort’, ‘sait que son royaume, c’est le jour et non pas l’intimité de l’irrévélé’.<sup>30</sup> But what happens when language turns round on itself to search for that which precedes the ‘day’? Blanchot’s reply is that ‘littérature’ happens : ‘Le langage de la littérature est la recherche de ce moment qui la précède’.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

(404) What is the pilgrimage of Orpheus?

The journey which during the hours of night the sun was supposed to take in order to bring back the dawn in the morning, which he does only to destroy her with his dazzling splendour.<sup>32</sup>

The Comparative Mythology of Max Muller, vulgarized in the work of Cox, attempts to reveal an archetypal myth underlying the scattered stories of Indo-European culture. Hidden and distorted by the dust, there lies, just beneath the surface, a Solar Drama, and the multiple, overlaid, myths are opened to a true reading which shows them to be variations on the one theme which obsesses the mind of primitive man, the eternal battle between light and dark. Mallarmé, Marchal argues, penetrates through the sedimented layers, overcomes the Christian sublimation, to rediscover this primordial conflict.<sup>33</sup> The trauma of the disappearance of the sun at the end of the day, repressed by the myths and dreams that it had engendered, rushes back to modern consciousness in Mallarmé’s writings. Mallarmé does not, of course, attempt to reinstate any primitive mythology in his work. It is rather that in his acute attention to what he is doing when he writes, he rediscovers this primordial myth, indicating the

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<sup>30</sup> *La Part de feu*, p. 329.

<sup>31</sup> *La Part de feu*, p. 329.

<sup>32</sup> *A Manual of Mythology in the Form of Question and Answer*, p. 107

<sup>33</sup> Mallarmé’s short critical essay ‘Hamlet’ is exemplary in this regard. For Marchal’s reading see *La religion de Mallarmé*, pp. 220-222 and 236-244.

existential situation of man confronted by the death of the sun, and along with that his own mortality. For Marchal it is in Mallarmé's texts that the repression disintegrates and this originary trauma, obscured by the very myths which related it, comes back in an incessant recollection and inscription in his writings.

We saw above that Blanchot's work can be approached as an aggravation of the problem of the origin. I hoped to show during the course of the essay that 'littérature', for him, is tormented by an obsession with its own essence, that it is constituted through a turn inward towards an infinitely elusive origin which it will never be able to bring to the light of 'day'. If the 'day' is meaning and history, then 'littérature' brings us back, through an interrogation of its own essence or possibility to an obscure region which precedes the 'day'. 'Littérature' is the 'madness of the day' because it is obsessed by the 'day's' precondition which cannot appear in the 'day'.<sup>34</sup>

The strangest thing is that this turn towards the *other* night happens at nightfall. That is, it is only with the passage to the Absolute that the problem of the origin becomes infinitely aggravated. Hence Blanchot's insistent questioning – 'Why Mallarmé?' The archaeological work of the late nineteenth century raised the problem of the origin and this, according to Marchal, became acute in the work of Stéphane Mallarmé. I have indicated above how, for Marchal, Mallarmé's text is involved in an incessant evocation of this repressed trauma. It was Blanchot's peculiar ability to be confronted in his reading by the contradictory movement of the modern text, and to show how this could be understood as a profound turn. It is in 'littérature' that the modern text becomes tormented by the impossible demand of the *other* night. If Davies's reading of 'le drame solaire' suggests an accomplished resolution, a sunset

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<sup>34</sup> *La folie du jour* is the title of a short *récit* by Maurice Blanchot (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973). It was an important text for Jacques Derrida in his reading of Blanchot, See the essays collected in *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986).



which leads to a victorious resurrection in the poetic absolute, then Marchal's reading perhaps suggests something else; the return of a trauma which destroys that accomplishment. We have here then two sunsets, an end which doubles itself in its own movement of closure, one of these ends leads to rest and repose at the end of the day, and one opens an entirely *other* space.

**‘Those women who were fighting men’:  
Monique Wittig’s *Les Guérillères*, a mythical re-vision**

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Abstract: ‘We can analyse a society’s dreams and anxieties through the myths in which it chooses to mirror itself’.<sup>1</sup> In a twentieth century devastated by war, many turned to the classical myths of antiquity for solace and guidance. In the latter half of the century, many others turned to those myths in the struggle for representation and freedom from oppression. Isobel Hurst states: ‘Reworkings of the androcentric mythology of the ancient world proved indispensable for the feminists who fought against restrictions on women’s identity in the second half of the twentieth century.’<sup>2</sup>

Monique Wittig responds to the feminist debate of the twentieth century with her text, *Les Guérillères*. In this article I shall argue that *Les Guérillères* constitutes a feminist reworking of the patriarchal epic as epitomised by Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It is the *Iliad*, that ‘canonical text of warfare and male heroism’,<sup>3</sup> which provides the main inspiration for her feminist epic. In blatant defiance of the assertion in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* that ‘it is not womanly to desire combat’, Wittig places the female centre stage. The ‘guérillères’ are the central protagonists of the work, complete with their own unique weapons, their own military procedure, and their own community. With her text, Wittig questions the status of the male-dominated perspective of the patriarchal epic. Aware that myth is instrumental in both the establishment and challenge of deep-seated ideologies and stereotypes, Wittig chooses to manipulate this duplicity and execute an attack from within. She exploits classical myth to voice the concerns and experiences of the female and to reinsert woman into male-dominated history. In this way, I shall claim that her work constitutes a gap in the patriarchal transmission and reception of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

‘Mythical characters or plots offer writers a distinctive perspective on the language and ideas of their day, enabling them to explore contemporary life with some critical distance’.<sup>4</sup> This is

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<sup>1</sup>Theodore Ziolkowski, ‘The Fragmented Text: The Classics and Postwar European Literature’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 6, no. 4 (Spring 2000), 549-562, (p. 562).

<sup>2</sup> Isobel Hurst, ‘“We’ll all be Penelopes then”: Art and Domesticity in American Women’s Poetry, 1958-1996 in *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English*, edited by S.J Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) pp.275-294, (p. 278).

<sup>3</sup> Ellen O’ Gorman, ‘A Woman’s history of Warfare’ in *Laughing with Medusa: Classical myth and feminist thought*, edited by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) pp.189-207 (p. 201).

<sup>4</sup> Isobel Hurst, ‘“We’ll all be Penelopes then”: Art and Domesticity in American Women’s Poetry, 1958-1996” in *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English*, edited by S. J. Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) pp. 275-294, (p. 275). The quotation I have used in my title, ‘Those women who were fighting men’, is from Homer, the *Iliad*, trans. by Robert Fitzgerald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Book III, p. 48.

particularly pertinent with regard to Monique Wittig, who engages with the world of myth and epic in her texts, offering innovative and subversive interpretations of some of the best-known and most established stories from ancient mythology.<sup>5</sup> Her first novel *Les Guérillères*,<sup>6</sup> written in 1969, is an appropriation of the *Iliad* and reflects a turn to the classical tradition that characterized the literature of a twentieth-century struggling to come to terms with its postwar world.<sup>7</sup> The title of Wittig's work signals, indeed proclaims, the first departure from her Homeric source, and immediately reveals her objective: the manipulation and refashioning of an ancient text to convey a female perspective. *Les Guérillères* – a neologism formed from *les guerrières* and *la guérilla* – refers to a community of Amazon warriors who are engaged in an epic battle. But this is not a battle for land, for wealth, or for Helen. This is a universal war for 'renversement'. The opening page of *Les Guérillères* acts as a synopsis of the themes and objectives that are developed within the text. But the rhythm and flow of the words, and the repeated mantras 'les mortes les mortes les mortes' and 'les phénix les phénix les phénix (7)' also create the impression of a political manifesto; a rousing speech to a legion of followers. This impression is reinforced by the fact that this segment is printed in block capitals. The final word of this introduction, the word on which the inspiring speech closes is 'renversement': 'ELLES AFFIRMENT TRIOMPHANT QUE TOUT GESTE EST RENVERSEMENT' (7). Wittig's feminist views and objectives are clear from the start. This is literature with a political and ideological purpose.

That Wittig gives prominence to these warrior women is a subversion of the *Iliad*, whose primary focus is on the male. In this sense, it reflects the patriarchal society of

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<sup>5</sup> Her second novel *L'Opoponax* engages with Homer's *Odyssey* amongst others, and her third novel *Virgile, Non* is a reworking of Dante's *Inferno* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. For further discussion see Jean H. Duffy, 'Monique Wittig' in *Beyond the Nouveau Roman*, edited by Michael Tilby (Oxford: Berg Publishers Ltd, 1990), and Fiona Cox, 'Monique Wittig' in her forthcoming *Sibylline Sisters – Virgil's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing*.

<sup>6</sup> Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères* (Paris: Minuit, 1969). All references will be to this edition.

<sup>7</sup> For further discussion of the classics in the post-war world, see Theodore Ziolkowski, "The Fragmented Text: The Classics and Postwar European Literature", *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 6:4 (Spring 2000), 549-62.

antiquity where the father is head of the household and inheritance is patrilineal. Here the term patriarchy refers to the organization of the body politic and its reflection in the microcosm of the home. Within this patriarchal world, women are conspicuously absent, regarded as objects, or defined in relation to men. The abduction of Helen provokes war between the Trojans and Achaeans. But it is male pride and the defense of a threatened masculinity that is truly at stake. Helen is a possession and her abduction constitutes an attack on male authority, as evidenced by the fact that lust for victory and glory quickly emerges as the driving force of battle.<sup>8</sup> While female characters occupy a place in the *Iliad*, it is largely as passive pawns within a male-dominated world. Even the goddesses, apparent symbols of a strong female identity, are subject to this restrictive identification. Athena, goddess of war, is repeatedly defined in relation to her father: ‘daughter of Zeus who bears the storm-cloud’ (Book v. p. 76). This greatly undermines her strength and influence, which are now seen to stem from the archetypal patriarchal figure of Zeus. In this context, the patriarchal world of epic now seems to embody the modern connotation of female oppression at the hands of male dominance.

Through her writing, Wittig is determined to weaken and overturn this patriarchal exclusivity. Throughout *Les Guérillères*, these Amazon warriors are depicted in Iliadic scenes. They frequently train with their weapons and travel to towns, recruiting new warriors and enlisting them into their battle (120). In addition, the Amazon women defend their city against attackers in a passage highly reminiscent of the conflict fought around Troy in the *Iliad* (Book XXII, pp. 378-395). Here, the ‘guérillères’ steadfastly and gallantly fight for their city: ‘Elles [...] soutiennent le siège, ne bougeant pas de leur place si ce n’est pour porter secours à l’une d’entre elles ou pour remplacer une morte’ (144). Significantly, the enemy is male, and they misinterpret the war tactics of the ‘guérillères’. Owen Heathcote states: ‘the

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<sup>8</sup> Hector says: ‘Now when the son of Cronos / Crooked Wit has given me a chance / of winning glory, pinning the Achaeans / back on the sea’, the *Iliad*, Book XVIII, p. 329.

