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The Gap Between Myth and Literature

The history of attempts to relate myth and literature has been a strangely pessimistic one. Literary criticism has long been interested in justifying literature by showing that its essential role in our cultural experience is somehow "mythic". Yet most often it has had to accept that art somehow takes second place to myth. No matter whether we are comparative mythologists, followers of Jung or Frye, Structuralists or Semiologists, myth stands as the paradigmatic model for literature, the essential reality *behind* the text, but not the text itself. Literature is symbolic and incidental, myth is essential and an item of belief. At best, scholarship has tried to show that literature can be like myth, either because it uses motifs supposedly embedded in human experience, or because it has a similar narrative structure to myth.

There are, then, two basic approaches to myth-and-literature study: the Essentialist/ Archetypalist and the Structuralist. The arguments start from opposite ends of a continuum: on the one hand, art seeking, myth and its irrational origins; on the other, myth tending to art and narrative order. The question to explore here is whether they can ever meet, whether we can find some common grounds for discussing the impact of both myth and art. What we are looking for is the vanishing point at which it no longer matters which is which, the point at which the distinction appears purely academic because we cease to find that the impact of myth contradicts the experience of art, and vice-versa.

Traditionally, we have sought that vanishing point either in some essential component of the human unconscious or else in the peculiar structure of narrative, both "mythic" and "literary". The Essentialist argument, which depends on explaining how the unconscious works, involves an emphasis on "primordial archetypes" and has been the most influential of theories of relating myth and literature. It clearly develops from the symbolism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition through Romantic theory and the metapsychological criticism of D.H. Lawrence, the work of Freud and Jung, the Genre criticism of Northrop Frye and the Vitalist

use of myth perhaps most clearly expressed in recent years by Leslie
Fiedler. There is, too, the related attempt to show that the literary sen-
sibility, in all its alleged idealism and need for wish-fulfillment, finds a
natural expression in mythological symbols, which we see, for example,
in Douglas Bush's studies of mythology and the Renaissance and
Romance traditions in English poetry.

Jung, of course, has been the most important figure in modern Essen-
tialist argument, and the most obviously Christian. For him all images
and motifs gain meaning from "historical categories that reach back in-
to the mists of time" (1954:32-33). To lead the imagination to meaning
is to restore our religious sense, a rather fundamentalist Protestant ef-
fort to get us back to the basic facts of the "primitive wonder world," as
he calls it, where God apparently lives. It has become a commonplace in
literary studies to assume with Jung that the unconscious is universally
disposed to distribute archetypes via the imagination, which in turn
forms versions not only of the same story but also of a collective un-
conscious. For Jung, myth is primarily a psychic phenomenon which
reveals the nature of the universal "soul." It is the language of an un-
conscious process which provides a displaced form of self-knowledge, a
chance, in his terms, to be "lost in oneself," to see oneself as the object
as well as the subject of every thought. Jung can allow that literature
may reveal this complex process of coming-into-consciousness, this "in-
ner colloquy with one's good angel" (1954:40-41). And strangely
enough, the Structuralists are even more uneasy than the Ar-
chetypalists over such a close relation between literature and myth,
preferring to concentrate on their apparently irreconcilable differences.
But Jung makes a powerful point which has influenced many an attempt
to define the hermeneutic nature of literary study. As the structure in
which archetypes appear, language has the potential to be a symbol-
making process, a reliance on the experience, as he says, "in images and
of images." The symbolic process presents a "rhythm of negative and
positive, loss and gain, dark and light," a rhythm of the psyche as *anima*
and *animus*, which, he declares, requires the integration of archetypes
in a "dialectical process."

