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Myth and the Modern Problem: Mythic Thinking in Twentieth-Century Britain

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ABSTRACT

Myth and the Modern Problem: Mythic Thinking in Twentieth-Century Britain

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This dissertation, "Myth and the Modern Problem: Mythic Thinking in Twentieth-Century Britain," argues that a widespread phenomenon best described as "mythic thinking" emerged in the early twentieth century as way for a variety of thinkers and key cultural groups to frame and articulate their anxieties about, and their responses to, modernity. As such, can be understood in part as a response to what W.H. Auden described as "the modern problem": a vacuum of meaning caused by the absence of inherited presuppositions and metanarratives that imposed coherence on the flow of experience. At the same time, the dissertation contends that—paradoxically—mythic thinkers' response to, and critique of, modernity was itself a modern project insofar as it took place within, and depended upon, fundamental institutions, features, and tenets of modernity. Mythic thinking was defined by the belief that myths—timeless rather than time-bound explanatory narratives dealing with ultimate questions—were indispensable frameworks for interpreting experience, and essential tools for coping with and criticizing modernity. Throughout the period 1900 to 1980, it took the form of works of literature, art, philosophy, and theology designed to show that ancient myths had revelatory power for modern life, and that modernity sometimes required creation of new mythic narratives. Most fundamentally and most importantly, the dissertation demonstrates how mythic thinking constituted a new mode of making meaning that appealed to the imagination rather than reason by making the claim that myths communicate timeless truths that cannot be apprehended through

reason or science. Myth therefore signified what its advocates found lacking in both modernity

and in alternative responses to it: myth was rooted neither in the past nor the present but was

timeless, it offered wisdom rather than knowledge, unity instead of fragmentation, order in place

of chaos, spiritual solace instead of unbelief, and meaning rather than confusion. If, as Auden

contended, the modern problem was at bottom about a vacuum of meaning, then mythic

thinking—because it posited an entirely novel way of making meaning that broke with the past—

was an audacious and unique twentieth-century attempt to fill that vacuum.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Modern Problem

Modernity was predicament without precedent. That was W.H. Auden's conclusion as he reflected on the challenges of modern life in 1948. He explained that inhabitants of the twentieth century were:

> …faced with the modern problem, i.e., of living in a society in which men are no longer supported by tradition without being aware of it, and in which, therefore, every individual who wishes to bring order and coherence into the stream of sensations, emotions, and ideas entering his consciousness, from without and within, is forced to do deliberately for himself what in previous ages has been done for him by family, custom, church, and state, namely the choice of the principles and presuppositions in terms of which he can make sense of his experience.[1]

Auden's assessment was correct: there was a "modern problem"—or at least many of Auden's fellow Britons were convinced that there was. To cultural observers of the time Britain seemed disorientingly bereft of given meaning-creating structures, a situation that had ushered in a host of distinctly modern ills. Though catalogs of these ills described the problem in varying terms, assessments of modernity's faults nevertheless tended to emphasize the same family of complaints: science's epistemological pretensions, the spiritual barrenness of modern life, a lack of shared values, the excesses of consumerism, the banality of mass culture, the alienating effect of contemporary urban existence, and the emotional estrangement produced by the mass media. By the early years of the interwar period, there was a widespread sense in Britain that "modernity" or "the modern age" had eroded a shared set of, to use Auden's terms, "principles and

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[1] W.H. Auden, "Yeats as an Example," *Kenyon Review* 10, no. 2 (1948): 191-92.

presuppositions." It is no coincidence, for instance, that 1922 saw both the publication of T.S. Eliot's epochal modernist poem *The Waste Land* and the founding of the BBC. Both endeavors were expressions of a desire to reestablish or replace a cultural unity—based on common principles and presuppositions—believed to have been lost in the transition to modernity.

The widespread sense of a "modern problem" provoked a number of responses by British thinkers and writers. Some, such as G.K. Chesterton or the historians J.L. and Barbara Hammond, longed for a return to a simpler era and hoped to recover a social and moral cohesion that had vanished with the transition to modernity. Such thinkers imagined a lost golden age that could be recaptured if the right steps were taken. Others, such as the novelist Evelyn Waugh and the historian Christopher Dawson, converted to High Church Anglicanism or Roman Catholicism, seeing such traditionalist forms of Christianity as bulwarks against modernity. And still others, such as the literary critic F.R. Leavis and his many epigones, believed that the proper response to modernity entailed replacing Christianity with the humanities as the primary source of cultural values. Even those who launched the BBC were inspired by visions of a cultural unity made possible by modern technology. These responses to the modern problem were all alike in that they developed their interpretations of and responses to modernity by drawing inspiration from the past, whether in the form of an imagined bygone golden age of social cohesion, an ancient faith, or a "great tradition" of literature.

