

Myth and the Modern Writer

Why are modern writers so obsessed by myth? Why do they return to mythic themes, rewrite them, effectively create new versions of our oldest stories?

Why was Ted Hughes at the end of his life writing his own, free version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*? Why before that had he produced a version of Euripides's *Alcestis* and Seneca's *Oedipus*? In one sense, the answer to the question in relation to Hughes is more straightforward than it might be with other writers. He was fascinated by classical tragedies because he'd found himself living inside one. Not one but two female partners were to commit suicide, the second including their daughter in the act of immolation. In *Alcestis* the queen offers to die in place of the king, Admetos. One can see how the subject might not so much have fascinated as tormented him. But Yeats produced versions of the Oedipus plays too. Derek Mahon has written his own *Bacchae*, Seamus Heaney has written versions of Greek plays, Robin Robertson recently produced a version of *Medea*. Pasolini made extraordinarily compelling film versions of both *Oedipus* and *Medea*. Our contemporary culture is obsessed with repossessing and reworking the mythic material of the past. We are permitted to ask why.

Seamus Heaney recently produced a version of *Beowulf* which has become a best-seller across the world, and in 1971 John Gardner published a remarkable novel, *Grendel*,¹ which was a rewriting of *Beowulf* from the point of view of the man-eating monster. It is perhaps the Gardner version which might lead us most usefully to the theme of the contemporary writer and myth. What Gardner did was to use the original legend as a heuristic principle, a route of

¹ John Gardner, *Grendel* (1971; New York: Vintage, 1989).

Myth and the Modern Writer

discovery, a way of probing our assumptions about ourselves. We take the myths, the earliest and often most potent stories we have ever told about ourselves, and we defamiliarize them. Defamiliarization is frequently an optical device – think of *Gulliver's Travels* and those tiny and huge people in Lilliput and Brobdingnag. By seeing something from a radically different angle, we see aspects to it which convention had made previously invisible. The coarseness of humanity's habits when seen through an optic the size of Tom Thumb's is the defamiliarizing device of Brobdingnag. Now, this is what Gardner does in *Grendel*: he uses the monster's viewpoint to critique the heroics of humanity. Their boasts and boozing in the mead hall are seen from the stance of an outsider. He is in a unique position to gainsay all their accounts of him, and their myth-making in regard to their various encounters. He lives in a world of appetite and terror, but he also lives in a world of language. He is a linguistic creature and therefore able to tell his own story. And his own narrative seems inexplicably contemporary; he becomes the existentialist of Anglo-Saxon dread. Though he is outside and alone, yet he is mysteriously a member of the linguistic community. This mixture of ancient source and contemporary language and sensibility is at the heart of our modern reworkings. We intermingle the present with the past; this mixture, this incongruity, a species of intellectual miscegenation, generates energy.

At the beginning of Hughes's *Alcestis*, Apollo describes himself as 'the maker of the atom'. Atomism was already a philosophical possibility at the time Euripides was writing; Leucippus and Democritus were atomists. But the playwright did not write this line. What Hughes is doing here is to try to make the language of the play as vividly contemporary as possible. Part of the defamiliarization functions as a linguistic shock: we retain plot and

Myth, Metaphor and Science

character, but fill the new version with contemporary insight; Grendel as an Old English existentialist filled with dread, and expert in contemporary usage, or Apollo as the maker of the atom, with all that that means for a post-Hiroshima reader.

We should remark here that we have altered our view of myth. *Mythos* itself simply means story, so we began to identify the earliest stories ever created and called that study mythology. James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* coincided with the high point of imperialist expansion and possession. Myths in his account are clearly the versions of reality held by those not in possession of scientific knowledge. Wittgenstein complained about this reading of myth as if it were merely a fumbling and mistaken version of science: 'This is too big to be a mistake,' he remarked, and we are more likely to sympathize with Wittgenstein nowadays than with Frazer. One of the reasons for this is that we live after that movement in the arts known as modernism. Just as Frazer was completing his mighty work, Picasso was discovering that the forms of modernity might need to borrow the forms of the primitive for their own purposes. And this is what we have been doing ever since, in art, music, dance and literature. Instead of patronizing myth and the primitive, we realized how much we could learn from them.

