MYTH AND MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

by

Lawrence Buell

The milkwhite dolphin tossed his mane and, rising in the golden poop, the helmsman spread the bellying sail upon the wind and stood off forward with all sail set, the spinnaker to larboard. A many comely nymphs drew nigh to starboard and to larboard and, clinging to the sides of the noble bark, they linked their shining forms as doth the cunning wheelwright when he fashions about the heart of his wheel the equidistant rays whereof each one is sister to another and he binds them all with an outer ring and giveth speed to the feet of men whenas they ride to a hosting or contend for the smile of ladies fair. Even so did they come and set them, those willing nymphs, the undying sisters. And they laughed, sporting in a circle of their foam: and the bark clave the waves.

But begob I was just lowering the heel of the pint when I saw the citizen getting up to waddle to the door, puffing and blowing with the dropsy and he cursing the curse of Cromwell on him, bell, book and candle in Irish, spitting and spatting out of him and Joe and little Alf round him like a leprechaun trying to peacify him.

(James Joyce, ***Ulysses*** (New York, 1946, p. 335.) (1921)

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Qvando fiam vti chelidon — o swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aqvitaine a la tovr abolie
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih

(T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 424~434.) (1922)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritvs Mvndi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
(William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming.") (1926)

Written within a few years of each other, these passages from three of the most important modern writers of literature in English have two points in common: they relate contemporary action to mythology and therefore cannot be understood without special information. Largely through the influence of Eliot, Joyce, and Yeats, many English and American writers since 1920 have used the "mythical method"[1] in lyric and narrative. Their intent has been to enrich their works, but the effect has been to make them more obscure than almost any others in the history of their literature.

The difficulty of the three passages has made most readers, especially students forced to study them, distrustful and disinterested in the judgments of trained critics who praise ***Ulysses, The Waste Land,*** and works which use the same technique. And it's sometimes right to feel hostile toward a literature unintelligible to most of its audience. But some of the hostility is poorly founded. This paper's purpose is to make the reader at least willing to study the difficult modern writers in English by showing what the mythical method is, why it is used, and what advantages it has.

I

Used loosely by most critics today, "myth" signifies a story invented by man to explain "why the world is what it is and why things happen as they do."[2] Unless he is a Christian, the western critic assumes that all theologies are mythologies; and in the twentieth century the tendency has been to speak of "the Christian myth" as well.

The mythical method in literature is to compare or contrast a contemporary action to a myth. In ***Ulysses,*** for example, the three main characters are meant to remind the reader of Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus in Homer's ***Odyssey,*** and the experiences of the hero, Leopold Bloom, to remind him of the adventures of Odysseus. In the passage quoted, from the "Cyclops" episode in ***Ulysses,*** Bloom is leaving a Dublin bar, where he has bested "the citizen" in an argument and made him angry. "The citizen" is parallel

to the Cyclops, Polyphemus, whom Odysseus blinds in the *Odyssey*. The general situation suggests Odysseus and his men hastily embarking from the Cyclopes' island as Polyphemus pursues them. Even the citizen's oath has reference: it suggests the curse put upon Odysseus by the Cyclops. Just as this curse caused Odysseus to wander for years, so the curse of Ireland, a Roman Catholic nation, upon Bloom, a Jew, makes Bloom an outcast among Dubliners. The first paragraph of the passage is not an imitation but a parody of Homer's epic description of Odysseus' ship setting sail; however, its primary comic effect is not as a parody of Hemer but as a humorous contrast to the present scene. Milkwhite dolphins, comely nymphs, the ship itself are ridiculously out of place in a Dublin bar. The racy Irish dialect of the second paragraph increases the comic contrast. Here and elsewhere in *Ulysses* the *Odyssey* parallel has two general purposes: to show the astonishing similarity between character and action in the two works, and to show the tremendous difference between them.