There was, however, a very different and very prevalent response to the modern problem that did not look to the past for guidance, and it is this phenomenon that this dissertation examines. I term this unique response mythic thinking, because it was defined by the belief that myths—timeless rather than time-bound explanatory narratives dealing with ultimate questions—were indispensable frameworks for interpreting experience, and essential tools for

coping with and criticizing modernity. Mythic thinkers' distinctive response to the problem of modernity can be examined collectively because they viewed modernity as a rupture in history. They therefore thought that ways of coping with the modern problem that drew inspiration from the past were obsolete and doomed to failure, a belief that marked them as part of a broader twentieth-century reaction against historicity that was also reflected in, for example, literary modernism and analytic philosophy. This sense of a radical break in history that rendered old ways of thinking obsolete connected all mythic thinkers, whether the arch-modernist T.S. Eliot in the 1920s, the best-selling fantasist J.R.R. Tolkien in the 1930s, or the influential avant-garde novelist J.G. Ballard in the 1960s. What was needed, mythic thinkers held, was a new way of making meaning that took into account the unique nature of modernity, and they believed that this need could be fulfilled by myth—a concept that was at once conveniently vague and rich with significance. Indeed mythic thinkers defined the modern problem precisely as a debilitating lack of myth. Auden himself expressed this view when he noted how modern culture was characterized by "the disappearance…of a common myth," and T.S. Eliot voiced a similar assessment when he described the modern condition as being "barren of myths"—a condition he sought to rectify with his myth-infused poetry.[2]

This dissertation, "Myth and the Modern Problem: Mythic Thinking in Twentieth-Century Britain," argues that mythic thinking emerged in the early twentieth century as a way for a variety of thinkers and key cultural groups to frame and articulate their anxieties about, and their responses to, modernity. At the same time, I contend that—paradoxically—mythic thinkers' response to, and critique of, modernity was itself a modern project insofar as it took

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[2] W.H. Auden, "A Contemporary Epic," *Encounter* 2, no. 2 (February 1954): 69; T.S. Eliot, "The Romantic Englishman, The Comic Spirit, and the Function of Criticism," in idem, *The Annotated* Waste Land *with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 141.

place within, and depended upon, fundamental institutions, features, and tenets of modernity.

Throughout the period 1900 to 1980, mythic thinking took the form of works of literature, art,

philosophy, and theology designed to show that ancient myths had revelatory power for modern

life, and that modernity sometimes required creation of new mythic narratives. Most

fundamentally and most importantly, I will insist, *mythic thinking constituted a new mode of*

making meaning that appealed to the imagination rather than reason by making the claim that

myths communicate timeless truths that cannot be apprehended through reason or science.

Myth therefore signified what its advocates found lacking in both modernity and in the

inadequate alternative responses to it: myth was rooted neither in the past nor the present but was

timeless, it offered wisdom rather than knowledge, unity instead of fragmentation, order in place

of chaos, spiritual solace instead of unbelief, and meaning rather than confusion. If, as Auden

contended, the modern problem was at bottom an absence of given or inherited presuppositions

and metanarratives that imposed coherence on the flow of experience, then mythic thinking—

because it posited an entirely novel way of making meaning that broke with the past—was the

most audacious and unique twentieth-century attempt to fill that vacuum.

The Mythic Response

In 1952 the London School of Economics, the British citadel of empirical social science,

was the unlikely venue for a lecture that criticized, albeit gently, the rationalistic principles upon

which the institution was founded. The lecture was delivered by the Cambridge don W.K.C.

Guthrie, who took as his subject "Myth and Reason." Guthrie, a respected historian of ancient

Greek philosophy and religion, argued that Greek mythology was more relevant now than ever

because of the timeless wisdom that it conveyed. "Mythical thinking never dies out completely,"

he observed, thus in his view the task was to find ways to make proper use of what myth could

offer without granting it either too much or too little validity.[3] To do this, it was necessary to

balance mythical thinking with scientific or rationalistic thinking, which entailed distinguishing

"bad myth" from "good myth." Bad myth amounted to masking irrationality in "woolly and

abstract language," and he cited contemporary "isms" and ideologies as prime examples.

However, he continued:

> Good myth is the opposite. It consists in apprehending the profound and
> universal truths symbolically conveyed by simple stories and images which, just
> because their mode of expression is concrete, individual and imaginative, are apt
> to be brushed aside by the devotee of "scientific method" or the latest non-
> existent –*ism*.[4]

Guthrie went on to argue that British culture needed to avail itself both of the truths offered by

myth and the very different sort of truths conveyed by science; the two forms of knowledge were

necessary complements to each other.