We saw how Constantin Brancusi complained that realist art had become 'a confusion of familiarities'. The primitive, the mythic, permitted the shattering of all that convention. Suddenly we saw distinct form in all its uncompromising luminosity, and all else became inessential. Mythic shapes and patterns cast such mighty shadows on the cave wall of the imagination that they could be used to obliterate many of the unwanted niceties of scrupulous realism. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is still the astonishing painting it was a century ago because of its

Myth and the Modern Writer

brutal energy, its unattenuated shapes, its lack of interest in anything but the presentation of vital form. A modern man paints a 'primitive' picture, and when, much later, Picasso was to be taken down to see the Palaeolithic cave paintings, his comment afterwards is revelatory: 'We have invented nothing.' It is interesting that of two of the most famous plays from the 1950s, *Look Back in Anger* and *Waiting for Godot*, it is surely the latter that has transcended its initial context. The Osborne play now looks knotted in the very skein of convention it was thought to be escaping, whereas Beckett's play has the spareness and vitality of myth. One could say 'modern myth', but that merely begs the question, since myth, if compellingly retold, always feels either modern or timeless.

We have dusted the myths down: better stories have never been told. More realistic ones might have been fashioned, and more sophisticated ones staged, but no one has ever created stronger narratives or stronger characters than those the myths present to us. So, since it is a cliché that no new tales can ever really be told, why not return to the old ones, and see what a contemporary sensibility, psychology and language might make of them? In describing what he saw as the psychic conflicts in the minds of the Viennese he was treating, Freud reached back to Oedipus. He saw in the myth a universal applicability which had never been superseded by subsequent science. When T. S. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land*, he too reached back to the same mythic material. A typist is seduced sordidly in a bedsit in London. And Tiresias describes the scene, he who has seen it all before so many times, he who, having been both a man and a woman, can see things from both sides – not that such duality seems to improve anything. In both cases, Freud and Eliot found a form through which contemporary existence could express itself, and the form was borrowed from myth. Both Oedipus and Tiresias

Myth, Metaphor and Science

appear in Sophocles.

A myth can be used in the manner of Walter Benjamin's 'dialectical image', which contains the present and the past simultaneously. In this it should be distinguished from that type of historical fiction which might be more aptly described as historicist fiction; which is to say that it operates on the premise that it is possible to reinhabit the past authentically, without acknowledging the existence of the present in the writing - as though the modern writer can simply disappear, an agency that has become invisible. Louis MacNeice believed this to be impossible. As he writes in *Autumn Journal*: 'It was all so unimaginably different/ And all so long ago.' The use of myth permits the acknowledgment that it was unimaginably different, and thereby acknowledges the unimaginableness of the present too. Both our origins and our existence here at the end of time are equally monstrous, equally unimaginable. This is why Borges wrote in his short parable about Don Quixote and Cervantes, 'Myth was there at the beginning of literature, and it is at the end of literature too.' In myths we discover both the monstrous and the marvellous.

The modern writer made the decision to enter myth, rather than merely see it as the shape of earlier people's belief. Myth simplified that 'confusion of familiarities' which Brancusi detected in modern realist art. It allowed for an expressive and monolithic formality. Think for example of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, with its young girl dancing herself to death to ensure fertility's continuance. Eliot uses Tiresias as the focusing consciousness of *The Waste Land*, and Pound begins his *Cantos* with a section from Homer.

Inventiveness can then be inventiveness about character and language and perception; the shape of the narrative is given. What Joyce borrows in *Ulysses* is the

Myth and the Modern Writer

shape of the classic tale, and the order of characterization. His form is now provided. All his modern inventiveness proceeds to fill the pre-existing structure, which is large enough to accept the mass of contemporary data. Eliot saw this work as the end of the novel as we have known it, and one can see why. It was the beginning of 'the mythic method' in fiction.

If the myth is to live, then it must represent an opportunity for a journey, possibly even that most exciting of journeys, the one to the museum. Two of the most fascinating artists of our time, the film director Jean-Luc Godard and the painter R. B. Kitaj, have both testified as to how their imaginations first came alive inside the museum. All the writer's current resources must be brought into play; there should be no hint of pastiche. In his book *The Sacred and the Profane*,² Mircea Eliade talks about the *axis mundi*, the sacred pole which shaman communities placed at the centre of their villages, the centre of their world. It connected the highest and the lowest, connected up the realm of heaven with that of the underworld, humankind's habitation being situated midway between them. This axis located the community in cosmic space, situated it in what was otherwise a homeless homogeneity. Eliade discusses many different manifestations of this pole, employed to centre existence in the vastness of unwelcoming space. In one village, the pole goes right through the centre of the ceremonial house, exiting through the roof. The shamanistic figure, dedicated to the furthest explorations possible in the most far-flung realms, would climb the pole during the ceremonies of initiation. This spiritual journeyer is thus gifted with the ability to connect up heaven and hell; he can now make the ultimate journeys that the rest of

² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (1959; Sydney: Harcourt, 1968).

Myth, Metaphor and Science

the community is unprepared for, but need to have made for them nevertheless, for purposes of both solace and ultimate information.