In the passage just discussed, the effect of the *Odyssey* parallel is made comic by the absurd contrast between two styles. While this is by no means the only way Joyce uses the parallel, it is typical of *Ulysses* in that its action proceeds from event to event on a certain day (Thursday, June 16, 1904) independently of the *Odyssey*. The parallels vitally affect our attitude toward Bloom and seem to add significance to what he does, but if Joyce had eliminated them we still would have the story of Leopold Bloom. In this respect, although not in sublety of allusion,[3] myth in *Ulysses* is less difficult than in either *The Waste Land* or "The Second Coming." In the latter two works the myth itself is part of the basic level of the action.

The passage quoted from *The Waste Land* is the most extreme example of Eliot's effort to use spiritual values inherent in myth in order to suggest a way of living in his troubled times. Coming at the end of the poem, it, ties together some of the myths he has been using as points of reference for what at first reading seems to be a mere series of images.

To pick the chief example, the speaker here identifies himself with "the fisher king," originally a figure in a fertility myth which Eliot learned from Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. According to the myth, the fisher king rules a waste land ("the arid plain" in the passage), which can only be made fertile when a perfect knight comes to retrieve a cup and spear, representing fertility, from "the chapel perilous" at the heart of the waste land. Eliot compares the mythological waste land to his own country ("London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down"). Unless we know the legend of the fisher king, it is impossible to know that the speaker is "fishing" at the end of the poem because his country is still barren.

The purpose of "*Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*" ("Then he plunged into the fire which refines them"—from Dante's *Purgatorio*) is to emphasize the idea of spiritual purgation, which the poet feels is necessary if we are to save ourselves from our present barren state. "*Quando fiam uti chelidon*" ("When shall I be as the swallow?") refers to the classical myth of Procne, who was transformed into a swallow to escape the wrath of

an evil king; the speaker hopes for a similar metamorphosis and escape. He expresses this same hope in "O swallow," an invocation from a lyric in part four of Tennyson's *The Princess*, in which the poet longs to fly like the bird to the country where his beloved lives. "*Le Prince d' Aquitaine a la tour abllie*" ("the Prince of Aquitaine at the ruined tower") probably refers to King Richard I of England, who was imprisoned but later ransomed, as the speaker hopes to be.[4] After an allusion to Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* which I don't understand, the speaker gives three words, "Datta," "Dayadhvam," "Damyata" ("Give," "Sympathize," "Control"), from Hindu scripture, which he has mentioned just before the quoted passage, in order to show what we must do to transform the three "fragments I have stored against my ruins" into reality. With a Hindu benediction, "Shantih" ("the peace that passes all understanding"), he ends the poem.

In the last seven lines, Eliot is using the fisher king as a mask through which to repeat and tie together his ideas about whether and how the modern waste land is to be saved. The fertility myth provides him with the poem's basic metaphors: his country is like a waste land, in which he is, like the fisher king, the central observing figure. The speaker, like the fisher king, cannot act but only watch; on the other hand, the development of the poem itself can be compared to the quest which the knight must undergo to save the waste land, for its argument consists of an inquiry into what is wrong with the waste land and suggestions of remedies. But it ends in fragments because the poet has no certain solution, although using religion and literature he furnithes some ethical proposals and some hope.

Eliot's purpose in stringing together allusions to myth and literature is apparent in their affect: to call our attention from the contemporary images themselves to the timeless patterns in them. For example, when the poet says

> **A rat crept softly through the vegetation**
> **Dragging its slimy belly on the bank**
> **While I was fishing in the dull canal**
> **On a winter evening round behind the gashouse**
> **Musing upon the king my brother's wreck**
> **And on the king my father's death before him.**
> (187~192)

he begins, typically, with a sordid contemporary picture, then directs us to what is symbolic about that picture: the speaker as fisher king. The images of the poem have no order except the intellectual order of their symbolic meanings. There is no natural connection between "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down," a line from a children's nursery rhyme, and "*Poi s'ascose*" except that in the poem the first summarizes London and the second suggests how to escape it. We must stop for a moment to grasp the special meaning of the two quotations before the connection is clear.