In 1970 Ted Hughes—eventually to be poet laureate—likewise commended the value of

classical myth, though to a very different audience. The occasion was a conference on children's

literature, and Hughes suggested to the attendees that myth had an indispensable role to play in

the education of children:

> The myths and legends, which Plato proposed as the ideal educational material for
> his young citizens, can be seen as large-scale accounts of negotiations between
> powers of the inner world and the stubborn conditions of the outer world, under
> which men and women have to live. They are immense and highly detailed
> sketches for the possibilities of understanding the two….
> Their accuracy and usefulness…depend on the fact that they were originally the
> genuine projections of genuine understanding….They gave a true account of what
> happens in that inner region where the two worlds collide. This has been attested

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[3] W.K.C. Guthrie, "Myth and Reason: Oration Delivered at the London School of Economics and Political Science on Friday, 12 December, 1952," (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 1953), 7.

[4] Ibid., 18-9. Italics in original.

over and over again by the way in which the imaginative men of every
subsequent age have had recourse to their basic patterns and images.
   But the Greek myths were not the only true myths. The unspoken definition of
myth is that it carries truth of this sort.[5]

Hughes had been a student at Cambridge during Guthrie's time and almost certainly had heard

him lecture on Plato and classical myth. In claiming that "every subsequent age" was marked by

recourse to myth's resources Hughes was agreeing with Guthrie's claim that "mythical thinking

never dies out completely." For both, emphasizing myth's perennial significance was a way of

underscoring myth's ongoing relevance as means of coping with the challenges of modern life.

The views of Guthrie and Hughes raise a number of questions. Why were they convinced

that myth was indispensably relevant to modern life? What influences had contributed to such

views? Were Guthrie and Hughes exceptional and, if not, how widespread was such yearning

for myth? And, above all, what is the significance of such interest in myth if indeed it did

comprise a broader cultural trend? Answering these questions rapidly draws us into a host of

matters that go well beyond just Guthrie and Hughes and open out onto issues concerning how

historians can best describe the topography of twentieth-century British culture.

Guthrie and Hughes were drawn to myth in part because of the discontent with some

aspects of modernity, and also because their own study and personal experience had convinced

them that myth somehow possessed a unique power to provide precisely those dimensions of life

that modernity had displaced or eroded. In part they came to this conclusion through their

contact with late-nineteenth and early-twentieth anthropological work on myth. Guthrie had

both personal and professional connections to the group known as the Cambridge Ritualists,

whose work blended classics, archaeology, and anthropology in order to raise new questions

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[5]Reprinted in Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 151-52. This is a somewhat revised version of the address Hughes originally delivered in 1970.

about the role of myth in ancient Greek culture and its possible role in modern culture.

Hughes switched from studying English to anthropology while at Cambridge, a move that led to

his increasing fascination with mythology. In being led to a deeper consideration of myth

through contact with anthropology, Guthrie and Hughes were by no means atypical; rather they

were representative of a common pattern in twentieth-century Britain. Neither were they

atypical in thinking that ancient myth had a unique epistemological validity that made it relevant

and indispensable to modern life.

That such interest in myth was more ubiquitous than uncommon was a fact recognized by

the prominent literary critic Frank Kermode. No one captured the appeal of myth—and the

extent of this appeal—better than Kermode, one of the most attentive and incisive observers of

British intellectual life during the post-Second World War period. Confronted with a host of

thinkers and writers who like Guthrie and Hughes extolled the virtues of myth, Kermode

concluded that "our literary culture is saturated with mythological thinking." It was a

development that was a source of both fascination and ambivalence for him, and he devoted

much of his attention to the topic during the 1960s. He understood well myth's appeal in a

modern age, which he tried to capture in these words:

> In the domain of myth we can short-circuit the intellect and liberate the
> imagination which the scientism of the world suppresses….Myth deals in what is
> more real than intellect can accede to; it is a seamless garment to replace the
> tattered fragments worn by the modern mind….[6]

Kermode's assessment goes to the heart of the mythic thinking phenomenon, emphasizing as it

does that the turn to myth was a response to the perceived deficiencies of modernity.

Taking a cue from Kermode's words, this dissertation explores "the domain of myth" in

order to ask what forms it took and why they had such great appeal for British thinkers of the

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[6] Frank Kermode, "The Myth-Kitty," *The Spectator*, September 11, 1959, 339.

twentieth-century. The aim of the project is to provide a cultural and intellectual history of myth as a mode of thought in order to explain its significance as a facet of twentieth-century British culture. Building on Raymond Williams's insight that cultural analysis begins with identification of cultural patterns, the dissertation identifies such a pattern—the mythic thinking phenomenon—and sets out to trace its dimensions and salient manifestations from roughly 1900 to 1980 by focusing on how it was used to frame and articulate their anxieties about, and responses to, modernity.