*guérillères*' exposure of their breasts is interpreted, incorrectly, by their enemy as a gesture of submission'.<sup>9</sup> This apparent 'geste de soumission' (143) symbolises the exact opposite, with the Amazon warriors unleashing war on the male attackers. The (mis-)interpretation by the male enemy reflects the indoctrinated patriarchal mode of thought, where display of the female body is synonymous with submission to the male.

By appropriating scenes characteristic of the *Iliad*, Wittig is creating a female epic that can facilitate the development of an independent subjecthood. The active construction of a female identity is further assisted by the female names that are listed throughout the text. On the one hand, this list reinforces the identification of *Les Guérillères* as a feminist epic. The catalogue of female names punctuates the text on every sixth page, appearing in capital letters on an otherwise blank page. Wittig is determined to draw attention to this list of mythical, historical, and fictional female characters originating from different cultures and different epochs. This list supplants the endless list of heroes common to the *Iliad*, 'a standard set-piece in the epic', and in doing so challenges the 'divisive, patriotic dimension of the traditional epic'.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, this list represents the displaced female genealogy. The male genealogical system is privileged, and Homer, as the father of the patriarchal epic, is the first of the sacred male ancestors. However, women are deprived of such ancestry and this has repercussions for the development of female identity. Marie-Andree Roy states: 'Female genealogies are defined as cultural filiations that link women with their spiritual mothers – these female figures who are so significant as references in the construction of female identity'.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the suppression of female genealogies strengthens patriarchal dominance. Amongst the goddesses that she describes are those present in the *Iliad* but who

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<sup>9</sup> Owen Heathcote, 'Hermeneutic Circles and Cycles of Violence: "La fille aux yeux d'or", "Histoire d'O", "Les Guerillères"', *South Central Review*, 19:4 (Winter 2002-Spring 2003), 44-62 (p. 53).

<sup>10</sup> Both quotations from Duffy, 'Monique Wittig', p. 209.

<sup>11</sup> Marie-Andree Roy, "Women and Spirituality in the Writings of Luce Irigaray", trans. by Sharon Gubbay Helfer, in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 19.

remain trapped within and subject to the patriarchal tradition. The many other names seem obscure and unrecognisable but, in fact, identify strong female figures from the past and the present, from real and fictional domains. One example is Éponine from *Les Misérables*. By choosing the lesser-known Éponine, who fights and dies on the barricade at the Rue de la Chanvrerie, over Cosette, Wittig is foregrounding the female presence within the French national epic. The obscurity of the list serves to highlight the gendered nature of history that has consigned many of its most influential females to the ether. In contrast, Wittig's female genealogy is inclusive and universal, offering 'spiritual mothers' to women from all cultures and ages. In the words of Cixous: 'In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history'.<sup>12</sup> Wittig's catalogue of female characters restores the displaced female ancestors, thereby renewing the construction of female identity.

Wittig also identifies and scrutinizes inconsistencies and contradictions within the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.<sup>13</sup> She exploits the ambiguity surrounding women's status in antiquity, for although a woman's life may appear expendable, it is in fact essential for the male transferral of power upon which patriarchal society is built. The female body thus becomes the object of suspicion and patriarchal dominance. Patriarchal society needs to control the female body and deny female sexuality in order to preserve the male transferral of power. One of the most effective and popular methods of doing this is to extend patriarchal dominance to discourse. Through its strangulation of the female voice, patriarchal society silences female (sexual) identity. Boose remarks: 'the talkative woman is frequently imagined as synonymous with the sexually available woman, her open mouth the signifier for invited entrance elsewhere. Hence the diction that associates "silent" with "chaste" and stigmatises women's public

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<sup>12</sup> Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1:4 (Summer 1976), 875-93 (p. 882).

<sup>13</sup> Homer, the *Odyssey*, trans. by Walter Shewring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). All subsequent references will be to this edition.

speech as a behaviour fraught with cultural signs resonating with a distinctly sexual kind of shame'.<sup>14</sup> Given the 'obvious relation between the individual body and the body politic', the oppositional pairings of silent/chaste and talkative/promiscuous originate from strong political motivation, where control and possession of the female becomes synonymous with the preservation of the state.<sup>15</sup> Such views evoke the scold's bridle, the equivalent of a verbal chastity belt, which was frequently used in Elizabethan society to curb woman's tongue and, by association, her sexual promiscuity. This reflects the 'obsessive energy [...] invested in exerting control over the unruly woman – the woman who was exercising her sexuality or her tongue under her own control rather than under the rule of a man'.<sup>16</sup>

In response to the oppressive constraints and linguistic domination of patriarchal society, Wittig engages with Homer's *Odyssey* and the episodes that depict strong female characters. She refers explicitly to the Sirens who are described in Book XII of the *Odyssey*. The Sirens are represented as formidable adversaries whose song enraptures men and leads them to their death: 'the high clear tones of the Sirens will bewitch him. They sit in a meadow; men's corpses lie heaped up all round them, mouldering upon the bones as the skin decays' (Book XII, p. 144). Significantly, the power of the Sirens derives from their voice. This is perceived as being strange or 'bewitching' within the patriarchal world of epic. Wittig seizes upon this description of the Sirens and appropriates it as a powerful image of female identity: 'Il y a quelque part une sirène [...] Quelquefois elle se met à chanter. Elles disent que de son chant on n'entend qu'un O continu' (16). In doing so, she exposes the contradictions inherent within the patriarchal conception of women and the male anxiety that underpins them. Most of the adversaries that Odysseus encounters during his trials are female and the threat that they pose stems predominately from the open female mouth. Calypso and Circe

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<sup>14</sup> Lynda E. Boose, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42:2 (Summer 1991), 179-213 (p. 196).

<sup>15</sup> June Deery, "Science for Feminists: Margaret Atwood's Body of Knowledge", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43, no.4 (Winter 1997), 470-86 (p. 475).

<sup>16</sup> Boose, p. 195.

are two goddesses who detain and hold Odysseus captive through their ‘bewitching’ powers. Each is continually described as ‘the goddess with the braided hair, with human speech and with strange powers’ (Book x, p. 116). Power and voice are somehow seen as sinister and inexplicable when they belong to a female. This is particularly evident in relation to Circe. As the previous quotation reveals, she is described as possessing ‘strange powers’, while her brother, Aeetes, is described as a ‘magician’ (Book x, p. 116). Both brother and sister possess knowledge of magic and potions, but they are defined differently. The female is removed from the general and therefore masculine ‘magician’, and confined within the particular and therefore suspicious ‘goddess of strange powers’.<sup>17</sup> The language reserved for the female has negative and sinister connotations. This association of the open female mouth with danger reflects male anxiety and fear of the female. The female mouth is a symbol of orality and speech, but also of sexuality. Consequently, the female voice is denied in an attempt to control the female and curb her sexuality and power.

Wittig infuses her depiction of the ‘guérillères’ with qualities of the fearsome female characters of the *Odyssey* in open defiance of the female oppression that male anxiety imposes. The warriors possess the open mouths and powerful song of the Sirens: ‘les combattantes sont vues, chantant sans s’arrêter, leurs grandes bouches ouvertes sur les dents blanches’ (144). Their battle cries are powerful enough to weaken the resolve and valour of the enemy (147). With their mouths, the site of the threatening and threatened female voice, significantly open in battle, they attack pre-existing convention and bring death to patriarchal dominance.

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<sup>17</sup> The original Greek text compounds this reading. The word for Circe is δεινὴ (10.136), which is described as ‘fearful, terrible; in Hom[er], of persons and things’ by Henry G. Liddell, and Henry R. Scott in *A Greek-English Lexicon, Ninth Edition, With a Revised Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). For Aeetes the word is ὀλοόφρονος, (10.137), which the Liddell and Scott translate as ‘mischief, baleful (so always in [*The Iliad*]); but in [*The Odyssey*], crafty, sagacious, of persons’. Stanford comments on the connotations of this description: ‘in [*The Iliad*] this epithet is confined to savage animals; in [*The Odyssey*] it is applied to Atlas [...], to Aietes brother of Circe (10, 137) and to Minos (11, 322), none of whom show any notably evil or cruel characteristics in H[omer]’, W. B. Stanford, *Homer: Odyssey. 2 vols* (London: Duckworth, 2009).



In this way, Wittig's work acts as a Trojan Horse. In her essay entitled "The Trojan Horse", Wittig uses the Trojan Horse as a metaphor for works that refashion conventional linguistic usage and, by association, conventional modes of thought. She says:

A literary work with a new form must operate as a war machine, because its design and goal is to pulverise the old forms and formal conventions [...] to sap and blast out the ground where it was planted. Then it must achieve universalization, to create a global form of work.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, Wittig employs recognisable terms, such as 'elles', only to strip away their established meaning so that they can be seen in a new and 'unsexed' context. Similarly, Wittig exploits narrative form, taking the traditional epic form and subjecting it to a radical overhaul. Elements characteristic of the epic, such as the litany of heroes, the depiction of battle, and godly intervention are recast in a narrative that both aesthetically and formally defies convention. In *Les Guérillères* continuity of plot, characterization, and textual aesthetics are challenged. The text is divided into isolated, detached paragraphs, creating a fragmentary narrative; a narrative of *lacunae*. Here style reflects theory. Diane Crowder perceives that 'lacunae are absences which signify', signaling the absence of women from discourse, from history, in short from culture.<sup>19</sup> Throughout *Les Guérillères*, and particularly in the closing rallying speech where once again block capitals and repetition emphasize the point, Wittig urges women to appropriate these *lacunae*, which constitute a powerful weapon in the overthrow of patriarchal oppression, allowing women to reinsert themselves into language and history: 'LACUNES LACUNES LACUNES / CONTRE TEXTES / CONTRE SENS [...] / SANS RELACHE / GESTE RENVERSEMENT' (204).

Wittig's use of the Trojan Horse as a metaphor for such works that subvert patriarchal convention is, in itself, an example of a 'war machine'. The description in the *Odyssey* casts

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<sup>18</sup> Monique Wittig, "The Trojan Horse", in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp.68-75 (p. 68-69). This essay was first published in English, appearing in translation as "Le cheval de Troie," in *Vlasta*, 4 (1985), 36 – 41.