In ways we have not discussed, the concern of Joyce as often as Eliot is to show action and image more as special symbol than for its own sake in completing a picture

of Dublin and Leopold Bloom. But *Ulysses* is connected by a sequence of action, however hard to follow, whereas *The Waste Land* is unified only by the metaphor given in the title. Myth in the latter is therefore more important because the poem has no order or meaning without it.

Eliot stands between Joyce and Yeats in that while he uses myth in a personal way, the myths he uses are not of his own invention. Yeats, on the other hand, invented a mythology of his own, outlined it in *A Vision*, and used it in many of his poems. As a result, his poems sometimes seem queer, or even unintelligible, to one not learned in Yeatsology. In "The Second Coming," for example, the uninformed reader has the vague feeling that the "rough beast" is connected with the picture in stanza 1 of the world falling apart, but wonders why Yeats substituted a sphinxlike ("lion body and the head of a man") creature for Christ to symbolize the Second Coming, which is a well-known Christian term referring to the Second Coming of Christ to earth. Such a reader must be taught Yeats believes history moves by the interaction of two contrary forces; at the points in history when the balance between these forces is most unequal a cataclysmic event, such as Christ's birth or His Second Coming, occurs and starts a reaction which ultimately restores equilibrium. During his life, Yeats sometimes thought that such historical crises came every 2000 years, sometimes he thought every 1000 years; in this poem he thinks the former. But the reason Christian references--the Second Coming, "a rocking cradle "suggesting Christ's birth—are used in this poem linked together with the idea of the rough beast, and the reason the allusion to Christ's birth ("twenty centuries of stony sleep/Were vexed to nightmare") is made in the same violent language in which the coming of the rough beast is described, is that in Yeats's mind they are the same kind of event, having the same effect upon history.

The first stanza also takes on more meaning if the reader knows Yeats's mythology. The falcon spinning out of earshot of the falconer seems a doubly fine metaphor when we learn that "gyre" is Yeats's name for the geometrical figure traced by each of the two forces in history as they interact. Because one force (the falcon) is completely out of the other's control, the world in the poet's time is flying apart.

Compared to the passages from Eliot and Joyce, "The Second Coming" is both less and more obscure. There is no abrupt shift in style, as there is in the Joyce passage, which requires us to know the outside information that *Ulysses* is parodying the *Odyssey* or else miss the point of the joke. And there is an obvious argument—"the world is falling apart; therefore a revelation is at hand"—which makes "The Second Coming" intelligible on a simple level for even the casual reader, whereas no one can see much connection between the references in the Eliot passage unless he knows what they mean in English and what they refer to. But after the student has learned Yeats's mythology, reread the *Odyssey*, and looked up Eliot's references, "The Second Coming," I think, will seem the most obscure of the three passages. Whereas Eliot and Joyce ask us to compare modern life to a mythological situation, Yeats views modern life as a reenactment of a supernatural process which for us is myth but for him is at least partly religion. We are not

asked to believe that Bloom is actually Odysseus or Eliot is the fisher king, but we are asked to believe that a rough beast, or something very like a rough beast, will soon be upon us.

II

Since the pre-Socratic Thales claimed that all things are made of water, western readers have been assailed with silly theories about the nature of things; Yeats's is among the more silly. If we read "The Second Coming" solely as a prophecy of the rough beast's advent, the poem seems ridiculous. Then again, if we assume that the "lesson" of ***The Waste Land*** is to show what the fisher king legend is and that modern life is only a myth in disguise, then the poem seems unendurable stuffy and obscure, because we have assumed that the most abstract part is the most important part. Yet because the mythologizing of Yeats and Eliot and Joyce is a barrier that strikes every new reader at once, many feel that their works are about nothing else.

Although part of the function of myth, particularly in Yeats, is to show a moral, this function of myth has been greatly exaggerated. Statements like the following, made by T.S. Eliot, have contributed to the popular misunderstanding.