What linked Guthrie and Hughes with a host of others was their consciousness of a "modern problem" that could best be met by drawing on the resources of something they all referred to as "myth"—a concept that resonated with significance for them. At the same time, mythic thinkers' response to, and critique of, modernity was itself deeply implicated within and dependent upon fundamental institutions, features, and tenets of modernity. Though the categories of "modernity" and "myth" were often rhetorically opposed to each other, in actuality myth was much more deeply implicated in the modern project than its proponents recognized or were willing to admit. That mythic thinking was an inescapably modern project is neatly suggested in Kermode's above description of it: in describing myth's appeal he cannot avoid reverting to the very scientific terminology ("short-circuit") that myth is supposed to help the over-rationalized modern mind circumvent.

To be sure, "mythic thinking" is not a common word in the historian's lexicon. It is thus necessary to offer some explanation of the concept that is central to this project. The term is admittedly nebulous, in large part because the term myth is itself nebulous. I make no attempt to offer a normative definition of myth or to enter debates about myth's status as a genre of unique power or authority. There is a sizeable and fascinating body of interdisciplinary literature

devoted to defining the category of "myth" and to categorizing the myriad theories, examples, and uses of it. [7] As useful as such scholarship may be in some contexts, this study steers clear of the ongoing attempts to validate, quantify, or extol what has been called "myth's abiding power."[8] Instead, I want to explain why myth seemed to many twentieth-century British thinkers to have an abiding power. Consequently, instead of offering my own definition of myth, I use the term as it tended to be used by the thinkers and writers I examine: a sacred, foundational or archetypal narrative dealing with gods, heroes, cosmology or the transcendent, that serves to explain, reconcile antinomies, guide action, express transcendent truths, or legitimate cultural values.

This is clearly an elastic definition and one that allowed for considerable leeway as to what qualified as myth. It was commonly thought, for instance, that contemporary writers could create fictions that functioned as myths. Such thinking is one reason the myth scholar Robert Segal has noted that, "[Myths] may not even go backward in time but may instead go forward, as in science fiction, or go sideways, such as to other cultures around the world."[9] Mythic thinking thus did not necessarily entail primitivism or an idealization of the archaic cultures that had produced ancient myths.

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[7] For an excellent discussion of the difficulties involved in defining myth see Chapter Two of William Doty, *Myth: A Handbook* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004). Other key works in this body of literature include Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), Robert A. Segal, *Theorizing about Myth* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); idem, ed., *Psychology and Myth*, vol. 1 of idem, ed., *Theories of Myth: From Ancient Israel and Greece to Freud, Jung, Campbell and Lévi-Strauss* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996); idem, ed., *Literary Criticism and Myth*, vol. 4 of idem, ed., *Theories of Myth: From Ancient Israel and Greece to Freud, Jung, Campbell and Lévi-Strauss* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996); Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997); and Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005).

[8] Elizabeth M. Baeten, *The Magic Mirror: Myth's Abiding Power* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

[9] Segal, *Theorizing about Myth*, 23.

Instead, mythic thinking was essentially an attempt to exploit myth's supposed unique

properties by thinking with or through myth. Mythic thinking was simply a response to "the

modern problem" that used myth as framework to interpret experience and to channel cultural

criticism. These related endeavors were premised on the assumption that myth was a narrative

genre or a mode of thought that had an indefinable but undeniable gravity, and that it

communicated truths that could not be apprehended by any other means. One mythic thinker

who tried to put this into words described "myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond

my grasp…."[10] Because this sense of myth's power was widely shared, the term "myth" had

significant force as a rhetorical weapon, which contributed to its effectiveness as an instrument

in twentieth-century cultural politics. Use of the term, whether in scholarly or non-scholarly

discourse, tends to be unavoidably polemical. As historian of religion and myth scholar Bruce

Lincoln has observed, when someone uses the term myth he or she is making potent assertions

about its level of validity and authority relative to other types of discourse.[11] These assertions

can be approving, by associating myths with, for example, primordial truth or the source of

cultural unity. They can also be pejorative, by characterizing myth as, for example, primitive

worldview. The mythic thinkers I examine dealt only in approving assertions about myth: de-

bunking myth or pejoratively characterizing it as merely false story was not part of their project.