<sup>19</sup> Diane Griffin Crowder, "Amazons and Mothers? Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous and theories of women's writing", *Contemporary Literature*, 24:2 (Summer 1983), 117-44 (p. 128).

the Trojan Horse as a female symbol. The men emerge from the horse as from the womb: 'Then the bard sang how the sons of the Achaeans forsook their cavernous hiding-place, slid from the horse and sacked the town' (Book VIII. p.97). The phallic Trojan Horse gives birth to warrior men, thereby becoming a symbol of both the masculine and the feminine.<sup>20</sup>

This multifaceted attack on patriarchal epic allows Wittig to 'pulverise the old forms and formal conventions'.<sup>21</sup> This done, she advances towards 'universalization and [the creation] of a global form of work'.<sup>22</sup> As *Les Guérillères* reaches its conclusion, Wittig also brings its world closer to her objective of the universal. The enemy in the warriors' war is sexual difference, not exclusively its male perpetrators. Duffy states: 'the women, at the end of the novel, are offering men a second chance, an opportunity to participate in the inception of a new society in which difference and its inevitable side-effect – warfare – will be eliminated'.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, women welcome men into this new world where each individual exists equally, irrespective of gender. This sense of harmony is encapsulated in the 'co-operative renaming of the elements of this pristine world'.<sup>24</sup> The act of naming, which in the previous mode of exclusively male privilege had conferred power and assumed a dominant master/submissive subject relationship, is now a universal right.

It is ironic that myth can operate as the perfect vehicle for women to (re)write themselves into a tradition and culture from which they have been excluded. Writing does not begin with the effacement of mythical names, as posited by Lacoue-Labarthe. Rather, mythical names provide the opening for a way of writing that rewrites the patriarchal dominance of myth from within and carves out a new mythical voice. This reworking of myth in turn inscribes itself into cultural heritage, thereby ensuring the continued development and growth intrinsic

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<sup>20</sup> For discussion of the paradoxical status of the Trojan Horse as a phallic symbol and a symbol of feminist writing, see Linda Zerilli, "The Trojan Horse of Universalism: Language as a "War Machine" in the Writings of Monique Wittig", *Social Text*, 25-26 (1990), 146-70 (p. 152).

<sup>21</sup> Wittig, "The Trojan Horse", p. 68-69.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>23</sup> Duffy, "Monique Wittig", p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

to culture and its survival. Through its versatility and dynamism on the one hand and its familiarity on the other, myth affords a balance that prevents the stagnation of art and ensures the continued renewal of culture. Myth also plays a key political role. Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard attest to the role of classical myth in the development of feminist thought, notably opening their introduction with reference to *Les Guérillères* and in particular the closing speech.<sup>25</sup> Adrienne Rich states: 'Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival'.<sup>26</sup> Wittig is not challenging the patriarchy of Homer's era nor indeed is she joining in the feminist appraisal of the *Iliad* as a patriarchal text. Rather she is responding to the patriarchal transmission and reception of Homer's poems and the wider classical tradition. The distinction is a crucial one. Wittig perceives in Homer the myriad alternative interpretations and an accommodation of the female voice that the cultural authority of the patriarchal tradition seeks to deny and silence. Her work challenges the oppressive portrayal of women and removes the female from the overbearing shadow of patriarchal representation. In *Les Guérillères* Wittig is laying the foundation for a new conception of female identity. Through her mythical transmutations, Wittig is reinserting the displaced female into the gaps of history.

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<sup>25</sup> See *Laughing with Medusa: Classical myth and feminist thought*, ed. by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and in particular p. 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Adrienne Rich, "When we dead awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", *College English*, 34, no. 1, Women, Writing and Teaching (October 1972), 18-30 (p. 18).

**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 Grassie 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).

**Myth as Model: The Narratives of Cronus and Jacob in  
Sylvie Germain's *Le Livre des Nuits* and *Nuit-d'Ambre*.**

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**Abstract:** In this essay, as part of a larger project on the role and status of myth in her writings, I shall examine the ways Sylvie Germain employs two mythical narratives – the narrative of the Titan Cronus from Greek mythology, and the story of Jacob's fight with a man (usually thought to be God, or an angel) in Genesis 32, in her first two novels, *Le Livre des Nuits* (1985) and *Nuit-d'Ambre* (1987). Taking Socrates's desire to offer censored versions of certain myths for the education of the guardians of the city (in Plato's *Republic*) as a starting point, I ask whether sanitized versions of myths would provide useful models for a reader. In Germain's novels, a character does indeed try to use the Cronus story as a model, with disastrous results. But the story of Jacob's fight with the angel, reenacted in *Nuit-d'Ambre*, results in a newfound perception that accounts for that which is usually imperceptible. As such, the novels use myth to expose the absences and the gaps within mythical narratives. Such narratives cannot thus serve as models for behaviour unless one is aware of those gaps. The novels eventually redirect the striving and struggling of their characters toward an attentive seeking of that which is hidden, an attention that is also a space for an ethical relationship with another person and with the world.

‘But even if these stories were true, they should be passed over in silence, I would think, and not told so casually to the foolish and the young’.<sup>1</sup> In this statement Plato's Socrates advocates the silencing of those mythical stories that show the gods engaged in violence, plotting against each other, or otherwise serving as poor models for those whom he imagines as guardians of his ideal city. Since the philosopher maintains that these stories *must* be false,<sup>2</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy can describe Plato's definition of the mythical mode of discourse by writing that ‘myths are fictions, and these fictions tell sacrilegious lies about the divine’<sup>3</sup> but these fictions may be seen as a model for acts and behaviours. But when Socrates proposes, a few lines

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 378a.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 377e.

<sup>3</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in ‘The Nazi Myth’, trans. by Brian Holmes, *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1990), 291-312 (p. 297). See also: *Le Mythe nazi* (1980 ; La Tour de l'Aigue: L'Aube, 1991).

further, to suppress the more unsavory elements of the old stories, would the new versions not still be telling lies, sanctimonious ones this time, about the divine?<sup>4</sup> Would the silencing of undesirable behaviour remove it entirely from the model or would traces of it remain on the margins of perception?

In this essay, I shall examine the ways Sylvie Germain employs two mythical narratives within her first two novels, *Le Livre des Nuits* (1985) and *Nuit-d'Ambre* (1987).<sup>5</sup> Her novels show the dangers of affixing a mythical narrative to one's own story, yet in rewriting mythical tales, her own works take on mythical characteristics. The key to this seeming contradiction lies in the fact that Germain, in these novels, exposes the absences and the gaps within myths. They cannot thus serve as models for behaviour unless one is aware of those gaps. The novels eventually redirect the striving and struggling of their characters toward an attentive seeking of that which is hidden, an attention that is also a space for an ethical relationship with another person and with the world.

What Socrates offers as his first example of the sort of story that ought to be banished, or told to a very restricted few, is the history of Zeus's father Cronus.<sup>6</sup> According to Hesiod, Cronus, son of Earth (*Gaia*) and Sky (*Ouranos*), the youngest of the Titans, was 'crooked-counseled' and the 'most terrible'.<sup>7</sup> It was he who volunteered to avenge his siblings, the Cyclopes and the Hundred-handers, imprisoned within Earth by Sky, by castrating Sky with the

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<sup>4</sup> For example: 'But as for saying that a god, who is himself good, is the cause of evils, we will fight that in every way' in Plato, *Republic*, 380b.

<sup>5</sup> The second novel continues the story of the first, although Germain has stated that in fact, *Le Livre des Nuits* began life as a preface to *Nuit-d'Ambre*, establishing a genealogy – an origin myth – for the eponymous main character of the second novel. This preface exceeded its bounds and became a novel in its own right. Cf. Sylvie Germain, 'Sylvie Germain: L'obsession du mal', *Magazine littéraire*, 286 (March 1991), 64.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 377e.

<sup>7</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, ed. and trans. by Glenn W. Most (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), ll. 18, 137, and 168 for the first quotation, and 138 for the second.

sickle that Earth brought forth for this purpose.<sup>8</sup> Warned by his father that vengeance would come, Cronus swallowed each of his own children for fear that they would eventually betray him; only Zeus, with the help of his mother, was able to escape this fate.<sup>9</sup> It is a story, then, of unspeakable violence, of characters acting out of fear and an instinct for self-preservation. No one acts with concern for any kind of entity larger than him- or herself, and certainly no one hesitates to use violence to achieve her/his ends. Clearly, it would form a poor model for the guardians of the city and just as much for the ordinary citizen, and one can understand why Socrates would wish to exclude it from his ideal city.

The two mythical narratives that I will discuss in Sylvie Germain's *Le Livre des nuits* and *Nuit-d'Ambre* are this story of Cronus devouring his offspring, and the story from the Hebrew Bible of Jacob's encounter, and battle, with a mysterious figure thought to represent the divine, recounted in Genesis 32. A common thread between these stories is the fact that they both feature characters who struggle or strain: Sky names his sons the Titans, which means 'strainers' and the being with whom Jacob wrestles renames him Israel, that is, 'one who strives with god.'<sup>10</sup>

Each of these myths has a different status in the novels: Jacob's encounter is quoted as the epigraph to *Nuit-d'Ambre*, which means it stands in the background of the entire text; also, the story is enacted at the novel's climax. The Cronus narrative is a less important plot element, though it does occur at a key juncture. The presence of these myths within the novels contributes to a certain epic tone, but these stories do not function as the sort of sanitized models or types

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ll. 154-82. I follow Most's translation in using Earth and Sky instead of *Gaia* and *Ouranos*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., ll. 453-506.

<sup>10</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, l. 208; Genesis 32. 28.



that Plato has Socrates advocate.<sup>11</sup> I will argue instead that Germain's fiction points to the holes in any such narrative; that is, to its inability to account for the intricacies of human experience when used as a mimetic model. The mythical name, as a marker for mythological discourse, only exists in Germain's novels with its insufficiencies exposed, the way that its silences and hesitations fail to account adequately for what it is meant to signify. As we will see, the protagonist's surname, Péniel, means 'face of God' but does not signify glory or even remembrance of a particular glorious narrative, but the back-and-forth of interpreting narratives filled with silences and gaps.