There are, however, several problems with this argument. Above all,
an image of the self emerges from the symbolic process which appears
quite dualistic. The archetypes are "relatively autonomous" and cannot
be integrated rationally. They move hesitantly from the dimly lit world
of unconscious forms to a tentative union with substance, constantly
struggling, it would seem, to return from where they came. Meaning
lies not really "in the images and of the images," as language concretely

provides, but in a transformation process revealed in dream. The "dialectic" and the transformations, that is, are *arbitrarily* dependent on the emergence of images as collective psychological motifs from that ubiquitous "wonder world." Jung's archetype is like the boulder of Sisyphus, strained again and again to the top, only to quiver for a moment and disappear out of control. Perhaps this is not a large distortion of the symbol-making process, which it is fashionable now to see as developing from a psyche quite as androgynous as the *anima/ animus*. And it is a theory deeply influential in discussions of the relation between literature and dream, most articulately perhaps in recent years in the work of Gaston Bachelard (*The Poetics of Reverie*, 1960) who, although quite phenomenological in practice, borrows much from Jung's "criss-crossed cosmicities," as he calls them, "of the *animus* and the *anima* in alchemical meditations." But Jung's implied connection between myth and narrative is finally mystifying and full of primitive choices of key myths which are not only arbitrary but make the process of "becoming lost in oneself" a deterministic one, for the unconscious, as well as its symbol-making, seems to offer little more than a grab-bag of anthropomorphic meaning.

Within the very broad scope of Jung's influence, the question of assigning meaning to the relationship between literature and the recurring motifs in human experience has been answered with perhaps more accuracy for literary scholarship (though with no less historicism about myth) by Northrop Frye. He declares that "criticism, as a science, is totally intelligible; literature as the subject of a science, is, so far as we know, an inexhaustible source of new critical discoveries" (1951:10). Again, as in Jung, we can be drawn willingly into his theory by its hermeneutic intent, until we reach the assertion that the "unifying category of criticism" is the archetype, "a part of a total form." Frye seeks for criticism what he finds in myth, a sense of all-encompassing form, but he mistakes form for religious content and has few suggestions as to how mythic thought itself, the tangible evolution of archetypes in narrative, actually operates. While he does not confuse myth and literature, like Jung, he writes of the latter as *defined* by mythic material. "The myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the natural and archetypal narrative to the oracle. Hence, the myth is the archetype, though it may be convenient to say myth only when referring to the narrative, and archetype when speaking of significance" (1951:15). Here, again, for a moment, myth, archetype and narrative *appear* interchangeable, but like Jung, Frye is more concerned to show how myths essentialize themselves, not as

literature but as one large mythic structure of the mind. It is, in fact, not convenient to speak of myth as *narrative* unless we treat it as such, unless we offer more information than Frye does anywhere in his writings on the structure of particular narratives as myth. However subtle his synthesis of a wide body of important literature, it is finally a narrow science of myth and criticism that he offers, a cloistering of literature, for it seeks an order determined by proving the worth of literature by the presence of psychological archetypes.

Apart from the Essentialist view of literature as a receptacle of myth, the Structuralist argument, has centered on the nature of narrative form, both in myth (via Structural Anthropology) and literature, but as I want to show later, it too can opt for art's *a priori* subservience to myth. However, in recent years, the gap between anthropology and literary studies has slowly been closing. That, at least, is clear from the influence Claude Lévi-Strauss has had on the development of Semiotics (or the science of signs) in European literary criticism—especially that of Roland Barthes—which can be said to offer for literature a parallel to the science of myth in structural anthropology. Both offer—in conjunction with, say Piaget, Lacan, Chomsky and Todorov—relatively codified versions of the way human thought is expressed in language which allows that thought to progress. Certainly, the Structuralist argument has avoided seeing literature as translation and expedient representation. It has also avoided reifying either the text, the author or the reader around a few mythic "quests" and "archetypes" and reminds us that myth has to be known first of all as narrative.

The meaning of a myth for Lévi-Strauss, for example, is tied closely to the problem of understanding how language functions. Myth is revealed only as language, only in the emergence of its different narrative versions in which all the variants of the myth play a part. This would seem to be close to what Jung means by the recurrence of mythic archetypes in narrative, but whereas Jung sees a knowledge of the "soul" open to discovery through these motifs, Lévi-Strauss concentrates on the dialectical interplay of recurring images, which can only be discussed in the context in which they appear, and not as transcendent items.