Mythic thinking manifested itself mainly in two forms, which often overlapped with each

other. First, as Guthrie and Hughes's words above indicate, twentieth-century mythic thinking

often took the form of literary, artistic, and philosophical attempts to show that ancient myths

had relevance to modern life. However, it was also manifested in attempts to create new myths

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[10] C.S. Lewis, *Collected Letters: Volume I, Family Letters 1905-1931*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 976.

[11] Lincoln, ix.

and mythic narratives. This second type of mythic thinking was thus largely the province of writers of fiction. The outstanding example of this strain was J.R.R. Tolkien's self-confessed attempt to create a coherent body of mythology for England with his massive novel *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien believed that England's lack of its own ancient mythology was somehow a serious deficiency, and this belief illustrates the very essence of mythic thinking. The notion that British culture needed to maintain contact with myth and what it could provide in order to be balanced and healthy was not held by Tolkien alone; it was a fundamental presupposition underlying mythic thinking throughout the period.

Mythic thinkers thus desired myth because of what it represented or what it could provide; it was not so much myth itself but the salutary consequences of myth that made it appealing. What these benefits were was often revealed by what myth was rhetorically opposed to in cultural criticism. Depending on the particular historical moment and context, the cultural critiques devised by mythic thinkers targeted scientism, excessive rationalism, secularization, mass culture, and the alienation of contemporary urban life. The turn to myth was justified with claims that myth gave access to deeper truths than historical or scientific explanation, and that it offered a unique means of coping with the psychological pressures that modernity brought to bear on the individual. Mythic thinking, then, was in part an idiom through which anxieties about modernity could be articulated and ideas for redressing modernity's excesses proposed. Mythic thinkers thus used myth to construct modernity even as they criticized it: for them myth represented all that had been repressed, erased or fragmented in the transition to modernity. At the same time, mythic thinking was carried out within the rationalist tenets of modernity; it was

not part of the "revolt against positivism" described by H. Stuart Hughes.[12] Tolkien, for

instance, took great pains to emphasize that the mythic fiction he wrote and advocated "does not

destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the

perception of, scientific verity."[13]

Implications

The examination of mythic thinking that this dissertation offers adds to and reshapes our

understanding of twentieth-century British culture in a number of significant ways. Most

fundamentally, by identifying and defining the phenomenon of mythic thinking it contributes a

new and necessary category of analysis to our discussions of twentieth-century cultural politics

in Britain. Though historians of modern Britain have long been aware that numerous twentieth-

century thinkers were interested in myth, as of yet they have failed to appreciate the breadth and

significance of such interest. Two approaches have characterized the investigation of myth in

twentieth-century Britain. The first is comprised of studies of how the use of myth was a central

feature of modernist aesthetics and, in particular, the poetry of T.S. Eliot.[14] Though such

literature makes invaluable contributions to our understanding of the modernists, by its very

nature it cannot help us comprehend the broader dimensions of myth's role in British culture. By

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[12] See H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958).

[13] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), 72.

[14] For some recent examples see Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Roslyn Reso Foy, *Ritual, Myth, and Mysticism in the Work of Mary Butts: Between Feminism and Modernism* (Fayetteville, Ark.: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (Lexington, Kent.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992), Jewel Spears Brooker, *Mastery and Escape: T.S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994); Milton Scarborough, *Myth and Modernity: Postcritical Reflections* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994), Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997).

contrast, the second approach in some ways casts a broader net in attempting to trace the influence of J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a method that encompasses the modernists but also goes beyond them.[15] However, this second approach is also limited, as its concerns are largely confined to the influence of a single, albeit iconic, text. In addition to these two main approaches, literary scholars have of course identified a number of other cases where a deliberate use of myth has characterized British literary culture.   But there has been no systematic attempt to analyze such instances of preoccupation with myth as part of a broader cultural pattern. Consequently, there has been little effort to see, for example, how seemingly disparate figures like T.S. Eliot and J.R.R. Tolkien might have connections that are signaled by their common fascination with myth. The category of mythic thinking allows us to begin to excavate those connections and expose obscured structures of British culture.

Once the mythic thinking phenomenon is identified and defined, we are then equipped to examine it wherever it surfaces and to describe the role it played in shaping British culture. More specifically, an examination of mythic thinking adds a new dimension to our understanding of how twentieth-century Britons both constructed and responded to modernity. Because the turn to myth was justified with claims that myth was panacea for a host of modernity's discontents, mythic thinking functioned as key rhetorical weapon in a cultural struggle that defined twentieth-century Britain: the struggle between modernity's advocates and critics. Viewing this struggle through the prisms of secularization and the "two cultures controversy," the relevant historiography has represented it as a contest between the sciences on the one hand