*Le Livre des Nuits* and *Nuit-d'Ambre* chronicle a family over several generations covering more than a century. The family's patriarch, though, is never referred to by name. (His given name is never stated and while his family name is obvious from the context, the narrative voice never uses it directly to name him). In the novel's first pages the narrator speaks of the family ('En ce temps-là les Péniel étaient encore des gens de l'eau-douce'),<sup>12</sup> and then mentions that individuals and families were known more by the name of their canal-plying boat than by a patronym: 'Entre gens de l'eau-douce ils s'appelaient plus volontiers du nom de leurs bateaux que de leurs propres noms. [...] Les Péniel étaient ceux d'*A la grâce de Dieu*'.<sup>13</sup> Two characters are then named – Vitalie Péniel, the matriarch, and Théodore-Faustin Péniel, her newborn son – but the patriarch is only referred to by such attributive words as 'son mari' or 'le père'.<sup>14</sup> Even in

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<sup>11</sup> Alain Goulet calls these two novels 'une saga transgénérationnelle', a word that suggests the mythical structure and style of the works: cf. *Sylvie Germain, œuvre romanesque: Un monde de cryptes et de fantômes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Sylvie Germain, *Le Livre des Nuits* (Paris: Gallimard, 'Folio', 1987), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

the genealogical chart provided at the beginning of *Nuit-d'Ambre*, he is only named 'Péniel,' whereas each of his descendants is listed there by his or her given name.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, the indicator of this forefather's individuality, that which would demarcate him from his own forefathers is missing. What remains, though, is precisely a mythical name, a name that evokes Jacob's encounter with a man at the Jabbok ford, at the conclusion of which Jacob names the place 'Peniel'.<sup>16</sup> Peniel means 'face of *el*,' and '*el*' is a Hebrew word for God. In naming this place, Jacob thus inscribes his encounter with a person he sees as God, or a representative of God, into the landscape. The encounter takes the form of a struggle, for he wrestles the man from night till dawn. As the battle comes to a close (with no decisive victor – 'the man saw that he did not prevail' but he maintains enough control to put Jacob's hip out of joint), Jacob asks the man to give his name, and the man refuses.<sup>17</sup> It appears that if Jacob (now also dubbed Israel, he who strives with God) were to know the name of his interlocutor, he would gain power over him.

In choosing to name the family chronicled in her diptych *Péniel*, Germain inscribes this struggle onto the lives of her characters, as if transporting the site named by Jacob from the Ancient Near East to northeastern France. The father seems to incarnate Jacob's struggle, all the more because he bears no known name other than *Péniel*. His identity is reduced to the mythical name. Indeed, his life, or what little of it is related in the novel, is filled with struggles. He and his wife Vitalie are childless, each of her seven previous pregnancies having ended in stillbirth. At the term of the eighth pregnancy, he fully expects to mourn again, but when instead a son is

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<sup>15</sup> Sylvie Germain, *Nuit-d'Ambre* (Paris: Gallimard (Folio), 1989), pp. 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 32. 24-30. The New Revised Standard Version, the translation I have consulted, uses the verse numbering from the Latin Vulgate; the French *Bible de Jérusalem*, from which Germain appears to draw her epigraph, uses the slightly different numbering of the Masoretic Text. Hence Germain gives the source of her epigraph as 'Genèse, XXXII, 25/30-32'.

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 32. 25

born full of vigor and life, Pénier is struck dumb, in a passage perhaps meant to evoke the story of John the Baptist's birth.<sup>18</sup>

Théodore-Faustin Pénier returns from the Franco-Prussian war (1870-71) badly disfigured, the work of a mounted swordsman; and he finds that his wife has not yet given birth after two years to the child they were expecting when he left. While she gives birth soon after his arrival, instead of a child, Noémie delivers a statue of salt, as though prolonged gestation had caused the developing foetus to crystallize, a monument to hope lost by the ravages of war. Though it is only salt that links this episode to that of Lot's wife, Theodore-Faustin takes this stillbirth as a sign of God's anger. After Noémie dies, and now bereft of his hyphen, Théodore Faustin renames the family boat *À la colère de Dieu*,<sup>19</sup> feeling that divine grace has been withdrawn from him and his family. Victor-Flandrin, the son that Théodore Faustin finally has by his daughter, lives through an entire century of wars that traverse the countryside or call his sons away. This series of tragedies culminates, at the beginning of *Nuit-d'Ambre*, in the death of his grandson Jean-Baptiste in a hunting accident, which in turn causes Jean-Baptiste's brother, Charles-Victor, to see himself as betrayed, not only by his parents, but by everyone.

Charles-Victor Pénier (known later in the novel as *Nuit-d'Ambre-Vent-de-Feu*) leaves his family's rural hamlet for Paris once he reaches university age. In the room he rents, he hangs a reproduction of Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Son*, one of the artist's so-called Black Paintings, and is fascinated by the narrative of Cronus (whom the Romans called Saturn):

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<sup>18</sup> When an angel announces the impending birth of his son, Zechariah is dubious, given he and his wife's advanced age – as a result of his skepticism he is made mute and must confirm Elizabeth's choice of name by scrawling his assent on a slate. Cf. Luke 1. 8-23, 59-66. See also Bénédicte Lanot, 'Images, mythes, et merveilleux chrétien dans l'œuvre de Sylvie Germain', *Roman* 20-50, 39 (June 2005), 15-23 (p. 19).

<sup>19</sup> *Le Livre des Nuits*, pp. 46-47.

Sa préférence allait au dernier-né des Titans, Cronos, son intérêt s'arrêtait avec l'avènement de Zeus qui instaura le règne des Olympiens où déjà commença à s'établir un certain principe d'ordre et de clarté auquel il répugnait.

Cronos, lui, était le Rebelle, le Fourbe, le Violent, celui qui avait castré le père trop étouffant d'un coup de faucille en silex, puis qui avait réenfoui ses frères dans le ventre grouillant de sa mère. Celui qui s'était uni à sa sœur Rhéa, dont il avait ensuite dévoré les six enfants conçus de lui.<sup>20</sup>

Nuit-d'Ambre introduces this image, whose incestuous context resonates with his own family history, into his life and this text becomes a sort of guide for him, for he begins to imagine himself acting out the role of Cronus with characters from his own life: 'Il se rêvait Cronos tranchant le sexe de Fou-d'Elle, son chien de père.'<sup>21</sup>

So, far from keeping it silent or restricting its audience, Germain takes what was a repugnant and dangerous tale to Socrates and sets it as an important narrative over the life of her character. Texts in this novel have the effect that Socrates believed them to have, too: people can see themselves in the narratives and act as though they were scripts for their lives. Though the next paragraph begins 'Mais très vite il déserta sa chambre, il oublia l'image',<sup>22</sup> the events recounted show that in fact Nuit-d'Ambre is still holding the image as a model. He meets a woman whom he first sees from behind and to whom he is attracted because her buttocks resemble those of Cronus's victim in the Goya painting. He comes to see himself as Cronus to her Demeter;<sup>23</sup> when the woman, Nelly, insists that she is more than a figure in someone else's fantasy, Nuit-d'Ambre responds with violence, striking her, raping her, and abandoning her.

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<sup>20</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, p. 204. Hesiod does not make it clear whether Cronus re-imprisons his brothers or if he just neglects to free them; they are not mentioned again until Zeus frees them after defeating Cronus: cf. *Theogony*, l. 501.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>23</sup> The narrative voice, which often speaks from Nuit-d'Ambre's perspective in this section of the novel, categorically states that the victim in Goya's painting is a woman; Nuit-d'Ambre decides that it must be Demeter in *Nuit-d'Ambre*, p. 205.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy write: '[M]yth, like the work of art that exploits it, is an instrument of *identification*.'<sup>24</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, in this passage, has seen in the myth of Cronus someone whom he resembles, someone whose rebellion against a perfidious father resonates with his own sense of betrayal and desire for revenge. However, the title of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's piece as well as the results of *Nuit-d'Ambre*'s identification with Cronus leave little doubt as to the dangerous power that these myths can take, and perhaps agree, obliquely, with Socrates's desire to sanitize them. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy show how German nationalism and later Nazi ideology appropriate the means of identification, using mythologies or exploiting them to further the idea of German supremacy. Since France had long been imitating the ancients in its art and national narratives, German thinkers attempted to imitate a *different* ancient world, the mystical, ritualistic elements that the French passed over.<sup>25</sup> That is to say, they preferred the world of the Titans to the Olympian 'principe d'ordre et de clarté' that *Nuit-d'Ambre* found so repugnant.<sup>26</sup> The consequences of the adherence to these stories underline the danger of an uncritical use of mythical narratives as didactic models.

In Germain's novel, the narrative of Cronus takes a grip on the character's life, a grip that is shaken but not broken by Nelly's face. This episode also shows how the uniqueness of the face undermines totalizing narratives. *Nuit-d'Ambre* has been in a relationship with Nelly for nearly a year when she covers his eyes and asks: 'Et mes yeux, ils sont de quelle couleur? Le sais-tu au moins, dis?'<sup>27</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, taken by surprise, can only hazard a guess. He says her eyes are brown, but his guess is wrong: 'Les yeux qu'elle fixait droit sur lui étaient de la couleur du ciel

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<sup>24</sup> 'The Nazi Myth', p. 298.

<sup>25</sup> 'There had been a Greece of measure and clarity, [...] and a buried Greece, nocturnal, somber, [...] in short, a mystical Greece, on which the other, not without difficulty, was raised (through the "repression" of the mystical one), but which always remained silently present right up to the final collapse' in 'The Nazi Myth', pp. 300-01.

<sup>26</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, p. 204.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

que venait de traverser l'averse, exactement. Couleur d'ardoise. A croire qu'elle avait arraché deux petits morceaux du ciel entre les toits pour se les plaquer sur les yeux.'<sup>28</sup> Not only does this encounter overturn the norm of the relationship – Nuit-d'Ambre having noticed Nelly for her buttocks and admitted to her that he mainly likes her for them – but, by linking Nelly's image to the unconfined, infinite sky, it also represents Nelly's attempt to liberate herself from the pre-determined, myth-inspired picture Nuit-d'Ambre had striven to fit her into. In this picture, Goya's *Saturn*, Cronus' victim is seen from behind and indeed his victim's head is already devoured. Nuit-d'Ambre's ignorance of Nelly's eye colour shows how closely he had identified her with the painting, and that there was no room for Nelly's reality within the Cronus narrative. When she reveals her eyes, she asserts their very existence, erasing Demeter's name from her life, and opening her own name to the varied inscriptions it held and which Nuit-d'Ambre's gaze denied.

At the end of the novel, after still graver consequences of Nuit-d'Ambre's blind obedience to the narratives, mythological and otherwise, that he has set upon his life, he too is visited by a nocturnal stranger with whom he wrestles. Nuit-d'Ambre resists valiantly, but is vanquished in the end:

'Le jour va se lever, fit l'autre, il faut maintenant en finir', et, disant cela, il empoigna d'une main les deux bras de Nuit-d'Ambre-Vent-de-Feu qu'il lui tordit derrière le dos, et de l'autre main il lui saisit la tête par les cheveux. Alors il l'embrassa sur les yeux. Nuit-d'Ambre vacilla, frappé soudain par un violent sommeil, et s'effondra doucement sur le sol.'<sup>29</sup>

When Nuit-d'Ambre awakes, his mysterious visitor has vanished. Jacob's battle with the mysterious man in Genesis 32 ends with the man seeing 'that he did not prevail', then striking

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<sup>28</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, p. 208.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 402-03.

