

Classical Tradition and Myth in Modern Poetry

By

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Writing an essay about James Joyce's controversial and recently published (1922) novel *Ulysses* in Dial Magazine in 1923, T. S. Eliot declared:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. [...] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious. Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method.¹

It is noteworthy that Eliot credits W.B. Yeats with being the first contemporary poet to be mindful of the significance of myth to current

¹ T. S. Eliot, "'Ulysses', Order, and Myth," in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, p.177-178. Faber And Faber Ltd. (1975).

events. Certainly Yeats adapted and applied both traditional Celtic and ancient Greek myth to the problems of Ireland, especially during that troublesome time when "a terrible beauty" was being born, and what he regarded as modern philistine society "grubbing in a greasy till." His poem "The Realists" is addressed to those who underestimate the value of myth:

Hope that you may understand!

What can books of men that wive

In a dragon-guarded land,

Sea-nymphs in their pearly wagons

Do, but awake a hope to live

That had gone

With the dragons?²

Yet in "A Coat," the last poem in the same volume (*Responsibilities*, published in 1914), Yeats seems to renounce myth, or at least "old mythologies":

I made myself a coat

Covered with embroideries

² W.B. Yeats, 1983 *The Poems of W.B. Yeats*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, p. 120

Out of old mythologies

From heel to throat;

But the fools caught it,

Wore it in the world's eyes

As though they'd wrought it.

Song, let them take it,

For there's more enterprise

In walking naked.³

Or possibly Yeats is just warning us of the dangers of mythological metaphors being misunderstood or misinterpreted; a pertinent caveat in this age of rampant fundamentalism, where so many have lost or have never developed the capacity for metaphorical thinking.

In his later poems Yeats abandoned his earlier, romanticized images of an Edenic, aristocratic Ireland in favour of myth as a mechanism for self-knowledge, the declared objective of almost all spiritual traditions. In "A Coat" he depicts this self-knowledge as "Walking Naked."

³ Ibid. p. 127

In *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot (who once described his most famous poem as merely a piece of "rhythmic grumbling") also utilizes myth to express the human struggle and *failure* to acquire self-knowledge:

... blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract

By this, and this only, we have existed

Which is not to be found in our obituaries⁴

In Eliot's philosophy the conflict is resolved finally by conversion to orthodox Christianity via The Church of England.

Yeats' flirtation with the spiritual world is possibly one reason why he fell out of favour in the mid-twentieth century, when logical positivism reigned supreme. Yet he always had his advocates. In *Defending Ancient Springs*, Kathleen Raine rebukes those sterile materialists who still claim to be poets:

The language of symbolic analogy is only possible upon the assumption that these multiple planes do in fact exist. Those for whom the material world is the only plane of the real are unable to understand that the symbol – and poetry in the full sense is

⁴ T.S. Eliot 1930. "The Waste Land," *T.S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, p.49

symbolic discourse, discourse by analogy – has as its primary purpose the evocation of one plane in terms of another; they must find other uses for poetry or honestly admit that they have no use for it.⁵

Raine goes on to argue:

In England it is above all the poets who have kept the knowledge of this perennial wisdom when this has been all but lost alike by churches and by philosophers; and their language has at all times been (not because these invented the truths they perceived or formulated, but because in Europe Platonism has been the mainstream of such thought) that of Plato and Plotinus and their predecessors and followers. Indeed a revival of the learning of the imagination, and especially of the works of Plato and the neo-Platonists, has been the inspiration not only of the Florentine renaissance and all that followed (in England as elsewhere) but of every subsequent renaissance.⁶

Kathleen Raine would get no argument from William Blake (of whom she was an aficionado) who maintained that we even imagine the physical world into existence:

Now I a fourfold vision see

⁵ Kathleen Raine, 1967. *Defending Ancient Springs*. Oxford University Press, p. 108

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 110

And a fourfold vision is given to me

Tis fourfold in my supreme delight

And three fold in soft Beulah's night

And twofold Always. May God us keep

From single vision & Newtons sleep.⁷

Or William Butler Yeats:

Those masterful images because complete

Grew in pure mind but out of what began?⁸

Or the Buddhists:

The real sky is [knowing] that samsara and nirvana are merely an
illusory display.⁹

Or quantum physicists, who argue that a sub-atomic particle is a wave
until it's observed and then it becomes a particle. Thus we perceive or will
the putative world into being. Plotinus and other neo-Platonists would
concur. This is all too mind-boggling to logically comprehend. Myth is the
transformational vortex through which we can understand, appreciate and
even tolerate reality.

