

BEYOND MODERNISM

Toward A New Myth Criticism

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Georgia State University

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To Joseph Campbell,
Mentor and friend

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Introduction: Toward a New Myth Criticism

The most important single document concerning myth and literature in twentieth-century writing in English is undoubtedly T. S. Eliot's review of James Joyce's Ulysses in The Dial of November, 1923. In it Eliot announced that something he called "the mythical method" would replace the narrative method and would lead to a new order and form in literature. Eliot and Joyce both used myth to give form and meaning to their own sometimes disordered experiences and impressions of the modern world as they sought to shape these experiences and impressions into works of literary art. What they did with myth in their writing has in fact set the pattern for much of the mythic criticism that has appeared since the twenties. Yet by the sixties one phase of myth criticism had begun to decline, as new critical movements emerged. The chief reason for this was that most myth critics plowed the same old ground as they continued to point to ways that authors used myth to achieve form in their works and as they recorded different myths found in individual works.

In the seventies some myth critics were beginning to find new ways to relate the depth psychology of Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung to myth in order to discover the psychological function of myth in modern literature. After all, Eliot in his review of Ulysses in The Dial had said that psychology, ethnology, and James Frazer's The Golden Bough should all be taken into account in the attempt to understand the uses of myth in the writing and study of literature. Frazer's The Golden Bough, along with the work of his various disciples, would continue, however, to be the major source of knowledge about world mythology. The problem that many authors had with Frazer was that his valuable and multi-volumed work was based on a vision of the world that grew out of the mechanistic and materialistic world view of nineteenth-century science. It was difficult, if not sometimes impossible, to link Frazer's work with that of the new twentieth-century depth psychologists. And even the leader of these new psychologists--Freud--was often mechanistic in his viewpoint. Jung, in fact, broke with Freud largely over the latter's interpretation of dreams, based as it was on a theory of sexuality that was essentially mechanistic in nature. Jung believed that many dreams could only be explained in terms of mythology, and the burden of much of his work from

1909 until his death in 1961 was to reveal how myth is related to the development of that area of human existence called at various times the unconscious, the psyche, or the soul.

Jung would influence major modern writers and critics, yet the difficulty of much of his writing on myth, symbol, and archetype has kept his work from having a central place in myth criticism. What has been needed since the twenties is a school of myth criticism that could provide a comprehensive view of both the findings of modern depth psychology and the new science of mythology that Jung, Campbell, and others like Mircea Eliade believed could be brought into being through the careful investigation of the world's many mythic systems. Joseph Campbell, with various works culminating in his four-volumed The Masks of God, completed in the late sixties, provided a valuable synthesis, the first real synthesis since Frazer's work. By the decade of the seventies the work of Campbell and Eliade had begun to influence some myth critics. What these two scholars offered myth critics amounted in effect to a renewed understanding of the relationship between myth, literature, and human consciousness. From the rise of some of the ideas presented by these two scholars as well as from concepts found in Jung and other depth psychologists like R. D. Laing, Otto Rank, and Abraham Maslow may in time emerge a revitalized myth criticism.

The chief contribution of both Campbell and Eliade to a renewed myth criticism might well be to place the study of myth, literature, and religion on a footing with certain aspects of modern science. Jung, Campbell, and Eliade all posit energy as the basic element of the universe instead of mechanism. If matter is essentially energy for Einstein, then for Campbell, Eliade, and Jung the human being is essentially a unity of what Campbell, following Jung, would call psychic energy. For both Campbell and Eliade there is in fact a mythic realm of energy which Eliade, echoing Rudolph Otto, calls the sacred. For Eliade a myth is then a story recording the breakthrough of the sacred into the life of an individual or society. Eliade's use of the terms sacred and profane is basic to his work, which has particularly influenced not only the study of religion but also theology. For Eliade the sacred, leaving aside its theological implications, is a form of