Lévi-Strauss provides us with enough empirical evidence from the analysis of numerous variants in totemistic myth (in his four-volume *Mythologiques*) to see that myth is problem-solving thought which operates dialectically and, in genuine myth, there is no end to that dialectic. Myth develops series of oppositions which progressively work out their own mediation, but they are progressions, he explains in *The Savage Mind*, which begin in coincidence. Myth, to use his well-known

term, is a kind of *bricolage*. It is always put together from items at hand, from signs which have received meanings within the context of language usage. Roland Barthes has a similar theory in which he explains that myth can only result from meaning already there in the world's arbitrary arrangement of signs. But the problem is, quite simply, that if we push questioning about the ontological status of language towards Jung's mystical categories, we discover, as both Barthes and Lévi-Strauss are at pains to explain, that dialectical reason cannot account for itself: "Language, an unreflecting totalization, is human reason which has its own reason and of which man knows nothing" (Lévi-Strauss, 1962a:252).

Clearly the key problem of relating myth and literature is the old onto-logical one. Confronted with the fact that there is no reasonable answer to the question "why is man rational?", Structuralist argument must emphasize that myth is a metalanguage, a second-order system. Lan-guage itself is not the source of logic. Barthes and Lévi-Strauss hold the view that somehow language is grounded in reason, that mythic thought reveals itself as a self-correcting transformational structure. Language, though an "unreflecting totalization," is never finally haphazard because of its *intent* to solve the problem of its own status, to bridge the gap between the known (and the conscious) and the unknown (and the unconscious). Myth as language does not provide analogies from the real, nor archetypes which are its essence. Rather it is an analogy of the function of the real. Myth is an homology, providing a logical model capable of overcoming contradictions because it is always mediating be-tween its own terms and those outside it. Myth never ceases to be in the process of change, and it is the very intent to go on trying to synthesise which is mythic.

What, then, has this to do with literature? Lévi-Strauss is somewhat tentative about the ontological status of myth, since it comes to us, weighing and sorting its own meaning, as consciously problem-solving language, systematically offering negations of its own terms as it at-tempts to provide a synthesis. But such activity, he implies, is not a challenge to metaphor, it is metaphor itself. As he puts it in "Charles Baudelaire's 'Les Chats' ", "myths do not consist only in conceptual ar-rangements. They are also works of art which arouse in those who listen to them (and in the ethnologists themselves who read them in transcrip-tion) profound aesthetic emotions" (1962b:124). Myth operates somewhere between aesthetic perception and logical thought, unifying the two. It is self-conscious form, not only constantly seeking the terms of its own justification, but also how to seduce us by those terms. But

with Lévi-Strauss, as with Jung, the seduction is deemed essential because myth is not simply one man's point of view, but a universal text which, by virtue of its rationality, does not need an author. The basic distinction between myth and literature in structural anthropology, then, is that myth is a coded message from a society to its members, literature is the very reverse, a coded message from a member of society to others.

Yet it is also Lévi-Strauss' point that literature and myth are "complementary terms", even in their distinct functions. In "Charles Baudelaire's 'Les Chats' ", he declares that "in poetic works, the linguist discerns structures which are strikingly analogous to those which the analysis of myths reveals to the ethnologist" (1962b:124). The "striking analogies" are formal: myth and literature are both metalanguages. As Roland Barthes puts it, and Lévi-Strauss would agree: "language is a form, it cannot possibly be either realistic or unrealistic. All it can do is either be mythical or not, or perhaps . . . counter-mythical" (1957:136). And so there *are* times when the language of literature can *appear* to be the language of myth. But in spite of what seems to be a belief in the same ontological status for literature and myth, Lévi-Strauss, consistently throughout *Mythologiques*, reminds us that analogy does not clearly define meaning. He builds on the Saussurean distinction, explained in the study of "Les Chats," that myth reveals the syntagmatic function of language ("myth can be interpreted at the semantic level only") and poetry the paradigmatic (there are many versions of a myth, but only one of a poem). In *The Raw and the Cooked*, he points out that myth lies somewhere between music and poetry. The former "is the only language with the contradictory attributes of being at once intelligible and untranslatable" while "the vehicle of poetry is articulate speech, which is common property" (1964:18). Presumably, poetry shares untranslatability with music and music shares intelligibility with myth: they are apart on a continuum determined by the function of all language or sign systems on synchronic and diachronic axes. In *The Origin of Table Manners*, however, the gap between myth and literature grows wider. If myth seeks to become one myth, or merely parodies dialectical thought, then it will tend to survive only by weak transformations, by repetition of progressively shorter and more discontinuous episodes, all of a similar type. Exoticism, sets of paradigms, even archetypalist categories, replace the dynamic interchange between terms and the constant search for a synthesis. Creation, that is, can spring from imitation rather than dramatization, and this progressively distorts the interchange between the empirical and the ontological dimensions of reality.