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[15] Examples included John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of* The Golden Bough (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Robert Fraser, ed., *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990); and Brian R. Clack, *Wittgenstein, Frazer, and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). See also Martha Celeste Carpentier *Ritual, Myth, and the Modernist Text: the Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998) is a work in the same vein, though it traces Jane Harrison's influence rather than Frazer's.

and Christianity, an imagined past, or the humanities on the other. Traditionally, religious discourse had provided the basis for a critique of modernity, but its plausibility was eroded throughout the century. As Francis Mulhern and others have emphasized, to thinkers like F.R. Leavis and his disciples, the humanities provided a substitute for the religious critique.[16] Adding mythic thinking to the mix complicates our understanding of this struggle by showing how, in the search for an alternative critique of modernity, many thinkers and writers turned to the discourse of mythic thinking instead of to religion, a past golden age, or the humanities. The picture is complicated further by the fact that, for some, mythic thinking was a strategy for reinforcing either religion, or the humanities, or both.

The questions at the heart of this work link it to the rapidly evolving body of literature which challenges the view that the processes of rationalization characteristic of modernity were incompatible with spiritual impulses. Modernity is without question a fraught term: historians have been unable to agree on a definition and even offer widely contrasting accounts of when it emerged in history. Nevertheless, some broad lines of agreement can be sketched. Modernity has typically been understood as signifying the interconnected growth of rationalism, scientism, secularism, urbanization, professionalization, urbanization, capitalism, and consumerism—and the list could go on. Historians emphasize some of these processes more than others, but as Michael Saler has noted in a recent assessment of the relevant historiography, "There is one characteristic of modernity…that has been emphasized fairly consistently by intellectuals since the eighteenth century: that modernity is "disenchanted.'"[17] In other words, the advancement of

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[16] Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of "Scrutiny,"* (London: New Left Books, 1979). See also Ian MacKillop, *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); and Stefan Collini, "Cambridge and the Study of English," in *Cambridge Contributions*, ed. Sarah J. Omrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 42-64.

[17] Michael Saler, "Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (June 2006): 694.

reason, science and rationalizing processes came at the expense of ways of apprehending the world associated with transcendent meaning, spiritual longing, wonder, and the suprarational; the modern world was a place from which enchantment had been expunged. This was a view most famously expressed by Max Weber in 1917,[18] but it was well-ingrained in western culture before then, going back to the romantics of the late-eighteenth century and sustained through the nineteenth century by a range of cultural pessimists from Arthur Schopenhauer to Oswald Spengler.

Saler has gone on to describe an emerging "antinomial" understanding of modernity that aims to avoid the "either/or" logic that has long characterized scholarship on modernity. Instead, a new body of interdisciplinary literature is emphasizing how, "[M]odernity is characterized by fruitful tensions between seemingly irreconcilable forces and ideas. Modernity is defined less by binaries…than by unresolved contradictions and oppositions, or antinomies: modernity is Janus-faced."[19] Such new work includes both frontal assaults on the paradigmatic narrative of modern disenchantment, such as Jane Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, and more specific historical case studies that expose the inadequacies of that narrative by uncovering fascinating examples of modern enchantment.[20]

An examination of mythic thinking intersects with the new understanding of modernity and enchantment by adding an additional important object of investigation to the discussion. Recent works that scrutinize the interaction of modernity and enchantment in modern British

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[18] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958): 129-156.

[19] Saler, 700.

[20] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

history include Allison Winter's *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, Daniel

Pick's *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture*, and Alex Owen's *The Place of*

Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern.[21] Such works offer remarkable

insights into the contours of modernity in Britain through examination of mesmerism,

spiritualism, and occultism in particular. These three objects of investigation have for good

reason received the lion's share of scholarly attention as conduits of enchantment in the modern

age. I suggest that mythic thinking can be considered alongside them as an innovative response

to modernity—a strategy for maintaining contact with the transcendent in a secularized age. But

mythic thinking was more about making space for transcendent concerns within modernity than

it was about a revolt against it. Because myth could be conveniently defined as a realm of

discourse that was not subject to empirical verification, mythic thinking could articulate spiritual

impulses in a way that was thought to be compatible with, not antithetical to, modern rationality.