Jacob's hip, such that he will thereafter walk with a limp.<sup>30</sup> Germain's transposition of the myth into her narrative makes it somewhat harder to decide who 'won' the battle, whereas the text of Genesis strongly implies that the man sought, and failed, to defeat Jacob, even though in both texts the mysterious opponent is able to dictate the outcome of the encounter.<sup>31</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre* also leaves his encounter with a kind of handicap. The stranger that he encounters kisses his eyes rather than striking his hip, already suggesting a more positive outcome. Indeed, the character leaves the encounter unable to see colour, which results in an enhanced perception of the world around him. He is conscious now of the grain of things, their texture, their incompleteness:

il sentait chaque fois le grain du silence en eux comme on éprouve le grain d'un papier. Comme on caresse la peau de quelqu'un. Et il sentait cela avec une telle acuité qu'il en était bouleversé. Pareillement tout lui semblait inachevé, – paysages et visages étaient semblables à des lavis et des esquisses. Ils se montraient à lui dans un inachèvement qui les rendait tout à la fois plus fragiles et infiniment plus étonnants.<sup>32</sup>

The result, then, of the reenactment of the mythical tale of Jacob's fight with the angel is opposite to the effect of Cronus' story within the novel. Where the latter provided the source for an inflexible model that *Nuit-d'Ambre* imitated criminally, the former is one of the last acts in a process of reconciliation with the world. In other words, the encounter with the mysterious visitor turns *Nuit-d'Ambre* from a novel with mythological influences into a mythical tale in its own right, perhaps with a goal of encouraging certain behaviour among its readers. But this myth is not a sanitized version: where the Socrates we see in the *Republic* would censor the violence and treachery of the old myths, leaving model tales of good behaviour, in Germain's novel we see a tale of a child and young adult with no moral compass, but we as readers are asked to accept his reconciliation, one that comes about through an acceptance of the incompleteness of

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<sup>30</sup> Genesis 32. 25, New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>31</sup> The epigraph to *Nuit-d'Ambre* omits verse 25, the one where the man states that he is not prevailing (p. 13).

<sup>32</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, pp. 404-05.

objects, from texts and artworks to human faces, landscapes, ideas, and emotions. The scriptural narrative helps to undo the Greek narrative, but one cannot see a simple triumph of one over the other, or of monotheism over polytheism. If Jacob's story plays a more significant role in the novel, its reenactment leads Nuit-d'Ambre to perceive the incompleteness in the world. This incompleteness, already announced by the inadequacy of names in the novels, suggests that even the Genesis story is full of gaps. The new myth that Germain's novel creates is just as incomplete, and thus requires its hearer to be attentive to its silences, to its gaps, to that which it leaves unsaid; for instance, the name of Jacob's interlocutor or the given name of the patriarch Péniel. It is impossible to set mythical texts as models for ethical action in a social or political setting, whether or not they be sanitized or straightened; the silences they carry make them into something far more complex than didactic narratives. Hence, the narrative summons the reader or hearer to strive to attain a perception that is conscious both of its own incompleteness and the incompleteness of its object.



## The Fisher King, the Grail and the Goddess: Ted Hughes's aquatic myths

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**Abstract:** This paper presents some research for my PhD thesis on fluvial landscapes in the works of Ted Hughes and Alice Oswald. The thesis as a whole aims to explore the relationship between myths of the *genius loci* in the English poetic canon, and the eco-poets' mythology of riverine landscapes in crisis. In this paper, I set out to explore the role of the Grail and Fisher King, favoured figures of T. S. Eliot, in Ted Hughes's river-poetry. The Grail is an object of medieval legend, but this paper contends that Hughes follows the example of Jessie Weston in making it fit into a family of more ancient myths. The fertility myths which Weston views as giving rise to the Grail legend are associated with the aquatic goddess who haunts both Ted Hughes' poetry and his critical work *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. I use a combination of methods – contextualization of Hughes's work with reference to Modernist texts, close analysis of the poetry, and comparisons to the poet's letters and critical works, in order to uncover the myths behind what is often a very modern, environmentally engaged text. I hypothesize that Hughes's use of myth gives his poetry a universal, canonical tenor, with its persona as nameless Fisher King and its muse as an abstract Goddess. However, I conclude that at times his use of myth becomes self-mythologizing.

Contrary to Lacoue-Labarthe's proposal that art and culture begin at the point at which myth ends, Ted Hughes's poetry is spawned by myth. His writing depends on mythic methods similar to those of his Modernist predecessors. Scholarship such as John B. Marino's *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature* places the Grail firmly in the realm of legend. Yet the wellspring of the ideas which inspired Hughes was derived from Jessie L. Weston's work on the Grail, which attempts to trace the original *myths* behind the legends. Myths have a life and function beyond the purely textual, suggests Mary Midgley: 'Myths are not [...] detached stories. They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world'.<sup>1</sup> The network of symbols which Hughes used was inherited

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (2003; Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which in turn was derived from Weston's scholarship. The Grail – and the legendary and literary canon which it has inspired - is *fons et origo*, the fountainhead of *River*. This elusive treasure is also, for Hughes, a symbol of the river-Goddess responsible for all life, all creativity. The wounded Fisher King who will be healed by the Grail is healed by this Goddess, according to pre-Christian, and Hughes's post-Christian, perspectives. Hughes's own vision of the Grail is bound up with his conception of feminine, creative nature and his conservationist agenda. After illustrating how the writing of Weston and others informs Hughes's consideration of the Grail legend, I will trace its evolution in the collection *River*. I shall also examine where Hughes's mythopoiesis is self-effacing and universalizing, and where self-mythologizing.

Eliot acknowledged his debt to Weston's scholarship in the Notes accompanying *The Waste Land*.<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Plath owned and annotated a copy of Weston's book, which Hughes later kept in his own library. Moreover, the Cambridge English Tripos syllabus at the time when Hughes studied it aimed to allow undergraduates to interpret *The Waste Land*. Hughes's change to Archaeology and Anthropology in his final year allowed him to acquire a deeper knowledge of the anthropological texts which provide the structural and mythic underpinning of Eliot's poem. *The Waste Land*, with its aquatic cycle from the stagnant world of the fisher king 'fishing in the dull canal', to the drought where there is 'no water but only rock', to the relief of the 'damp gust / Bringing rain' contributes to the cyclical structure of *River*.<sup>3</sup> In a sense, *River* is a reinvention of Weston's theories, whose grouping of widely disparate myths does not stand up to modern anthropological scrutiny. Hughes may include Oriental mythology in the poem 'Japanese River Tales' and Native American totems in 'The Merry Mink', conforming partially to the trend for comparative mythology which lies behind

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<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. by Valerie Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 147. All further citations are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, pp. 140, 144, 145.

much Modernist poetry. Yet his use of Grail metaphors in a collection of British and Brythonic settings – the Dee, the River Barrow, the Sligachan – grounds his aquatic poetry in Celtic landscapes. As if turning away from Weston's comparison of medieval French-language legends to Hindu myths, Hughes focuses on the Celtic Grail-myths, real or imagined, from which medieval Grail-legends are sourced.

The theme of male human sacrifice runs throughout Hughes's work, emerging particularly clearly in his collection *Gaudete*. He was inspired by James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which linked the sacrifice of the priest of Diana at Nemi to the sacrifice of Tammuz-Adonis and sacred kings from a wide array of world cultures. Such priests and sacred kings appear to have been killed in order to regenerate the land, as Frazer explains in 'The Killing of the Tree-spirit';<sup>4</sup> the Fisher King belongs to the same family of sacrificial heroes. A wound from the Bleeding Lance in the thighs or groin disables him, leaving him to spend his time fishing in the moat outside his castle. A knight – usually Perceval or Gawain – must bring him the Grail and place the Bleeding Lance in the wound it created in order to heal him. This restores fertility to the land, which had become barren when the Fisher King was wounded.

In a footnote to the significance of the Boar in Shakespeare's version of the Adonis myth, Hughes identifies the Grail and the Lance with aspects of the deity he calls the Goddess of Complete Being:

The sexual wound (piercing both thighs) that made the Grail King impotent and laid the land waste was inflicted by a pagan knight's spear, on the blade of which was inscribed 'The Grail'. The submerged but tightly interconnected circuitry of these apparently separate mythic complexes can be glimpsed in this metaphor of the Boar (the spear blade) emerging from the estranged (lost) Goddess (the Grail cauldron) as itself a form of the Goddess (bearing her name, The Grail).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged edition, with an introduction by George W. Stocking, Jr. (first published in abridged form in 1922. London: Penguin Books, 1996) pp. 356-86.

<sup>5</sup> Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992. Revised paperback edition: London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 431.

What Hughes wrote of Shakespeare applies equally to the personae he adopts in his own work. By drawing on the 'mythic complexes' behind Shakespeare's writing, he situates his own work within the tradition of England's most iconic, and perhaps most mythologized, writer.

The original form of the Goddess is, for Hughes, an aquatic fertility-goddess. It is unsurprising, then, that he should identify her with the Grail: at once a fountain of life-giving water and a vessel brimming with sacrificial blood. Indeed, if one takes the Grail as a Christian symbol, it contains both blood and water. The water it contains is an ancient symbol of birth and rebirth. As Weston notes,

The perusal of [...] *Notes on Celtic Cauldrons of Plenty and the Land-Beneath-the Waves*, has confirmed me in my view that these special objects belong to another line of tradition altogether; that which deals with an inexhaustible submarine source of life, examples of which will be found in the 'Sampo' of the Finnish *Kalewala*, and the ever-grinding mills of popular folk-tale. The fundamental idea here seems to be that of the origin of all Life from Water, a very ancient idea, but one which, though akin to the Grail tradition, is yet quite distinct therefrom.<sup>6</sup>

Yet she proposes a more direct link between the Grail and myths of the origins of life:

But Lance and Cup (or Vase) were in truth connected together in a symbolic relation long ages before the institution of Christianity, or the birth of Celtic tradition. They are sex symbols of immemorial antiquity and world-wide diffusion, the Lance, or Spear, representing the Male, the Cup, or Vase, the Female.<sup>7</sup>

Uniting the Lance with the Grail symbolises the sexual union of male and female; according to Frazerian sympathetic magic, this restores the fertility of the land.<sup>8</sup> In Hughes's particular *mythos*, which reinvents the Grail legend for an environmentally conscious age, Grail and river symbolize the fecundity of the river-goddess, 'the creative womb of the inchoate

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<sup>6</sup> Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance: An account of the Holy Grail from ancient ritual to Christian Symbol* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920. This edition New York: Anchor Books, 1957), p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 164.

waters’.<sup>9</sup> When the reproductive capacity of the river-goddess is impaired by pollution, the precious liquid of the Grail is tainted, leaving a sterile Waste Land.