⁷ William Blake, 1982. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. New York: Anchor Books, p.720.

⁸ W.B. Yeats, 1983 "The Circus Animals' Desertion" *The Poems of W.B. Yeats*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, p. 347

⁹ Mipham Rinpoche, 2004. *Quintessential Instructions of Mind*. Rangjung Yeshe Publications p. 117

Thus, as Lillian Feder argues:

In the confusion of disputes over its definition, exaggerations of its values, and warnings of its dangers, one fact about myth is clear: it survives because it functions in the present, revealing a remarkable capacity to evolve and adapt to the intellectual and aesthetic requirements of the twentieth century. Critical controversy over myth and the diversity of poetic experimentation in its use reflect the vitality of myth as a means of expressing a variety of contemporary approaches to the inherited past, to time, history, and the yearning for order and meaning in a sceptical age.¹⁰

And in a sceptical age, Richard Tarnas's *The Passion of the Western Mind*, deals extensively with the Renaissance dichotomy of scientific rationalism versus romanticism:

From the complex matrix of the Renaissance had issued forth two distinct streams of culture, two temperaments or general approaches to human existence characteristic of the Western Mind. One emerged in the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment and stressed rationality, empirical science, and a sceptical secularism. The other was its polar complement, sharing common roots in the Renaissance and classical Greco-Roman culture (and in the Reformation as well), but tending to express just those aspects of human experience suppressed by the Enlightenment's overriding

¹⁰ Lillian Feder, 1971. *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press P.3

spirit of rationalism. First conspicuously present in Rousseau, then in Goethe, Schiller, Herder, and German Romanticism, this side of the Western Sensibility fully emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and has not ceased to be a potent force in Western culture and consciousness – from Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Holderlin, Schelling, Keats, Byron, Hugo, Pushkin, Carlyle, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and onward via its diverse forms to their many descendants, countercultural and otherwise, of the present era.¹¹

An example of modern poetry with a thread leading back into the golden ball of classical poetry is Susen Gillis's "The Sufficiency of Love," cited in HUMA 100 2008 Coursepack, *An Introduction to Humanities* (p. 195). The poem is the first in a sequence of fifteen that Gillis wrote after reading the sonnets of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. Surrey's own sonnets were variations on the sonnets of Petrarch, which in turn were sourced in Horace.

Tarnas goes on to write:

The two temperaments [scientific rationalism and Romanticism] held similarly divergent attitudes toward the two traditional pillars of Western culture, Greco-Roman classicism and the Judaeo-Christian religion. As the Enlightenment-scientific mind developed during the modern era only to the extent that it

¹¹ Richard Tarnas, 1991. *The Passion of the Western Mind*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, p.366.

provided useful starting points for further investigation and theory construction, beyond which ancient metaphysical and scientific schemes were generally perceived as deficient and of mainly historical interest. By contrast, classical culture for the Romantic was still a living realm of Olympian images and personalities, its artistic creations from Homer and Aeschylus onward still exalted models, its imaginative and spiritual insights still pregnant with newly discoverable meaning. Both viewpoints encouraged the recovery of the classical past, but for different motives – one for the sake of accurate historical knowledge, the other to revivify that past, to enable it to live again in the creative spirit of modern man,¹²

Robert Graves (1895-1985), for whom classical literature and mythology were a constant source of inspiration, was another writer who, like Kathleen Raine, thought poets should have little truck with philosophy. In his essay "The Case for Xanthippe," from in *The Crane Bag* (1969) he wrote: "Philosophy is antipoetic. Philosophize about mankind and you brush aside individual uniqueness, which a poet cannot do without self-damage."