This project can also be seen as a contribution to a nascent historiography on the

relationship between myth and modernity. As noted above, scholars of twentieth-century

literature have long understood that a self-conscious and deliberate use of myth was central to

modernist literary culture, and modernist thinking about myth continues to attract scholarly

attention.[22] As valuable as such recent works may be, they also have had the effect of

reinforcing a sense that the modernists had something like a monopoly on mythic thinking in the

twentieth century. In recent years, however, there have been some indications that historians are

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[21] Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Daniel Pick, *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[22] See above, n. 12.

beginning to examine the interaction of myth and modernity in ways that take us beyond what

we know about the modernists in Britain. It is beginning to appear as if a belief in myth as a

panacea for modernity's discontents was a common feature of intellectual life in the west from

the late-eighteenth century on. Perhaps the outstanding example of such recent work is George

Williamson's *The Longing for Myth in Germany*, which details how from the Romantic period

on intellectuals used myth as a discourse to articulate both regrets over what had been lost in the

transition to modernity and visions of a future society in which aesthetic, religious, and public

life would be integrated.[23] Two aspects of Williamson's book are particularly relevant for this

study. First, what he calls "mythography" (his term for mythic thinking) in Germany was bound

up with characteristically modern developments such as the emergence of the public sphere, the

development of national identity, the professionalization of academic disciplines, and so forth.[24]

Williamson is certainly right to emphasize this characteristic of mythic thinking and in doing so

he sets the terms for future investigations. And this leads to the second aspect of his monograph

that is particularly relevant for this study. Williamson seems to believe—on what grounds it is

not clear—that mythography manifested itself more intensely in Germany than in other places.

This view seems debatable, but it does point up an opportunity for comparative historical

inquiry: how did mythic thinking take shape in other contexts and how was it inflected

differently in different places? This dissertation represents a step in the direction of such

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[23] George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). For other examples of the emerging interest in the relationship between myth and modernity see Andrew Von Hendy's sweeping, impressive study *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Dan Edelstein and Bettina R. Lerner, eds., *Myth and Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), which focuses on uses of myth in modern France; and Angus Nicholls, "Anglo-German Mythologics: the Australian Aborigines and Modern Theories of Myth in the Work of Baldwin Spencer and Carl Strehlow," *History of the Human Sciences* 20, 1 (2007): 83-114.

[24] See Williamson, 7.

comparative study; the investigation of British mythic thinking offered here can contribute to new insights into myth and modernity when placed alongside studies like Williamson's *Longing for Myth*.

Overview

The ensuing study is divided into six chapters, each of which examines a different instance of mythic thinking as practiced by a particular cultural group. Each chapter thus amounts to a case study of how myth was used for specific ends in specific circumstances. Taken together, the chapters reveal both the adaptability and elasticity of the discourse of mythic thinking, as well as the recurrent emphases and traits that distinguished it as a phenomenon. That is to say, though these groups deployed myth in varying ways, there is nevertheless a family resemblance that marks their uses of myth as being instances of the same cultural phenomenon.

The chapters are arranged in rough chronological order in a way that highlights the emergence of mythic thinking and its subsequent development in different historical moments. Ironically, twentieth-century fascination with myth had its origins in the social sciences—forms of knowledge production that exemplified modernity's rationalist and secularist face. This story is told in Chapter One, which details how anthropological study of myth prepared the way for later mythic thinking. Central to this story was how two strands of scholarship on myth reinforced each other by exploring ancient subject matter that somehow seemed to speak to early-twentieth century concerns. The first of these was the comparative anthropology that reached its apex in J.G. Frazer's magnum opus *The Golden Bough*. This work's fascinating depiction of a vast array of myths and associated rituals made it a bestseller, and it supplied writers in particular with an inexhaustible stock of mythological themes, images and symbols.

Frazer himself, however, saw myth through the lens of his Darwinian presuppositions: to him

myths were little more than misguided primitive attempts at scientific explanation. But not all

who were dazzled by *The Golden Bough* shared Frazer's late-Victorian rationalism. A case in

point was the work of the Cambridge Ritualists, who constituted the second important strand of

anthropological scholarship on myth. Motivated in part by a dissatisfaction with the spiritual

barrenness of the early twentieth-century, they studied the religion of archaic Greece in part so

they could better understand the nature of humanity's "religious impulse."

As has been amply documented by scholars like John Vickery, the work of Frazer and the

Ritualists struck a resonant chord in a post-First World War period characterized by heightened

cultural pessimism and a consequent search for spiritual meaning and cultural unity. Chapter

Two takes up this theme by examining the first group to realize that works like Frazer's *Golden

Bough* could be mined for ideas, tropes, and images for use in literature intended to make the

modern age comprehensible and tolerable—the literary modernists. T.S. Eliot's vaunted

"mythical method" was the classic case of such a modernist use of myth. According to Eliot the

conditions of modernity, in particular cultural fragmentation and the impossibility of religious

belief, dictated that myth's role was simply to provide the elements for a pattern or structure in a

given literary work. Myth could thus help give aesthetic shape to the chaos of modern life, but it

could not convey religious truths or insights in which to believe. But not all modernists

presumed with Eliot that religious belief was impossible in the modern age. A number of

modernist writers picked up the attitude of spiritual seeking and the critique of instrumental

rationality that had been a hallmark of the work of the Ritualists. These writers—John Cowper