creative energy connected with the concept of wholeness, or totality, that is given in various measures to the individual who searches for it. The searcher, the quester, the pilgrim are words describing a single figure in myth who sets out on a journey, or quest, in which he struggles against the destructive energies blocking his path in order to find, if he continues his search, increasing amounts of creative energy. Campbell sees this creative energy in terms of Jung's archetypes, which are at once symbols and energies, one of the most important of which is the power of creativity associated with an essence in the unconscious mind called by Jung the self, but sometimes referred to by Campbell as the hero within. The energy associated with the archetype of the self must be sought and found, Campbell tells us, if an individual is to experience growth and development of the whole personality. Not to find inner creative powers is to become the victim of either a loss of energy or of destructive energies. Thus in Campbell and Eliade there is a dualism of the creative and the destructive, of the sacred and profane energies, but underlying both energies is an undifferentiated energy which sustains both and, in one sense, is both. For both scholars the most important myths in all societies are about the encounter of the quester with the one undifferentiated power which makes it possible for that figure to overcome destructive or profane forces.

It is still too early to write a comprehensive work relating fully the concepts of Campbell and Eliade to modern literature. In the chapters that follow I have instead used some of their most basic ideas to help explicate works by leading figures of modern literature. I am not, in the essays that follow, primarily concerned with the sometimes obvious use of individual myths by writers, but instead I seek, with the help of Eliade, Campbell, and Jung, to explore aspects of their work related to what I will call their mythic vision. A poet like Yeats, for instance, did not know the work of Jung--nor Eliade or Campbell for that matter--but, as several scholars in the past twenty years have shown in detail, both the exploration of many myths and their poetic use by Yeats is remarkably similar to viewpoints often found in the work of Jung. A study of Jung as well as of Eliade and Campbell can be of great help in understanding how Yeats and similar writers were in their personal and intuitive ways presenting mythic

visions in their work. What in Yeats, for instance, often seems strange or even incomprehensible can be made clear by studying in detail the underlying mythic viewpoint found in his work. Jung, Campbell, and Eliade thus can help us elucidate individual works of literature, which is what Eliot called the main task of literary criticism.

More than any other two poets of our time writing in English, Yeats and Eliot, in their reflections on poetry, reveal the power of that continuing mythic vision which is reflected in much of the world's literature. In three of the four sections which follow in this book, I seek to deal with aspects of that literary power which the two poets often refer to when they write about the mythic basis of literature. First, I deal with the archetype of the hero, which is continually being revealed in the work of several modern novelists. Using Campbell's reflections on heroism and archetype, I seek to show some of the varieties of heroism reflected in writers like Conrad, Lawrence, Hemingway, Joyce, and Woolf in the first half of the century. Then with the help of Eliade's writings on concepts of the sacred and the profane as they relate to shamanism, I discuss that poetic power I call the shamanic in Yeats, Eliot, Stevens, and Thomas. The shaman, as Eliade writes about him, presides over the tribe's rituals and renews them when necessary. In doing so he invokes the archetype of paradise residing within all individuals and allows them through ritual to participate for a time in the paradisiacal experience. In one sense, Eliade, seconded by Yeats (who did not know his work), points to the meaning of a participation in literature and the other arts as being essentially the same as participation in a ritual, involving as it does all the faculties of the participator. The ritual experience is one way individuals encounter the power of what Jung called the chief archetype, the mandala, which stands for the one underlying energy which unites all existence, the undifferentiated energy beneath all opposites. The fourth section consists of a brief examination of certain shamanic aspects of three writers whose best work appeared after 1940. The aspects of shamanism I am most concerned with in examining these figures have to do with the renewal of language itself. Two of the writers, Saul Bellow and Walker Percy, seemed to find new sources of literary inspiration after 1970 and by the eighties were exploring many facets of possibly the profoundest of

all contemporary problems, the virtual death of language itself as a carrier of a form of communication that is both mental and emotional.