Lévi-Strauss, finally, in spite of his "science of myths" is a primitivist. He finds that modern myth is largely episodic and modern literature reveals mythic transformation at its weakest. The lowest forms of myth are the emergent forms of fiction. Failure in the transformational function of myth leads to discontinuous literary narratives. This rather bleak, though doubtless some would say "realistic" view of modern fiction declares that the novel (presumably in the hands of writers like Faulkner, Joyce and Pynchon) has overemphasized the paradigmatic function of literature, its habit of creating arbitrary relations, to the loss of a sense of universal sharing in language, which myth depends on.

But the most surprising aspect of Lévi-Strauss' attempt to explain the relation between myth and literature is that he does not consider that literature itself is all we have today to preserve the nature of essential, on-going and, therefore, mythic narrative. Given his terms of narrative as language seeking to prove its own necessity, either mythic or not, there would seem to be no clear means of differentiating between myth and literature. The literary imagination, no less than the mythic, is constantly searching for the "third term," or as we more commonly call it, the apt metaphor, the workable fiction. Art, like myth, seeks to create fictions which *intend* to be essential, not only at the moment of writing, but *because* of the writing. Like myth, art is a form of homologous thought, a second-order system. The distinction between myth as syntagmatic and poetry as paradigmatic, then, seems to me to be an unnecessary dualism, for both, as language, must rely on the fact that all meaning in all language results from the interplay of syntax and pardigm, that neither one is "translatable" without the other. Furthermore, myth constantly rearranges its terms, literature constantly redefines *its* terms, not only within the boundaries of the particular and general in language but in genre, too. And literature, like myth, can only preserve itself by being vitally self-transforming. The problem, of course, is recognizing such transformations, which is one of the tasks of literary criticism. While Lévi-Strauss does not commit the Essentialist fallacy of searching for the *immanence* of myth in art, he does mistake the radically discontinuous structuring of much modern fiction for the failure of myth.

We have perhaps a more catholic version of the inter-relationship between myth and literature in the writings of Roland Barthes, who has clearly developed Lévi-Strauss' science of myths into a more general science of signs, including literary signs. He points out that myth is a type of speech defined by a way of saying. His is a rather circular argument: everything can be a myth depending on the world's sug-

gestiveness, which in turn depends on the inter-subjectivity of facts as they are endowed with significance. Myth can only work on objects which already have meaning. It can only celebrate, at best unveil, tending to the tautologous, proverbial and aphoristic. Myth takes the meaning of an item and turns it into form (a second-level sign), making it transparent without supressing its meaning. The analogy to Lévi-Strauss' Hegelian dialectic in myth is Barthes' argument for the open-endedness of myth. Myth does not "act the things" but "acts their names"; it manipulates only signs, homologies; it is a gesturing with items constantly open to new meaning. The function of myth, then, is to be appropriated. It has no fixity. Nothing is hidden in myth, but meaning can be distorted by linguistic gestures. If myth for Lévi-Strauss is progress by negation, for Barthes it is progress by intention, a constant dialectic between meaning and form:

> What must always be remembered is that myth is a double system; there occurs in it a sort of ubiquity: its point of departure is constituted by the arrival of a meaning . . . the signification of the myth is constituted by a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language-object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness (1957:123).