The wound dealt to the persona of Hughes’s poetry is at once sacrificial, and emblematic of the multiple dolorous strokes which man inflicts upon nature. Aquatic wastelands appear intermittently in *River*, when winter comes in the song-cycle and the cycle of the seasons, when pollution reduces the creative womb of waters to stagnation. Just such a wasteland opens the collection. The fourth line of ‘The Morning Before Christmas’ has trees as ‘fractured domes of spun ghost’, wintry versions of the blasted trees of the Somme or victims of acid rain.<sup>10</sup> The ‘blue haze’ (l. 3) of Hughes’s winter dawn is a different version of Eliot’s ‘brown fog of a winter dawn’, reminding us that that the collection starts off in a postbellum, barren world akin to that of Eliot’s *Waste Land*.<sup>11</sup> And yet, the ‘brand new stillness’ of the second line already suggests renewal. With the coming of the sun in the sixth line, the river begins to steam (l. 7), as if it were a Grail-like Celtic cauldron of rebirth.

An interesting parallel to the Grail legend occurs when the salmon are milted into a ‘kitchen bowl’ (l. 30). This banal receptacle holds the ‘treasure’ (640, l. 44) of eggs and milt. The kitchen bowl, a humorously humble receptacle when compared with the gold-adorned Grail, takes on a Grail-like role. It is full not of life-giving Redeemer’s blood, but of eggs which will restore fertility to the river. The words ‘vital broth’ (l. 47) lend a sacramental quality to the fertilised eggs, as if anyone who partakes of the salmon which they will hatch could be restored to health like the Fisher King. Nameless men perform the milting; they are Grail-knights, faceless with the universality of myth. The poem ends in a world ‘Wrought in wet, heavy gold. Treasure-solid’ (l. 68), returning the landscape to the distant timeframe of

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<sup>9</sup> Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Faber & Faber 2003), p. 639. All other citations are from this edition. Page and line numbers are given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>11</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, p. 136, l. 61.

the Grail legend. The kitchen bowl has been replaced by a great golden chalice consisting of the entire river basin, a womb whose life-giving, sacramental blood is the river.

By 'New Year', however, there is less hope that the waters will bring forth new life. The persona imagines 'a Caesarian' (l. 3); 'The wound's hapless mouth, a vital loss' (l. 4) replaces the 'vital broth' of 'The Morning Before Christmas'; likewise the 'blue haze' is replaced by a sinister, artificial-looking 'blue glare' (l. 10). Human interference brings 'The intent steel/ Stitching the frothing womb' (ll. 8-9), a cure which entails further wounding. Here, the river-goddess becomes like a female version of the Fisher King: a terrible wound damages her reproductive organs, and the frozen sterility of the land ensues. The persona, too, is a Fisher King, who feels 'in my head the anaesthetic / the stiff gauze, the congealments' (ll. 11-12), in sympathy with the Goddess. This wound is inflicted by humans; they are the reason why the persona imagines 'The lank, dying fish. But not the ticking egg' in the last line. The tone here is more self-mythologizing than before: Hughes's own concern for fish stocks in the Devonshire rives where he fished (and an awareness of his vilification by feminist critics, which will be addressed shortly) can be glimpsed beneath the surface of this poem.

The river's healing process seems to be accelerated in places where the only human presences are long dead. 'Under the Hill of Centurions' is set in one of Kipling's mythic English sites, whose *genius loci* is the minnow. The minnows of this poem are 'Red-breasted as if they bled, their Roman/ Bottle-glass greened bodies silked with black' (ll 10-11). Their red colour emblematises the Fisher King's wound. They are 'A wrestling tress of kingfisher colour' (650, l. 19); the word 'kingfisher' echoes the Fisher King's title. Both Lance and Grail are evoked by the following line, where they are at once 'Steely jostlings' and 'a washed mass of brilliants': the steel Lance and the Grail encrusted with brilliant-cut jewels.

As the cycle of the seasons progresses and Hughes explores yet more geographical locations, 'Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan' shows water bringing life out of the dead land. Lines 67-69 describe a salmon emerging from the eye socket of a skull as a 'Gruagach', a 'Boggart', a 'Glaistig', placing this poem in a Celtic mythological world more ancient and sinister than that of the Grail legend. Life in death and wounds in healing reappear in 'River Barrow', where a barrow overlooks a river teeming with life, and trout 'rive a wound in the smooth healing' (657, l.32). The motif of the Lance – or at least a knightly sword – reappears at the end of the poem, as the persona becomes 'an old sword in its scabbard / Happy to moulder' (ll. 45-46). Yet the process of mouldering stops and old legends are re-forged in a furnace of molten creation, in 'West Dart'. The river is a sacramental chalice of 'spirit and blood' (658, l.4). During the storm, the flash of a trout becomes a Grail-knight's epiphany, a 'tumbling out of goblets' (l. 11). Diverse landscapes are universalized, mapped onto the contours of Celtic myth.

'An August Salmon' presents the salmon as 'mortally wounded / By love and destiny' (660, ll. 10-11). The fish is anthropomorphized by his ability to feel 'love', becoming a wounded Fisher King whose 'destiny' is to receive a mortal, rather than a healing, wound. Yet the shape of the salmon also suggests a Lance, and the 'torpedo launch of his poise' (l. 27) is a more modern, mechanized version of the spear which wounds and heals the Fisher King. However, there is an element of his quasi-sacrificial death which references more ancient sources than the Grail legend: ritual rather than romance. The presence of a female figure at the end of the poem recalls the mythic framework of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. Waiting 'For execution and death / In the skirts of his bride' (ll. 48-49), he resembles a sacrificial hero waiting to be immolated to his divine lover. Hughes mythologizes and anthropomorphizes the fish to show a masculine order giving way to the

rule of a matriarchal Goddess. It is possible, too, to see this as a metaphor for Hughes's early masculine writing being torn apart and sacrificed by a Maenad-like horde of feminist critics.<sup>12</sup>

A key poem in the River-as-Grail-cycle schema is 'The Kingfisher'. The bird's name recalls that of the Fisher King, but at the same time the kingfisher is a Fisher King in reverse: the inflictor of wounds. Here, the persona is transfigured by metaphorical wounds dealt by the bird. 'Shivering the spine of the river' (663, l. 26), he acts like the Lance, slicing into the fluvial landscape. A more explicit reference to the myth of the Fisher King comes in two isolated lines which describe the way the kingfisher seems to wound its observer. 'He has left his needle buried in your ear' (l. 8) shows that one wound inflicted by the kingfisher affects the auditory faculties of the poet, refining his perception of sound. He 'Leaves a rainbow splinter sticking in your eye' (663, l. 16); this is the wound from which imagery springs. Hughes creates a persona whose psychological wounding is part of the process of creation; the personal pronoun 'your' immerses both him and the reader in the mythopoeic process.

With the coming of October, we are reminded of the salmon's past splendour, when he was 'king of infinite liberty' (678, l. 45). Rather than a Fisher King, he was a king among fish. He is gradually returned to the dignity of his 'epic poise' (679, l. 59) which 'holds him so steady in his wounds' (l. 60). In the last poem, 'Salmon Eggs', the 'January haze' (680, l. 6) returns with the spawning salmon. This circularity is reflected in the 'travail / Of raptures and rendings' (l. 30), where wounds and rebirth are juxtaposed in the cycle of sacrifice and resurrection. The bedrock contains 'crypts' (l. 28) and an 'altar' (l. 29), but the salmon egg is

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<sup>12</sup> In her poem 'Arraignment' in the collection *Monster* which was withdrawn from circulation, Robin Morgan considers the idea of a covey of feminists breaking into his house to shoot him. She was not the only one to criticize him: in a letter to his son Nicholas, Hughes mentions the 'incessant interference of the feminists' in his affairs because of the death of Sylvia Plath – see *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007). Hughes responds to the feminist fantasy of his sacrifice by dramatising the execution of a male trout by a female agent in riverine form. He implies that the sacrifice of the male by female hands is not necessary, for in the natural world, the male is already destined for immolation. Morgan's poem 'Monster' uses the language of childbirth as a metaphor for the advent of a feminist revolution, which will come only after the labour agony of the feminist movement. There are traces of a response to this poem in Hughes's *River*, whose use of the language of birth shows an awareness of the agency and power of the fecund, feminised earth. Hughes attempts – with partial success – to answer his feminist critics by venerating the feminized riverine landscape.



swaddled by a 'font' (l. 38) whose shape and sacred liquid recall the Grail. Hughes wrote this poem with a figure from pre-Christian Celtic mythology in mind. Sheila-na-gig, an Irish fertility carving, is the mother of the poem: 'I suppose that this woman is our oldest goddess (a death/battle/love goddess) who copulated with her consort standing astride rivers (I suppose, where she also gave birth). [...] So my verses conflate the sculpture, the goddess, the red fish eggs and the swollen wintry river.'<sup>13</sup> The collection returns to the purportedly universal, prehistoric timeframe of Celtic myth. The last poem establishes the collection in a canon stretching back from Eliot to prehistoric art.

In conclusion, the Grail cycle provides the archetypal structure behind Ted Hughes's collection *River*. Nevertheless, whereas the Grail legend leads its hero to the Grail, the multiple temporal eddies in Hughes's work do not lead to such a neat resolution. This is because it follows the tradition of Weston and Frazer's cyclical, pre-Christian myths of sacrifice and revival, rather than Christian teleological progression. By drawing on Eliot's work and source-text, Hughes would seem to privilege mythic tradition over individual talent. Yet within his mythic method, there are elements of self-mythologization. The river, at times a font full of lustral water, a Grail full of sacrificial blood or a trough of clotting putrefaction, keeps renewing itself, despite pollution. *River* ends with the river's own words, italicized to show that the voice of the Goddess is cited directly: '*Only birth matters*' (681, l. 37). Presiding over both sacrifice and rebirth is the Goddess whose voice is heard as an undersong throughout Hughes's poetry.

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<sup>13</sup> Ted Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Christopher Reid. (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), p. 448.

## William Blake: The Arch Myth-Maker

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to explain some of the intersections between Blake's visionary ideas and mythological systems that were current in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The value of considering this subject lies in revealing some fresh insight into Blake's aesthetic theory and to respond to the thesis that either writing or art begins with the effacement of mythology or art equates with mythology. The article reveals that Blake's approach to mythology is such that myths become subsumed within myths, and that from a desire to critique the art of the mythographers from his period, Blake was able to deepen his own enquiry into his aesthetic theorization. Thus, by the time he had started composing his long poem, *Jerusalem*, he was aware that in order to develop a new creative system it was necessary to clear away the classical mythological remnants of the past and challenge some of the more ancient systems of belief such as Druidism, which predated most forms. As a consequence, Blake demonstrates a need to eradicate the possibility of mythical ossification at every stage of his myth.