It is an instructive and intriguing image, and a psychic pattern that recurs in many different forms in different times and cultures. In a sense, what the shaman does in climbing the pole, in the trance-like state of his initiation, is parallel to what Dante the poet does through his dream vision in the *Divine Comedy*: he visits heaven and hell and the regions between. He makes the ultimate journey and returns with the necessary images and information for the rest of the community to locate itself, and thereby orientate itself within the totality of existence. Poetry has often performed this function. In Book VI of the *Aeneid* we have a descent to the underworld, and much Romantic and post-Romantic poetry involves a visit to one sort of hell or another, counterpointed by the occasional glimpse of paradise. Coleridge's 'caverns measureless to man' recur with continued hallucinatory force in Baudelaire and Rimbaud. The earliest epic we have, *Gilgamesh*, contains a journey to the underworld. Human curiosity, it seems, must touch the extremities of perception, even if they lie beyond death.

Such an *axis mundi* locates the centre of existence as its ordering truth. But what is the *axis mundi* of our modern scientific world? We might usefully ask if it was replaced by Galileo's plank, down which he rolled his metal balls and so measured their velocities. In fact, Galileo used all sorts of surfaces and implements to arrive at his various conclusions, but for the sake of imagistic economy here, let's stick with his plank for the moment. Is this then our modern myth, or does it seek to replace all myth? This plank is resolutely unenchanted. It facilitates observation and close measurement. It lets you conclude that $F=ma$, which is to say that a force can be calculated by

Myth and the Modern Writer

multiplying the mass of the body with its acceleration, or the other way about. Watch closely and you will discover that gravity is evidently a uniform force when applied in the same place, since objects fall at the same rate, whatever their size. Galileo's plank, placed at the centre of our scientific culture, seeks to become the new *axis mundi*, and so the centre of the world, which is to say that all our perceptions about the world are about to become scientific. So does this then constitute a replacement of myth, or does the myth simply evacuate itself to other, more welcoming, sites? What we are asking in effect is, what's the story, since we have already remarked how the Greek word *mythos* originally meant story. The world is about to grow larger and more marvellous, whichever *axis mundi* you employ, since Galileo is about to look through his telescope and see an unimagined vastness. At that moment the *axis mundi* is his 'optical tube', the same one that will soon enlarge Milton's imagination.

And yet what Milton writes in *Paradise Lost* is surely more mythic than scientific, despite the reference to Galileo and his telescope in Book One. For a long time Milton thought that his epic would take an Arthurian shape, but he then became dubious about the authenticity of the Arthurian legends. Another way of expressing this would be to say that his imagination could not actually live inside them. It is not, after all, as though he could go to the muniments room and pull out authenticated documentation about Satan's Fall from Heaven, but he could believe these mythic narratives, all the same, more than he could the others. The Fall legends provided him with structures his imagination could move around in, and which could provoke and facilitate the full force of his language, in a way he had come to feel the other mythic narratives could not.

Myth, Metaphor and Science

Myth is liberating. It offers shapes and characters and structures which do not need to dispense with the science which is such an indispensable aspect of our modern consciousness. As Apollo shows, when he appears in Hughes's *Alceste*, the myth can incorporate the science that has come after it, not to dilute but to strengthen itself. The dragon in Gardner's *Grendel* performs the same function; it exists in all times, and therefore has access to all knowledge. It knows all about contemporary physics. What one can never afford is an awkward fumbling at a culturally distant authenticity, the sort of uncomfortable language that comes across merely as gaucheness. A. E. Housman parodies this mode brilliantly in his *Fragment of a Greek Tragedy*, already quoted earlier in 'Note on Translation'. It has to be said that Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*, despite its breathtaking popularity, does not entirely escape Housman's stricture. In its determination to stay faithful to reference points and metre, the verse often creaks in a manner that Heaney's own poetry would never permit. People speak to each other on the page in a way they would surely never have done on the street or even in the mead hall.

Rilke, when he first encountered *Gilgamesh*, felt that he had found something entirely new and wonderfully fresh; it was the same response that Picasso had had to the Palaeolithic cave paintings. Something had been achieved long before with an authority which both artist and poet were searching for in their own modern locations. Rilke said *Gilgamesh* was the first epic of the fear of death. Reading a number of versions of it I became fascinated too, and decided to try my hand. This has now been published, together with a book called *Jacob*,³ which combines an account of the patriarch of that name in the Book of

³ In Alan Wall, *Gilgamesh* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2008).

Myth and the Modern Writer

Genesis. It seems to me that all I have said above became relevant in the writing of this long poem: it had to feel contemporary as well as ancient, its language needed to be idiomatic and compelling, and it had to be able to incorporate later knowledge and discoveries without losing the narrative thread or excitement of the original. The original poem was set in what we would now call Iraq, where a war was taking place. So I had sections like this:

In the *battue*, beaters press lions on
Until they are netted. Tricky should one of your netsmen
Prove unsure of his knots.
Or if you set out by underestimating the lion.