For Barthes, the distinction between myth and poetry is that myth intends to transfer meaning into forms or signs while it aims to be "factual." Poetry works in the reverse, seeing the world as irreducible and turning signs into meaning, with the aim of being "essential." Poetic language, then, for Barthes, as it was for Lévi-Strauss, is incorruptible, untranslatable, resisting the transparency of myth (its open-endedness) in its struggle to be the thing itself. "Contemporary poetry is *a regressive semiological system*. Whereas myth aims at an ultrasignification, at the amplification of the first system, poetry, on the other hand, attempts to gain an infra-signification, a pre-semiological state of language. In short, it tries to transform the sign back into meaning" (1957:133). But poetry is duplicitous, too, as well as myth. If myth "is a type of speech defined by its intention . . . much more than by its literal sense", and yet has its intention "frozen" by that very literalness, so poetry, in aiming to be the thing itself, or even an "anti-language," must succumb to the myth of itself. "Literature," says Barthes, "is an undoubted mythical system" because it is the very *concept* of literature which gives it its meaning. The paradox of this argument, though—the paradox of any argument for a hermeneutic—is that as writing struggles to create new theories of the literariness of literature, it must fall to endless myths of "newness."

But Barthes, more than Lévi-Strauss, can more positively evaluate literary experiment in the face of its Sisyphean task by aligning it with myth. "Myth," he says, is itself "a *value*, truth is no guarantee for it; nothing prevents it from being a perpetual alibi . . . . The meaning is always there to *present* the form; the form is always there to outdistance the meaning" (1957:123). And in the most general way, this can be taken as a value of language performance before it is a value of myth. But in almost traditional terms, he can write of the moral crisis "modifying the writer's consciousness" in the late nineteenth century when "writing was revealed as signifier, literature as signification" (see *Writing Degree Zero*). In *Mythologiques* he describes this historical event as follows: "rejecting the false nature of traditional literary language, the writer violently shifted his position in the direction of an anti-nature of language. The subversion of writing was the radical act by which a number of writers have attempted to reject literature as a mythical system" (1957:135). Even the most ardent naturalists would agree with Barthes on this: *writing* has been "subverted" by Lawrence, Faulkner, Joyce and Pynchon. But, of course, it has only been particular myths (naturalistic, cause-and-effect) which have been rejected and not the mythic quality of literature itself.

How strangely old-fashioned and even deterministic Barthes and Lévi-Strauss can appear in their judgement of the modern, especially when Structuralism, of all current methodologies, has encouraged seeing the vitality of human thought in its open-endedness. As Jean Piaget puts it: "we must admit that we do not really understand why the mind is more truly honored when turned into a collection of permanent schemata than when it is viewed as the as yet unfinished product of continual self-construction" (1968:114). As modern scholarship is slowly documenting, this act of self-construction is as clear in Symbolist poetry and the novels of Joyce, for example, as it is in Hegelian phenomenology. Barthes and Lévi-Strauss have documented premises about self-construction which beg for application to modern literature, yet they themselves often retreat, it seems, before the sharp discontinuities of modern art, because it appears necessary to them to preserve some universal sense of the value of myth. For all of Lévi-Strauss' continual protests that his science of myths does not explain how men think but only what they think, it is hard not to draw inferences about the value of some kinds of form of thought over others. We can agree with him that much literature is weak transformation, but does it follow that strong transformations are any less abstract, or that the esoteric structuring of much modern art has no social basis? If Lévi-Strauss' moralism is

almost "primitive" Marxist (Caudwell rather than Goldmann), then Barthes might remind us, in Lawrence's terms, of "he with his tail in his mouth." Of course, Barthes' hermeneutic is subtle beyond perhaps any offered to us recently, and one cannot afford to avoid the questions he raises. As he notes at the end of *Mythologies*, what we are really confronted with in discussing the relation of myth and literature is the question of the penetrability of reality. The energy exerted in the act of writing defines both the social and mythic value of the text. "I am interested in language," he comments in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "because it wounds or seduces me." But for Barthes, our verbal relation to reality always seems too unstable and hence excessive, and for that reason the co-ordinates of the text quickly move to justify a pessimism at the endlessly circling hermeneutic.