The ossification of mythology is my specific interest and I aim to explore Blake's aesthetic practices helped him to maintain the freshness of his vision over a long time period and how he learned to adjust his own perspective in opposition to the theoretical, philosophical and psychological opinions of his day. As my thesis consists in researching Jungian psychology and Blake's ideas about medical knowledge and forms of mental disturbance, I am particularly interested in the study of archetypes inherent in a variety of mythological research and stories in both Blake's day and other historical periods.

This paper will argue that William Blake acted as a conscious interpreter of mythologies in order to explore the nature of the Poetic Genius<sup>1</sup> of, 'the prophet [as] a *vates* or seer...and the teacher of higher truths than reason knows'.<sup>2</sup> William Blake's mythology has been explained in diverse ways, due to the complexity of its sources and Blake's tendency to absorb mythical stories into his narrative and transform them within the context of his own mythical system. Previous scholarship has tended to accept this without explaining the rationale behind Blake's absorption

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<sup>1</sup> In *All Religions are One*, Blake describes this as a universal imaginative capability and man's essential being.

<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p.169

of such mythological ideas. As a result, in this paper I wish to explore one aspect of this subject, arguing that for this process of absorption to occur and to avoid contamination by what Blake perceived to be failed mythologies, the poet needed to establish an original mode of creativity. I intend to focus mainly on those mythologies that were of contemporary interest to Blake and an overview of Blake's relationship to myth will at first be necessary to clarify the issues involved.

### *Blake's 'Great Task'*

The Blakean scholar Jason Whittaker has investigated the revival of interest in aspects of British mythology in the eighteenth century and the way in which Blake interpreted these myths and absorbed ancient stories into his descriptions of historical events in his own period.<sup>3</sup> Blake's attempts to appropriate aspects of ancient rituals, such as those of the Druids and ideas of sacrifice, in order to demonstrate the connections between them and the Napoleonic Wars or 'the Terror' of the French Revolution, reveal a strong interest in utilising ancient myth to reinterpret historical events. Blake had a fascination for ancient stories that were retold in his period, most famously by Jacob Bryant in *A New System or Analysis of Antient Mythology* (1774-76). Blake, as both artist and poet, had a hand in engraving Bryant's book and was familiar with the references to Egyptian, Grecian, and Druidic mythologies outlined in this compendious three-volume work.<sup>4</sup> In describing a painting entitled, 'The Ancient Britons' in his *Descriptive Catalogue* of his only public art exhibition in 1809, Blake argues that, 'The antiquities of every Nation under Heaven, is no less sacred than that of the Jews. They are the same thing as Jacob

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<sup>3</sup> Jason Whittaker, *William Blake and the Myths of Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999)

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that in *Fearful Symmetry*, Northrop Frye is of the opinion that Jacob Bryant's work on a single world culture is strewn with 'misinformation' (p.173) and that Blake had not read it. Frye argues that another work with an alternative thesis, Edward Davies' *Celtic Researches* and William Stukeley's work may have influenced Blake's *Jerusalem* in terms of, 'identifying the original world culture with Druidism' (p.174)

Bryant and all antiquaries have proved...All had originally one language, and one religion, this was the religion of Jesus, the everlasting Gospel. Antiquity preaches the Gospel of Jesus'.<sup>5</sup> Just as Bryant had argued that an original Old Testament Monotheism had degenerated into pagan sects, Blake believed that the heroes of British Mythology, such as King Arthur, were representative of 'an ancient glory' that would revive again and act as an inspiration to artists.<sup>6</sup>

Blake also helped to engrave Richard Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain*, Part 1 (1786) and exhibited an interest in Ossian's works that had been revived in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In his annotations to Wordsworth's poetry Blake states, 'I own myself an admirer of Ossian equally with any other Poet whatever, Rowley & Chatterton also'.<sup>7</sup> Further sources for Blake include Pierre Henri Mallet's *Northern Antiquities* (1770), which purports to describe the customs of the ancient Danes and explains the origins of references in Blake's *Milton, a Poem* and his longer epic poem, *Jerusalem, the Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1820) to the Scandinavian sacrificial ceremony of 'The Wicker Man'.<sup>8</sup> References to Stonehenge also abound in this major work, one possible source material for which is William Stukeley's *A*

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<sup>5</sup> 'The Ancient Britons' is a painting that is now lost. Blake's description of the painting refers to three escapees from the last battle of King Arthur, represented in three classes of men, known as the Strong, the Beautiful and the Ugly. Blake insists that these classes of men live 'age after age', and this idea also arises in Blake's poem, *Milton, a Poem* (1803), in which 'the Reprobates', 'the Elect' and 'the Redeemd' appear to provide parallels, albeit with reference to Calvinism, to the Ugly, the Beautiful and the Strong man. In another description from the *Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake explains that his painting of Chaucer's Pilgrims depicts psychological types that endure from 'age to age'. It is noteworthy that Blake cites an ancient source for these classes of men, and as revealed in *The Ancient Britons*, Blake enfolds these types into his own mythology of Albion, the Ancient man of British Mythology, who is composed of different typologies or powers, known as Zoas, '[the classes] were originally one man, who was fourfold...and the form of the fourth was like the son of God'. David Erdman, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), p.543.

<sup>6</sup> Blake considered the stories of Arthur to be 'the acts of [the Universal Man], Albion, applied to a Prince of the fifth century' Erdman, p.543.

<sup>7</sup> William Blake, *Annotations to William Wordsworth's 'Poems'* 365; Erdman, p.666

<sup>8</sup> See *Milton, a Poem in 2 Books* plate 37. 11; Erdman, p.137 and *Jerusalem* 47. 7; Erdman, p.196. In the second of these, Blake refers to 'blood', of sacrificial rites 'Animating the Dragon Temples', which describes the temples of the Druids and this is replaced by 'The Wicker Man of Scandinavia', a large wicker construction in the form of a man that was traditionally set alight with the sacrificial victims inside. Jason Whittaker argues that Blake's reference to the consumption of the 'Saxons' on the, 'enormous altars in the terrible north' of 'Woden and Thor and Friga' that takes place 'From Irelands rocks to Scandinavia Persia and Tartary' (Erdman, p.21) has as its source the 'eastern homelands' of the Norsemen referred to in Mallet's work (Whittaker, p.28).

*Temple Restor'd to the British Druids* (1740), a text that argues that an ancient patriarchal religion once dominated as a single influence and fell into idolatrous practices, 'divine redemption by sacrifice...this the most ancient nations had a knowledge of, from patriarchal tradition. When they laps'd into idolatry, they applied these good notions to their new idolatry...sacrificing the ram...beating the ram...burying him in a sacred urn: all most evidently pointing out the notions they had...of the suffering statue of the Messiah'.<sup>9</sup> This notion accords with Blake's theology of Jesus that he considered to be explicated in ancient mythical sources and, as the human imagination is associated with Christ in Blake's works, he makes a case for the poets as those who, 'animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses'.<sup>10</sup> The poets possessed a 'Poetic Genius [that] was the first / principle and all the others merely derivative'.<sup>11</sup> For Blake, the degeneration of this original poetic imagination is represented in the growth of the church 'attempting to realize or abstract / the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood. / Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales'.<sup>12</sup> In the eighteenth century, there was a resurgence in the writing of religious poetry and an attempt to view the poet as divinely inspired. In this climate, Blake's agenda to reinstate the poetic imagination in defiance of the Moral Law took shape and required a reinvestigation of mythological origins. As a result, Blake promoted his mythology of Albion, the Ancient Man of British Mythology as an original embodiment of later myths and a representative of the 'Golden Age'.

### *Artist as Myth-maker*

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<sup>9</sup> William Stukeley, *A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids* (London: W. Innys & R. Maney, 1740), p.112

<sup>10</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 11; Erdman, p.38

<sup>11</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 12; Erdman, p.39

<sup>12</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 11; Erdman, p.38

In 1810, Blake clearly stated his agenda as an artist, 'The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative it is an Endeavour to Restore [what the Ancients call'd] the Golden Age'.<sup>13</sup> This announcement, as part of the artist's additional commentary for the first public exhibition of his paintings, reveals three facts about William Blake's aesthetic beliefs. Firstly, he regarded his visual and verbal art as imaginative and understood the nature of the 'Visionary' in these terms. Secondly, he considered 'Visionary' art to be a possible conduit for what he regarded as 'eternal' and uncorrupt. Thirdly, it reflects the fact that Blake's main artistic agenda was to recover the 'eternal' through the completion of his visionary art. Blake specifically defines the 'world of Imagination' as that 'into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body', which implies that the objective of imaginative striving is synonymous with the experience of an after-life.<sup>14</sup> For Blake then, true imaginative endeavour has no connection with corporeality, but it is possible to achieve a state of vision that can produce perfection in a work of art or literature. The redefining of imagery, beliefs, geography, and history is common in Blake's art, and to this list should be added the fact that Blake comments upon his own visionary experience and life experience. Myth itself becomes a fluid, unsystematic set of images in Blake's artistic imagination and, in placing elements of aesthetic, cultural and social life in his dynamic ever-shifting mental landscape, Blake is consciously redefining mythical traditions that structure his visionary system.

Blake's aesthetic principles suggest a belief in the timeless quality of significant artworks, and this is encapsulated in his notion of a 'Last Judgment', which he states as being 'not Fable or Allegory but Vision'.<sup>15</sup> The 'Last Judgment' refers to a moment of imaginative clarity which a poet or an artist might experience. Blake's critique of 'Fable or Allegory' is that

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<sup>13</sup> William Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*; Erdman, p.555

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> William Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*; Erdman, p.554

it is dependent on 'Memory', and thus belongs to the corporeal realm and is inferior to Blake's sense of 'Inspiration' that is required for a truly imaginative act to occur.<sup>16</sup> Blake permits the idea that 'Fable or Allegory' can contain 'Vision' and yet refutes the possibility that this can be placed in the same category as truly imaginative art.<sup>17</sup> One conclusion to which this leads is that certain forms of art, mythology and literature, did not herald a 'Golden Age' for Blake, and he is specific about what he regards as 'perfect': 'Milton, Shakspeare, Michael Angelo, Rafael, the finest specimens of Ancient Sculpture and Painting, and Architecture, Gothic, Grecian, Hindoo and Egyptian, are the extent of the Human mind'.<sup>18</sup> To this list Blake added a number of artists and writers, and in particular, the Biblical prophets who were admired for their, 'sublime & Divine Images'.<sup>19</sup> Other writers, such as Ovid, are regarded as producers of fables that, 'contain Vision in a Sublime degree being derived from real Vision in more Ancient Writings'.<sup>20</sup> Evidently, the essence of 'Visionary' art is regarded as transferable from one artist or writer to another, in the sense that it is inspirational. Blake considers mythology and art to be differentiated according to their purity of vision and the medium of mythology known as fables and allegory is therefore only valued if it is the result of a visionary tradition.