In the first section of the book, which is introductory in nature, I devote a chapter to a discussion of basic concepts concerning myth and shamanism to be found in the work of Campbell and Eliade. Furthermore, I seek in this chapter to distinguish two forms of modernism. One movement, based primarily on an elevation of science and technology to positions of supreme importance, uses the term myth to mean an untrue story. The other movement, mainly literary and artistic in its outlook, uses myth to mean a story that makes important statements about the nature of human beings. Myth for this tradition also suggests a means of participation in an activity that has important consequences for individual and social existence. C. P. Snow, of course, for several decades has made differences between these two "cultures," as he called them, the center of an important debate among scholars and intellectuals. But figures like Jung, Campbell, and Eliade make us aware that we cannot separate science and literature as easily as Snow tried to do. For instance, in the late twentieth century when it seems that there is too much science in modern education, calls regularly come forth for more of the arts and the humanities to balance the doctrines of the instructors of hard facts. Also, increasingly, the arts all over the world are considered to be nearly as important for the health and prosperity of a great city as the sciences, and the arts are now regularly made use of in medicine and industry, for instance, to humanize a process that has become sometimes too mechanistic. In fact, I suggest in several chapters that literature, far from being segregated from life, has drawn much from modern history and has had a powerful effect on modern times.

In relationship to changes even now occurring in the various types of modern movements, I seek to show not one but several periods, all of which have been affected by what is traditionally called culture. Modern culture, in fact, must be taken into account to explain many events that an understanding of science alone cannot clarify. For instance, at no time in the twentieth century have the sciences and technology totally dominated the modern mind, as some people once thought they might. The arts, philosophy, and

religion have continued to maintain a hold on millions of people. In fact, what I now believe to be a collective heroic action by leading artists and thinkers like Picasso, Stravinsky, Joyce, and Russell defeated the decaying powers of a late Victorianism that sought to impose permanently on Western civilization an intellectual regime of narrow moralism and mechanistic rationalism which denied those aspects of humanity that the arts in particular appeal to. The period of classic modernism in literature--roughly 1890 to 1950--was heroic in its efforts to give at least that part of Western society not strangled by repressive dictators a new chapter of creativity in both the arts and the sciences as well as in philosophy and religion. Since 1940 we have seen the development of an anti-heroic view along with a rationalism that has put too much emphasis on analysis and too little on synthesis. In fact, the interpretation of classic modernism from the viewpoint of analysis and anti-heroism has obscured much that was heroic in the early modernism and much that still continues to amaze nations whose civilizations have been stagnant for several centuries. A nation like China, as I indicate in my chapter on Stevens and Thomas, has not sought cultural renewal since Mao's death so much in Western philosophies of collectivism as it has in the music of Beethoven or even in the drama of Arthur Miller.

While distinguishing in this century at least two modern periods--classic modernism and post-World War II analytic modernism--I would like to suggest the emergence of a third period. Since 1970 the concept of postmodernism has received ever increasing attention. I do not believe we have yet entered a postmodern period, but, as I indicate in my first chapter and in my concluding chapters on Percy and Bellow, preparation for this new period may even now, as I write in the eighties, be under way. Thus I agree with a significant book of the mid-eighties, Frederick R. Karl's Modern and Modernism, that a genuine postmodernism has not yet evolved so that it can be properly identified as such. I agree with Karl that works which some critics call postmodernist represent a return to an earlier modernism. Karl also believes that modernism concerned itself primarily with a revolt against all authority and a fragmenting of out-worn world views. Yet he also notes that there is a modernism in search for "some totality missing elsewhere":

The contemporary stress on performance as to which we discussed above is part of that acceleration--not something new but an outgrowth of ideas intrinsic to both early and high modernism--the need to seek in art forms some totality missing elsewhere.¹

I suggest throughout the essays which follow that the quest for totality, as Karl puts it, grows more intense in certain literary artists like Yeats, Eliot, Bellow, and Percy as we move into the late modern period. Yet this awareness of a need for totality, Karl suggests, was always there. The sense of totality takes the form for Eliot of a need for order, and, in his first approach to Ulysses, Eliot noted that Joyce through using myth had found a way to give order to a seemingly chaotic modern experience. Peter Ackroyd in his biography of Eliot, also a work of the mid-eighties, states that order was the central concept in Eliot's life and work.² But contrary to what many critics have believed, Eliot's search for order was a quest for a hidden, occasionally glimpsed, sense of wholeness and not for an order imposed on experience by one standing above it.