The question arises, as we watch the coming and going of myth and literature in both Barthes and Lévi-Strauss: after all the generalizations about dialectical, rational thought and the tension between sign and meaning—which are, of course, most important correctives to the moralistic empiricism of the New Critics—are we not left, finally, with the sense that the most important scholarship is itself thought willingly in the process of "continual self-construction," because we have texts around which we can construct ourselves? In spite of Jung, Frye, Lévi-Strauss, Goldmann or Barthes, the science of criticism has not become a science because the act of reading refuses to be institutionalized. For much the same reason that we choose not to harness the body to work all the time, so we cannot completely harness our imagination to a formal pattern to a text. "The pleasure of the text," as Barthes realizes, "is pleasure in more things than the text alone."

But this is by no means to dismiss Barthes and Lévi-Strauss from an attempt to discover why we have traditionally needed to keep a gap between myth and literature in order, paradoxically, to show how essential literature is. On the contrary, the insight of both these writers into the tension between the mythic and the aesthetic seems to me to be central to any synthesis we might offer. Given that language as form establishes literature as neither realistic nor unrealistic, but only a form of the real or unreal (that is, as mythical or counter-mythical), then a relation between myth and literature can be made in that both, as language, must see the world as open to signification. Both are at best homologies of the real, and both evoke the dramatic irony, as it were, of the "excessive" reality of experience.

Of that dramatization we can emphasize—via Lévi-Strauss' description of essential, problem-solving thought as dialectical—that the

pessimism inherent in Barthes' hermeneutic of excessive reality need not appear inevitable. What we are dealing with in both myth and literature and their attempts to make sense of reality are the *ironies* created by the ontological limits of language. Language at its most suggestive, and therefore we might say, vital, is endlessly transformational. The transformations are not simply from a slowly unfolding essence within the consciousness, as Jung would suggest, though the unconscious, without being institutionalized into collective captivity, may be a convenient repository of what we do not know but slowly learn about ourselves. Rather the transformations result because we *intend* to give meaning to the forms of our experience, and we intend *to go on* giving them meaning. This intent, to my mind, helps close the gap between myth and literature, for literature's intention, as well as myth's, is to go on in some way forever. And it can only do this by allowing the reader room to play. No less than myth, poetry cannot go on forever unless it encourages more poetry, unless, in fact, it does not essentialize, but helps to create poetry *in the reader*, to create a separate version of the same poem.

Aesthetic theory nearly always aims to integrate form and content, as the cliché goes, but can do so with authority only within the functional limits that literary signs themselves determine. That, as everyone knows, is at the heart of the modernist aesthetic which Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Joyce made the very *subject* of poetry and fiction. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, for example, is nothing if not a grand hermeneutic for poetry, a display of the poet's concern not simply with watching himself write, but with summing up the fate of poetry as the fate of language, and the fate of reading. The *Quartets* do not merely use myth but operate as myth themselves. The function of the narrative is to carry a message in patterns which are repetitive, dialectical, even cybernetic, for they are constantly evolved as functions of the reader's consciousness of the poem. And James Joyce's intricate handling of evolutionary, cyclical history and fluctual, punning time becomes, too, the way of seeing revealed as ironically limiting what is seen to exist. *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are both narratives of plot implosion: the layers of simultaneous meaning they offer ironically take the fact-finding out of the art of reading, however much we strain for the precise reference Joyce seems to be making. Those layers offer, in effect, the open-endedness of mythic thought. The novels belittle linear and cyclical time. The sense of plot and character which we want them to impose, which provide the illusion of freedom we have traditionally needed in the novel by quantifying time and space, break down under the effect of Joyce's use of epiphanic puns

and plot repetitions with subtle disjunctions of time and place. That is, both Eliot and Joyce offer homologies for mythic thought: constantly self-transforming sets of signs which reveal the urge to discover rational form. What is narrated is not simply events in a plot but signposts to the process of thought which will not give up, which constantly seeks the third term to every set of contradictions. In Yeats, too, mythology (primarily Theosophist) contains no more than the coordinates for thought, is neither implicitly believed in nor really sacred mystery, but dependent on setting up the probing of human reason.