The gods sit in council.
In an oval office they sit
With a Bible open at a page in Exodus
Describing salvation for a few;
Slaughter for many.

Huwawa dead.
The Bull, the hit-man, slaughtered.
How will this go down in heaven,
Amongst the statistics of apocalypse?
How should Halliburton calculate the outcome?
Will zeroes in ledger books burst their skins?

Surely Enkidu must die.
Gilgamesh is royal. He can live -
Say, Hirohito in 1945 on the Chrysanthemum Throne

Myth, Metaphor and Science

While MacArthur makes all the running
Out there on Tokyo streets.
Like the Japanese, Babylonians obey orders:
Thus the wisdom from above, then as now.

They mutter darkly in conclave.
Papers are signed.
International calls are made, discreetly.
Men in suits speak softly in corners.

Suddenly Enkidu falls sick
Like Arafat, poisoned perhaps in his compound
Or Litvinenko lit up inside
By radiation's
Malevolent candle.
That wound from Huwawa
Had the essence of darkness inside it.

Enkidu:

It will be lonely in the grave
Between the Tigris and the Euphrates
Without you there smiling or shouting.
Saddam will be there, of course,
Entangled now with the spirits of his victims
Like a cat coming up from the cellar
Its face bejewelled
With gossamer from cobwebs.
Still, no point killing him twice.

Myth and the Modern Writer

And Gilgamesh:

I'd rather die than walk about up here without you.

Enkidu asked if no wisdom

Could be gleaned from the gods.

Gilgamesh turned his face towards the sky and squinted.

'They're planning a catastrophe,' he said finally.

'Are we in it?'

'Everyone's in it. All whose names appear in the Book.'

Then Enkidu began to curse:

Let the hunter's fingers be broken in his traps.

Let the harlot Shamhat

Have her womb sealed

So that no life can go in

And none come out.

And Shamhat answered softly:

I gave myself to you. You were glad to have me then.

Why do you curse me now?

Why do men always curse

What they want so badly

Myth, Metaphor and Science

When they cover you with kisses?

Then Enkidu:

Forgive me, Shamhat.

Let men die inside you each day

So others might live

The others they kill as soon as they leave your temple.

What strikes me now looking at that section of the poem is how my preoccupation with Gilgamesh enabled me to think about the present-day goings-on in Iraq. It was not as though the present was being pasted on to the past; not at all. The use of the myth is liberating precisely because it provides us with a literary structure large enough to contain the present, large enough to let us see the present vividly, in a defamiliarizing light.

There is one final option open to the modern writer: to challenge the myth, to confront it with its untruthfulness in terms of what we now know. This is the strategy of *The Penelopiad*, where Margaret Atwood takes *The Odyssey* and allows women their voice. Penelope and the hanged handmaidens return at the end of history to have their say, a say the original text never permitted them. They have been wronged by the narrative of history and tradition, and must now supply voicings for the myth which have previously been missing. This is effectively also Anne Stevenson's strategy in her version of *Medea*.⁴ Here the accusation is explicit: Euripides was lying through his teeth. Here Medea is allowed to confront Euripides himself

⁴ In Anne Stevenson, *Stone Milk* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2007).

Myth and the Modern Writer

with the version of herself he perpetrated and tradition has accepted. As she says to the Chorus:

Don't you see that every ugly thing you've heard about me -
My every wicked deed, so called, and treachery -
All, all are inventions of ambitious men?

The Corinthians, it seems, paid to have lies written about her; myths as always have territorial ambitions, and provide territorial excuses. And so in the short verse play, subtitled 'An Entertainment', the *Medea* of Euripides is replaced by the *Medea* of Medea. She was always voiced by men and now returns at last to voice herself, while the men must listen. And finally there is an admission of the inventiveness of myth, its fictiveness, the way it forms intellectual shapes to make sense of things, and such senses can change in time. At one point in the drama Medea exclaims that no woman would put her boys to death the way Euripides portrays it, but one might surely question this. Magda Goebbels did precisely that: she poisoned her little ones rather than hand them over to a world without Hitler. Curiously enough, this happened in the same year that 'the sun incinerates a city' (the end of Corinth in this alternative version of the myth): that event is the one we refer to as Hiroshima. Once again, the myths offer unlimited inventiveness.

It is one of the great tragedies of twentieth-century literature that T. S. Eliot did not continue with the extravagant linguistic inventiveness of *Sweeney Agonistes*, that slice of jazz age drama, simultaneously mythic and modern. Instead the language modulated into the stage acceptability of *The Family Reunion* which, despite a certain potency, has lost the feistiness of the earlier fragments.

Myth, Metaphor and Science

What one is hoping for in mythic writing is to convey the myth, to translate the legend, but without ever taming it.