> **What William Blake's genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own, and concentrated his attention upon the problems of the poet. The concentration resulting from a frameworkof mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius. The fault is perhaps not with Blake himself, but with the environment which failed to provide what such a poet needed; perhaps the circumstances compelled him to fabricate, perhaps the poet required the philosopher and mythologist; although the conscious Blake may have been quite unconscious of the motives.**[5]

Speaking of Blake, Eliot,who also writes the kind of poetry which "requires the philosopher and mythologist," speaks for himself and other poets who use the mythical method. What he feels is lacking in Blake and his environment is lacking in the world of the waste land. As Blake used his homemade philosophy, so Eliot uses the fisher king story and other legends as stylistic devices in order to preserve an aesthetic order when writing in a time of disorder, just as Yeats makes an order of the chaos described in "The Second Coming" by assuming that it is a phase in the cycle of history he has postulated.

Misunderstanding of the quotation comes when we fail to see Eliot's point that for the poet "a framework of ideas" is not a final goal even if it is a prerequisite for dealing with the real problems of the poet. Yeats expresses the same idea at the end of "A Packet for Ezra Pound," in ***A Vision***. Poets are not philosophers, nor do they pretend to be; and to discover the ideas, the "lesson" in a poem, whether it be in the form of rough beast, fisher-king legend, or something more familiar, is only one step in the understan-

ding of the poetry.

For instance, Eliot's reason for using the fisher-king story in ***The Waste Land*** has been wisely guessed at by Elizabeth Drew. Like the psychologist Jung, Eliot evidently conoluded that there are "certain archetypal patterns of images which recur and interfuse in the myths of the human race."[6] The fisher king legend is a good example because it is a Christianized fertility myth: it combines two cultural traditions. For example, sometime during the Middle Ages story tellers identified the cup and the spear withthe chalice used to celebrate the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples and the lance that pierced Christ's side when He was on the Cross. Moreover, both the fertility myth and Christianity have the idea of death and resurrection: the flowering of the land when the knight's quest is accomplished is analagous to the rebirth of the soul after a spiritual purification. Because the fisher king legend had seemed to grow naturally from many cultures which were the sources of his own, Eliot perhaps thought it could be applied to the present day as well.

If this explanation is correct, then Eliots' purpose in using the legend was primarily stylistic: to use it as a point of reference. As exploited in ***The Waste Land*** and in the examples from Joyce and Yeats, myth is primarily an extended metaphor, and the details of each of the passages are at least partly unified according to how they fit into the metaphor. Thus in ***The Waste Land*** the fragments "Then he dived into the fire which refines them," "When shall I be as the swallow." and "the Prince of Aquitaine at the ruined tower," have relation only insofar as they fit the metaphors of poet-fisher king and country-waste land.

In the Joyce passage, the ***Odyssey*** parallel is introduced chiefly because the contrasts among the epic, mock epic, and dialect styles provide amusement. That the parallels to ***Odyssey*** events in this section of ***Ulysses*** are quite close is not important in itself, but it makes more subtle Joyce's humor, which is exploiting the metaphor "the departure of Odysseus from the Cyclopes Island is like Bloom's leaving a Dublin bar." The purpose of both Joyce and Eliot is not to elucidate the myths they allude to but to produce different kinds of effects by comparing their contemporary subject to myth.

To look at the modern writer's use of myth as a primarily literary technique, as extended metaphor, is to see that appreciation of his poetry ***as poetry*** does not depend upon the question "does he believe in the myth he alludes to?" At the time he wrote ***The Waste Land*** T.S. Eliot was neither a Christian nor a believer in fertility cults, whereas "The Second Coming" probably reflects some genuine beliefs of Yeats; yet the myth in both poems has the same function, as metaphor. The real questions the reader should ask are: "is the poet skillful in the development of his metaphor?" and "is it worthwhile to have made a mythical situation out of the subject in the first place?"