In short, the discontinuities, the esoteric references and the radical disjunctions of time and place in modern writing would seem to encourage us to be proficient at myth-making ourselves, and this process, finally, is a rational one in much the same way that Lévi-Strauss describes mythic thought as rational: "so much addicted to duplication, triplication and quadruplication after the same sequence . . . repetition has as its function to make the structure of myth apparent . . . (for) the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction" (1958:229). Art, no less than myth, is a search for greater accuracy in what can be said. There is nothing more misleading than the study of aesthetics in a vacuum from other attempts to account for human knowledge. The aim of poetry has often been described as to restore the numinous to language, to restore it to its ecstatic, hortatory or vital origins. And this is not a process of mystification, but the aim of mythic, or we can say with Lévi-Strauss, "dialectical" thought. Modern poetry, after all, has long been fascinated by what Eliot saw as the struggle between the man who suffers and the man who creates, a distinction which can always be usefully preserved by the anonymity of the poet in the poem. That very paradox—for it is little more than that in Eliot's critical writings—reminds us of Barthes' "transparency" of myth or Lévi-Strauss' statement that myth depends on the disappearance of an author. If the universal reasonableness can be justified by the fact that no author need be found, so, in a sense, the very intelligibility of a poem depends on the disappearance of the poet. In poetry, the radical manipulation of language leads to the vanishing point of the self.

But we must also remember that in reading poetry, as in reading myth, a consciousness of the self comes and goes in time, we search to recover the author when reason breaks down. Creativity is dialectical, for identity can never be simple. Paul de Man puts the epistemological problem quite bluntly: "knowledge of the impossibility of knowing precedes the act of consciousness that tries to reach it" (1971:75). Here the Existentialist paradox is familiar: the empirical move towards

understanding, the poetic or critical act of interpretation, reveals that poetic language contains in itself the inevitability of dissolution. Criticism, says de Man, "thus becomes a form of demystification on the ontological level that confirms the existence of a fundamental distance at the heart of all human experience" (76). What this leaves is a tension in the act of poetic creation between the poetic self constantly reflecting on itself, but no less intending to reach "the center of things," and the realization that, like Yeats' spiral (one of the most convincing of all images of the hermeneutic circle), the *essential* is always repetitive. As Derrida puts it, ideality "*does not exist* in the world, and it does not come from another world; it depends entirely on the possibility of acts of repetition" (1967:52).

My argument has been that this is precisely what links literary thought to mythic thought. Nothing in literature is more mythic than the process of language reflecting with constant repetition on its empirical origins (and all *their* ambiguity) by reworking the reality of more than one meaning of a form, and moving toward self-consciousness and then self-abolition in the kind of sensual play that is poetry. For, paradoxically, the imagination will always relate to what is left out. Good art, like myth, always promises an enlargement on initial, arbitrary impressions of the few relatively established items (including ourselves) that we choose to begin with. And it does so as an *intended* act of both celebration and recovery, and not merely representation. So we can talk about art or myth as other than a semiological system only at great risk of essentializing each one. But we must also not forget that in both art and myth we are dealing not simply with sign systems but with sign systems as commodities, linguistic commodities, striving not to be so. What gives any narrative life—be it "mythic" or "literary"—is its ability to maintain that paradox, to dramatize the relationship between any number of problematic opposites involving self and society, nature and culture, words and things, and so on, in a way which makes their contingency, their mere *bricolage*, seem necessary, while the presence of an author seems unnecessary.

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