The growing interest since 1950 in Jung and in his concept of the archetypes is related to the problem of a quest for at least an awareness of a hidden wholeness inhering in experience. For Jung the mandala, a symbol among other things of totality, was the basic archetype, and for Jung the mandala and other archetypes were the building blocks of myth itself. As Jung himself has suggested, it is difficult for individuals to live forever with fragmentation, and in a late work like The Undiscovered Self he suggests that modern art, with all its fragmentation, points toward the possibility of world renewal: "The development of modern art with its seemingly nihilistic trend toward disintegration must be understood as the symptom and symbol of a mood of world destruction and world renewal that sets its mark on our age."³ The movement from an awareness of disintegration to a sense of renewal is, according to Eliade, the pattern of all sacred stories that he calls myths. The awareness of disintegration, even the need for it, provides at least some of the momentum for deconstructionist criticism in the forms it has taken in the seventies and eighties. Although authorities like Campbell, Jung, and Eliade have continued to point toward the awareness of totality

existing in myth, they also, as students of modern art and literature, have been aware of the need to deconstruct old and dying patterns, or, more often in their work, to accept the death of old logocentric forms of art and thought.

Karl insists that deconstruction in many forms has been a powerful element in modernism from the beginning of the movement in the eighteen-eighties: "In the arts, Modernism almost always corrupts ideas of social cohesion, for its aesthetic imperatives, warring against content and community and society, mean a perilous reorientation."⁴ To remove old "centers," or what Derrida calls logocentricity, is at the heart, Karl says, of the philosophy of Jacques Derrida: "Decentering--Derrida's alternative--opens up, allows freeplay, creates indeterminacy, and emphasizes anxiety."⁵ Yet even Derrida in defining deconstruction as decomposition suggests, at least for some, that he is moving toward a kind of affirmation that for Derrida himself is seen in Molly Bloom's "yes" in Ulysses. For Karl also, modern literature represents a movement toward what he calls "perilous reorientation." And in explaining Jean Moréas's symbolist manifesto of 1886, he speaks of modernism as a "kind of Hegelian journey that defies Hegel." For Karl the essential concept in the Moréas manifesto is the attack on "declamation," "false sensibility," and "objective description" so that what may be manifest on the poet's journey is "esoteric affinities with primordial ideas."⁶ Arthur Symons in the first book in English on the symbolist movement, in 1899, speaks of the modern poet's "dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible."⁷ As the poet and critic who first named Yeats the chief symbolist writing in English, Symons and the new Irish literary movement were in complete agreement with what Karl tells us is the central concept of Moréas's manifesto:

Spiritual truths, legends, myths, all those aspects of a supranatural belief are the true matter of symbolism. Eschewing the real, it uses reality solely for purposes of presentation, as a means of gaining entrance into a world we can comprehend only with our senses.⁸

Yeats above all other English poets first comprehended the connection between the poet's necessary journey

into legends and myths as well as into visions of the supersensible on one hand and, on the other, the inevitable need to attack Victorian morality and the forms of a society that was essentially repressive. Thus he held in one vision the beliefs of Symons, who sought esoteric, rarified states of being, and the counter-beliefs of a Maud Gonne, who worked for the overthrow of British authority in Ireland.

Mircea Eliade, growing up in a Europe in turmoil, himself a novelist as well as a scholar, saw the necessity of searching out the underlying meaning of myth along with experiencing various esoteric visions for the very reason that European civilization was collapsing. Thus he writes in a deconstructionist mood in his autobiography:

. . . the myths, the symbols, and the behavior of the archaic world and the Oriental world are fascinating because of their primitive and exotic character, but perhaps even more because they could furnish a point of departure for a new vision of the world which would replace the images and values, outmoded today, to which the preceding generations were attached. I could write an entire book on this phenomenon of regression toward the amorphous and the chaotic which is discernible in the history of all the arts in modern times. Its significance is clear, it seems to me, we are rejecting the world and the meaning of existence as known and accepted by our forebears. We are expressing the rejection by abolishing the worlds of the past, by shattering the forms and leveling the rough places, by dismantling all forms of expression. Our ideal would be to demolish everything down to ruins and fragments in order to be able to return to full, unlimited formlessness, in short, to the unity of the primeval chaos.⁹