### *Albion: Primal Mythical Man*

Blake's description of art serves as a basis for his conception of the nature of mythology, as he regarded different mythologies and belief systems as surrendering to the corruptions of their age. As myth might be regarded as a set of organising images that are used to make sense of both the

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> William Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, 46; Erdman, p.544

<sup>19</sup> William Blake, *Vision of the Last Judgment*, N69 [b]; Erdman, p.555

<sup>20</sup> William Blake, *Vision of the Last Judgment*, N79; Erdman, p.556

inner and outer chaos of existence, what is considered to be mythological, from Blake's perspective, might be questioned in the same way as art. Blake's Albion, the primal, 'Universal Man' is presented as the predecessor of all later mythologies, and when Blake describes this spiritual fall and redemption, the former of which occurs when Christ is rejected, the subjects of mythographers (such as Stukeley's Druidic mythology) are depicted as expressions of this fall. The reason for this is Blake's belief that there are different expressions of an original universal mythology. Albion, as the progenitor of all men, is to be seen as the 'true Man', who was faithful to the 'Poetic Genius', as are Blake's favoured artists, such as Michael Angelo, Rafael, or Albrecht Dürer.<sup>21</sup> However, there are corruptions of the original ancient mythology, found in the sacrificial rites of the Danes or the Druids. In Blake's poem *Jerusalem*, there are many references to the Druidic mythology reflecting their stone circles and oaks as reminiscent of a corruption across Albion's land: 'O God of Albion descend! deliver Jerusalem from the Oaken Groves!'<sup>22</sup> Albion's sons and daughters become forces of evil within Blake's mythology, and represent despised figures from Blake's life and characters from ancient British mythology. Significantly, they are associated with what Blake views as Druidic corruption, 'the senses of men shrink together under the Knife of flint, / In the hands of Albions Daughters, among the Druid Temples'.<sup>23</sup>

Albion is represented throughout history, just as Sublime art is discovered in the 'Works of modern Genius' as in the works of the ancients.<sup>24</sup> For example, in his *Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake cites Arthur as a figure whose actions and experiences resemble those of Albion. This suggests that Blake had a notion of archetypal recurrence, and applied similar, if not identical,

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<sup>21</sup> William Blake, *All Religions are One*, prin7; Erdman, p.2

<sup>22</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 38.11; Erdman, p.184

<sup>23</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 66.84; Erdman, p.219

<sup>24</sup> William Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, 46; Erdman, p.544



principles to his conceptions of mythology as he did to art. He states that ‘The giant Albion, was Patriarch of the Atlantic, he is the Atlas of the Greeks, one of those the Greeks called Titans. The stories of Arthur are the acts of Albion, applied to a Prince of the fifth century’.<sup>25</sup> This reflects Mark Schorer’s view that, ‘great literature is impossible without a previous imaginative consent to a ruling mythology which makes intelligible and unitive the whole of that experience from which particular fables spring and from which they, in turn, take their meaning’.<sup>26</sup> The figure of Albion, from this critical perspective, can be viewed as a binding mythological force in the universe, whose wholeness is realized when the ‘Last Judgment’ takes place. However, prior to the ‘Last Judgment’ and with the blight of Albion’s errors, all mythology is corrupted and acts as a corrupting force: ‘Of Albions Spectre the Patriarch Druid! where are all his Human Sacrifices / For Sin in War & in the Druid Temples of the Accuser of Sin’.<sup>27</sup> It is only at the end of *Jerusalem*, with Blake’s one hundredth engraved plate that Blake’s Zoas, the powers of Albion, set about the task of renovating the cosmos, which consists of stars and a Druidic ‘Serpent Temple’ in the background. Los is carrying the sun, Urthona is holding a callipers and a large blacksmith’s hammer and Enitharmon is hanging a veil or curtain across the starry backdrop in order to accomplish this task. This suggests that Blake’s own mythological figures are those that are fit to reconfigure the universe and other mythologies, such as the Druidic one, have been unsatisfactory and thus corrupting.<sup>28</sup> The emblems of druidic sacrifice, as representative of human error, are dispensed with by the harmonious work of the archetypal forms that have been in opposition to each other for the majority of the narrative.

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<sup>25</sup> William Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, 42; Erdman, p.543

<sup>26</sup> Mark Schorer, ‘Mythology (For the Study of William Blake)’ in *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 4, No.3 (Autumn 1942), p.368

<sup>27</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem* 98.48; Erdman, p.258

<sup>28</sup> Noah Heringman, *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2004) is a study of the significance of rocks in the Romantic period, which extends this view in citing Blake as a competing mythological revisionist, ‘building Jerusalem farther West even than Ireland’ (p.128)

## *Two Competing Forms*

The latter point is crucial in representing Blake's consciousness as a mythical rebuilders, as the Druid culture in Blake's period was viewed as being the most ancient, and as Northrop Frye argues, 'the word "Druid" would be practically synonymous with "inspired bard"'.<sup>29</sup> The decline of civilization since what Blake interpreted as 'a Golden Age', traceable to the Giant Albion, heralds a decline of Vision, art and literature, as a result of a loss of imagination, summarized in the figure of Christ. This corruption of the Visionary insight is explained with reference to other cultures, such as the Roman and the Grecian, whereby the inspiration behind mythological storytelling, such as in Homer, is contaminated by a culture devoted to war. In his short prose piece, *On Homers Poetry*, Blake states, 'The Classics, it is the Classics! & not Goths nor Monks, that Desolate Europe with Wars',<sup>30</sup> a sentiment that is extended in another prose work, *On Virgil*, in which the, 'Gothic is Living Form' and the 'Grecian [and Roman] is Mathematic Form'.<sup>31</sup> Here, art, culture and mythology are considered to be inseparable from each other, and as Michael Farrell argues, 'Blake's poetic may be said to be radical in the sense that it challenges and subverts the ideologies and conventions of classical and neo-classical aesthetic paradigms [expressing] Living Form [that] inheres in the internal unity of the parts as opposed to an externally and imposed order'.<sup>32</sup> 'Mathematical Form' is conceived of as what is most restricting

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<sup>29</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p.175

<sup>30</sup> William Blake, *On Homers Poetry-prose* 21; Erdman, p.270

<sup>31</sup> William Blake, *On Virgil-prose* 14; Erdman, p.270

<sup>32</sup> Michael Farrell, *William Blake: Reading and Writing the Law* <Url:<http://forum.llc.ed.ac.uk/archive/03/farrell> > accessed 30 July 2010

in art, life and mythology, as represented in the Druidic temples, which are associated with ‘Vengeance [that] cannot be healed’ and the violence of Greek and Roman culture.<sup>33</sup>

### *Vision as Myth*

Blake incorporates familiar mythical structures in the form of frequently negative symbolic referents within his later writing, such as *Milton*, *The Four Zoas*, and *Jerusalem*. Biblical and mythical names are placed alongside Blake’s less familiar mythical creations of the Zoas, the four powers that constitute the original man, Albion. In Blake’s *Jerusalem*, place names, or locations are decontextualized so that geography itself becomes a visionary landscape in which places and figures of the Holy land are removed to London: ‘To Islington & Paddington & the Book of Albions River / We builded Jerusalem as a City & a Temple; from Lambeth / We began our Foundations; lovely Lambeth!’ Names of Hebraic origin are placed within Blake’s own mythology and are thus transmuted into an aspect of an alien, private mythology, which does not allow the Biblical myth the luxury of remaining as a defined untouched monolith of meaning. This is but one example of a consistent urge in Blake to reshape history by re-contextualizing mythical or historical personages or places. This involves a vision of the human psyche that includes the rebranding and reshaping of the artistic persona and, in doing so, places the myth-maker at the heart of his myth. On one hand, Blake’s myth can seem to take on a life of its own, free from the constraints of other myths, but the artist also feels an incessant need to reinvent his mythical figures. In this regard, Arianna Antonielli has noted that, ‘Blake’s quest towards a mystical vision of reality reveals his constant attempt to overcome the material world and, by

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<sup>33</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 25.5; Erdman, p.170

means of his spiritual existence, to reach and observe the immanence of the Eternal One'.<sup>34</sup> Such a striving accounts for Blake's constant need to reject or revise the mythical systems popular in the eighteenth century and any aspect of his own mythology that remains enslaved by the circumstances of history.

### *Conclusion*

In order to establish a new system of mythology which might avoid the possibility of being 'enslav'd by another Mans', Blake needed to investigate the aesthetic, philosophical, and mythological traditions that informed his period.<sup>35</sup> His 'Gothic' artwork attempts to efface rationalistic systems such as Classicism and to replace them, but at the same time remains in a debate with these diverse mythologies. Blake struggles to escape from the constraining influences of philosophical, mythical, and aesthetic systems that arise from historical conflict, arguing that where culture is devalued by acts of violence, pecuniary practices and thoughts of vengeance, no sense of 'Last Judgment' or a visionary 'Pulsation of the Artery' can be discovered.<sup>36</sup> Thus, in attempting to reshape myth, Blake asserts that no organizing set of images used to make sense of culture can develop into an aesthetically pleasing system until the 'Golden Age' returns. In his poem, *Milton*, Blake asserts that the world of artistic Vision lies within what he refers to as the 'Vegetative' World, and in terms of the present discussion, that which is corporeal and Mathematical is denuded of its significance within the flux of history, acting as a

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<sup>34</sup> Arianna Antonielli, 'William Butler Yeats's 'The Symbolic System' of William Blake' in *Estudios Irlandeses*, 3 (2008), 1-28 (p. 13).

<sup>35</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 10.20; Erdman, p.153

<sup>36</sup> William Blake, *Milton* 29.3; Erdman, p.127

passive symbol and reduced to its most basic form.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the ‘Druidic Temples’ are used for cruel sacrifice rather than a bardic symbol, Classicism is affiliated with war rather than art, and mythical fables are devoid of vision. In arguing thus, Blake defies the classical, mythological and symbolic inheritance of the eighteenth century and establishes himself as an arch myth-maker.

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<sup>37</sup> Blake features in *Milton* as a poet-prophet who is invaded through his left toe by the spirit of the poet Milton. He describes his garden in Felpham within the narrative and in this garden the land of vision becomes welded with factual geography of the poet’s home and the surrounding area. This is self-mythologization to an extreme degree but it indicates Blake’s commitment to the idea that the world of vision is an aspect of the ‘Vegetative’ world. This is so much the case that Blake imagines that the, ‘Vegetable World appeard on my left Foot, / As a bright sandal formd immortal of precious stones & gold’ and the poet stoops down, ‘to bound it on to walk forward thro’ Eternity’ (*Milton* 21.12-14; Erdman, p.115).