Graves was an English poet, classical scholar, novelist and critic who produced some 140 books. He is perhaps best known for the historical novel *I, Claudius* (1934), with its sequel *Claudius The God* (1943). In his controversial study of folklore, mythology, religion and magic, *The White*

¹² Ibid. p.371

Goddess (1948) Graves rejects the patriarchal gods as sources of inspiration in favour of matriarchal powers of love and destructiveness. The Muse, or Moon-goddess, inspires poetry of a magical quality, in contrast to rational, classical verse. In the introduction he writes:

To summarise [*The White Goddess*] in a rough-and-ready fashion, the book's argument is that in late prehistoric times, throughout Europe and the Middle East, matriarchal cultures, worshipping a supreme Goddess and recognising male gods only as her son, consort or sacrificial victim, were subordinated by aggressive proponents of patriarchy who deposed women from their positions of authority, elevated the Goddess's male consorts into positions of divine supremacy and reconstructed myths and rituals to conceal what had taken place. This patriarchal conquest happened at various times, beginning in the second millennium BC and reaching Britain around 400 BC. True poetry (inspired by the Muse and her prime symbol, the moon) even today is a survival, or intuitive re-creation, of the ancient Goddess worship. Moreover, her cult and the matriarchy that went with it represented a saner and happier mode of human existence than the patriarchy of the male God and his sun-inspired rationality, which have produced most of the ills of the modern world.¹³

¹³ Robert Graves, 1948. *The White Goddess*. London: Faber and Faber, p. ix.

Graves was one of the few great First World War poets who survived the carnage. Seriously injured during the hellish Battle of the Somme in 1916, he was reported dead. In response he wrote a jocular poem, "Escape," in which he relates his experience in Hades, from which "Dear Lady Proserpine ... stooping over [him] for Henna's sake," returned him to life. The incident is recounted in mythical terminology – Lethe, Cerberus, demons and heroes fashion the feeling of the traditional underworld. But Graves refuses to take it all seriously, truly astonishing given the hell that spawned the experience. Proserpine is a sweet lady, an army biscuit drugs Cerberus and Graves defiantly declares:

"Life! Life! I can't be dead! I won't be dead!

Damned if I'll die for any one!" I said...¹⁴

In *English Literature and Ancient Languages*, Kenneth Haynes lists a long line of poets whose work represents the "presence of the Greek and Latin languages within English literature since the Renaissance."¹⁵ In his examination of Algernon Charles Swinburne's poem "Sapphics" he discusses Swinburne's use of "privative adjectives" ("All withdrew long since, and the land was barren,/Full of *fruitless* women and music only") which, he argues, "are easily created in Greek, and some of them form part of Greek's distinctive poetic vocabulary."¹⁶ Yet "Sapphics" also represents Swinburne's attempt to utilise Greek metrics in English poetry (p. 131) as

¹⁴ Robert Graves, 1927. "Escape," *Poems (1914-26)*. London: Cassell pp. 58-59.

¹⁵ Kenneth Haynes, 2003. *English Literature and Ancient Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. ix.

¹⁶ *Ibid*-p. 124.

he also did in "Hesperia" (pp. 133-134). Focusing on Swinburne's epic *Atalanta in Calydon* and the poem "The Garden of Proserpine," Haynes examines Swinburne's use of Aeschylus' frenzied rhetoric to produce a feeling of disenchantment and discord (pp. 162, 166).

One modern poet whose apparent obscurity can be challenging is W.H. Auden:

"Auden delves beneath the surface of events for the obscure forces that control history, and like them, he reveals the intrinsic connection between man's inner nature and his historical role through mythical allusions and symbols."¹⁷

Auden alerts us to how easy it is to overlook or ignore the warning messages of mythology. From "Musee des Beaux Arts":

In Breughel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away

Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green

Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

¹⁷ Lillian Feder, 1971. *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press P.317

Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,

Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.¹⁸

And, finally, William Blake (1757-1827), explains it all:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive.

And particularly they studied the genius of each city & country. placing [sic] it under its mental deity.

Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realise or abstract the mental deities from their objects; thus began Priesthood.

Choosing forms of worship from Poetic tales.

And at length they announced that the Gods had ordered such things.

Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast. ¹⁹

¹⁸ W.H. Auden, 1938. "Musée des Beaux Arts," *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc. p.741.

¹⁹ William Blake, 1982. "Proverbs of Hell," *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake)*. New York: Anchor Books p.38.