In this passage Eliade, approaching the end of his career, expresses at once a yearning for myth, a longing to deconstruct dying systems, and a sense of a quest for a totality he calls "the unity of the primeval chaos." Here we see an attack on an outmoded logocentricity as profound as any in Derrida's work;

at the same time there is an attempt to find an experience that is truly Eliade's own, containing that quality of difference, in at least one of Derrida's meanings of the term, which the quester seeks in our time. Yet even as one grapples with Eliade's deconstructive mood, one is reminded of an extremism of the sixties, a time when Eliade was first discovered by large numbers of Americans. Modernism in the eighties cannot be grasped in terms of a sixties' view of a total revolution leading to some vague counterculture, because the time for full emergence into a postmodern age has not yet arrived. Yet it would seem from the later remarks of Eliade, Campbell, Jung, and similar thinkers of the second half of the century that one should in the concluding two decades of the century be able to observe some of the directions that the path toward postmodernism could take. Eliade's journal of the fifties and sixties suggests this, pointing as it does not to the immediate emergence of a new age but rather to signs that a new age will begin to emerge in various avant-garde movements much as our present dying modernism began with the avant-garde efforts of figures like Baudelaire and Wagner as early as the 1840s and '50s.

In his journal Eliade records what is deepest, in his belief, concerning the immersion of leading avant-garde modernist figures in myth and legend--a "return to full, unlimited formlessness," or, as he puts it in the same passage: "It [the turning to myth] is yet another way to protest against the world as it is today and to manifest a nostalgia for another world, dawnlike, fresh, untouched." Along side this nostalgia, he places the rejection of our now largely used up poetic language: "It's very clear: a coherent, poetic language no longer has any interest for those who are put off by any form that would simply be a reminder, however vague, of the spiritual universe in which they no longer believe."¹⁰ What Eliade is doing here is invoking a new poetic language and a "dawnlike, fresh existence" along with the awareness of a paradisiacal existence he describes in one of his pivotal essays, "The Yearning for Paradise in Primitive Tradition," an essay I use in this collection to illustrate the shamanic elements of Yeats's poetry. Clearly Eliade is speaking of that longing for the intrusion of Being in time and is even suggesting that there must be another such intrusion to launch a new age. Yet though Eliade himself expresses vibrantly this modern need for a totality

which Karl tells us once again during the eighties is emerging, particularly in the performing arts, he does not in his life's work show us the actual emergence of a new age. The burden of his life's work as scholar and novelist is mainly historical, conducted within the structures of modernism. Thus Karl rightly distinguishes between avant-garde movements and the cultural structures created by modernism, which were originally made possible by the avant-garde movements. Modernism has helped to create a culture that has leaned heavily on the avant-garde movements, yet it has denied, as it inevitably had to in order to maintain itself as a culture, the possibility of radical new movements leading to a new age. Thus we see mainstream Anglo-American poetry in the seventies and eighties rejecting earlier avant-garde attempts to fracture language in, for instance, the elevation of Robert Penn Warren as the first American poet laureate. In America in the eighties a kind of poetic intelligibility was thus enshrined as a hopefully "permanent" classicism. And what of Eliade? By 1970 he would achieve a place of honor in modernist culture by having his definitions and discussions of myth become those of The Encyclopedia Britannica. Thus in a section called "Toward a Definition of Myth," Eliade's voice in the Brittanica speaks clearly: "The definition that seems least inadequate because most embracing is this: Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of 'beginnings.'"¹¹ Myth is "always an account of a 'creation,'" and, using his definition in Myth and Reality, Eliade sums up the Brittanica definition: "In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the supernatural) into the world"¹² Like Eliade, Jung and Campbell would also find honored places in modern culture, being accepted as scholars and thinkers who held together the fabric of a seemingly enduring modernist culture. One reason they and major avant-garde figures like Joyce, Yeats, and Eliot received their places of honor is that their works would be seen in an intertextual framework. It turns out they and other modernist innovators often took their stand with traditionalists, that they were in their ordinary functioning quite aware of their own place in history and in the web of the many texts from which their work sprang. But greater than any texts for most avant-garde poets and scholars is an awareness of the realm of the totality or, that is, of the sacred.