The first section of this essay should have shown that each of the three pasages has considerable sublety of allusion. But this strength is also their weakness. The more subtly the author develops his metaphor of life myth, the more that metaphor is liable to become academic and abstruse. As Eliot's comment on Blake suggests and as the case of

Yeats confirms, the myths used by modern authors often seem too personal and artificial to begin with. The more they stand out in the poem (*cf.*, Yeats's "The Statues") the more grotesque and forbidding the poem seems, however well-constructed it is. Eliot may have thouhgt that the fisher-king legend was an "archetypal" image which would stir his readers' imaginations; nevertheless ***The Waste Land*** suffers from the same difficulty as any work which repeatedly alludes to a story most of its readers have never heard: no one knows, until he does the necessory research, what the author is saying. The more the writer can herd his myth into the background of his work, the better he will communicate with his readers.

In an eycellent study of Yeats, R.P. Blackmur argues that "Yeats has, if you acceept his mode, a consistent extraordinary grasp of the reality of emotion," but because "his chief resort and weapon for the grasping of that reality is magic," "if we would make use of that reality for ourselves we must also make some use of the magic that inspirits it Magic performs for Yeats the same fructifying function that Christianity does for Eliot……it makes a connection between the poem and its subject matter and provides an adequate mechanics of meaning and value."[7] This expresses well the alternatives readers must consider when deciding if a given work is worth studying in order to appreciate. Using "The Second Coming" as an example,[8] Blackmur decides that Yeats's best work definitely is. Certainly the first stanza is a powerful description of the times whether or not one believes that history moves like interpenetrating gyres.

But sometimes the myth is distinctly not worth figuring out. Sometimes it is a minor story in itself and only incidental to the work in which it is alluded to, as in the case of John Updike's novel, ***The Centaur*** (1962), which uses parallels to the whole Pantheon in retelling the myth of Chiron, the schoolteacher-centaur. The parallels between the hero and his son to Chiron and Prometheus are formal and stilted compared to the development of their characters and the relationship between them. Fortunately the mythological allusions seldom obscure Updike's natrative.

Somewhat like Eliot's footnotes to ***The Waste Land***, a glossary of references appears at the end of ***The Centaur***. Such an addition is one sign of the artificiality of Updike's technique. Probably the mythical method will die out before long, or be used, as in Joyce, only for academic metaphorical joking, and be regarded as the eccentricity of a period, like excesses of Medieval allegory, or the more overstrained metaphysical conceits. But in the meantime, the works of its practitioners remain. Prejudice against one peculiarity in them should never be allowed to obscure the greatness of the best examples, nor should we forget that it was the peculiarity which made the greatness possible.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Mythical method" is a term used by Eliot in a review of *Ulysses* in *The Dial*, November, 1923. Eliot does not define it precisely, but his review is quoted and the term explained at leangth in the first chapter of Elizabeth Drew, *T.S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* (New York, 1949), pp. 1ff.

2. M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York, 1961), p. 54.

3. In *Ulysses* other myths are used almost as extensively as the myth of Odysseus. For example, Bloom is often paralleled to Christ. We may say that Joyce uses Christianity in *Ulysses* for its mythological value, because there is no evidence that he uses it for other than imaginative purposes.

4. For these three translations I am partly indebted to Drew, p. 88.

5. from "William Blake," 1920, quoted in T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Australia, 1958), pp. 171~172.

6. Drew, p. 8.

7. "The Later Poetry of W.B. Yeats" (1936), quoted in *Form and Value in Modern Poetry* (New York, 1957), pp. 33~34 and ff. Blackmur's book is one of the most valuable collections of criticism of modern poetry in English.

8. Blackmur, pp. 37~42.

英國現代文學中的神話撮要

畢 樂 純

比較現世文壇和神話是現代英國文學的典型技巧。本文首先用喬埃斯的「尤利西斯」，愛略脫的「荒地」和葉慈的「基督再臨」爲例來解說這技巧。其次闡明它的用意不在教訓，而在塑成體裁、並且提示它的長處及短處。