Powys, Mary Butts, Charles Williams, and David Jones—saw myth as a source of religious truth,

a notion they explored by producing literature that drew heavily on the mythology of the Holy

Grail. Their willingness to believe in the truth of myth was enabled by their particular

response to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century scholarship on myth: they refused to

accept the secularizing implications of such work, interpreting it instead as an enlightening

record of humanity's experience and interpretation of the transcendent. The chapter thus

explores the difference between Eliot's mythical method and alternate modernist understandings

of myth in order to show that modernists did not solely use myth to supply aesthetic form, they

could also believe in it as a source of religious consolation.

Though the modernists who were preoccupied with Grail mythology all attributed a deep

spiritual significance to myth, they were not operating as a united front. Chapter Three, however,

examines two writers, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, who worked in concert to develop a form

of cultural criticism in which myth played a key role. They stand out as two of the most

influential mythic thinkers of the century because of the popularity of the mythic fiction they

produced, which not only diffused but also set an example for subsequent writers who conceived

of their fiction as a contemporary form of myth. Lewis and Tolkien's use of myth resembled the

mythic thinking of Grail-preoccupied modernists in two important ways. First, Lewis and

Tolkien turned to myth in an effort to redress what they saw as the spiritual emptiness of a

secular age. Second, like the modernists examined in Chapter Two, they refused to see the

anthropological scholarship on myth produced by Frazer and others as necessarily corrosive of

religious belief. Instead of drawing the common conclusion that *The Golden Bough* had

demonstrated that myth making was little more than a primitive attempt at scientific thinking,

they argued that the very ubiquity of myth-making demonstrated myth's perennial relevance as a

language for conjuring with the transcendent. Yet their theory of myth was explicitly Christian,

and this was a departure from the way most modernists used myth. Lewis and Tolkien

conceived of myth as an epistemological category: it was a particular kind of idiom that

expressed particular kinds of truths, namely the transcendent truths of religion. Myth was thus a

necessary counterweight to science, because it conveyed truths that simply could not be

disclosed by empirical investigation. But the mythic thinking that they advocated was something

that took place within the rationalist bounds of modernity and freely acknowledged the value of

scientific reason. Theirs was a both/and proposition: both scientific rationality and mythic

consciousness were necessary components to of a healthy culture. Seeking to practice what they

preached, Lewis and Tolkien set out to create mythic fictions of their own, an endeavor in part

inspired by the fantasy literature they had enjoyed as children.

Tolkien and Lewis developed their conception of myth during the 1930s for the most part,

and this is reflected in the particular emphases of their brand of mythic thinking. Chapter Four

shifts to the post-Second World War period to examine how mythic thinking could be inflected

in a different context. Nevertheless, the work of Lewis and Tolkien provides a bridge to the

mythic thinking of this later period, because the writers examined in Chapter Four were to some

extent inspired by the work of Lewis and Tolkien from the 1930s and '40s, though they would

show how mythic thinking could be modulated and inflected very differently in the 1960s.

These writers were known as the "New Wave," and their aim was to create a form of science

fiction that functioned as contemporary myth. Their most prominent member was perhaps J.G.

Ballard, who conceived of his works of fiction as "myths of the near future." Ballard's concern

that modernity brought intense pressures to bear on the psyche, prompted him to produce

contemporary myths that would help individuals cope with these pressures. The work of Ballard

and the New Wave was thus distinguished in part by explicitly psychological concerns, and their

work can be seen as signaling the reappearance of a recessive gene in the history of mythic thinking: psychological theories of myth.

Mythic thinking was not just a matter for poets and writers of fiction, a point taken up in Chapter Five. During the post-Second World War period, mythic thinking became such a prevalent feature of British culture that academic disciplines began to adapt it for their own purposes. Academics began to realize that "myth" was a potent rhetorical weapon that could be used in disciplinary struggles within the university. This was a discovery made by literary critics in Britain as they attempted to stake a claim for their emerging discipline in the context of an expanding university system in which the sciences were ascendant. Literary critics could not plausibly associate their discipline with the authority of science, and even if it had been possible most of them had no interest in making the attempt. Nevertheless, they were still in need of a justification for their work and in their search for one they turned to myth. The embrace of myth by literary critics thus grew out of the attempt by the emerging field of English studies to find a discourse of its own that was authoritative without being scientific. Literary critics used myth to construct cultural authority for their discipline by positioning themselves as the interpreters of the mythic significance of literature, and by claiming they were equipped to elucidate that significance and therefore give access to truths that were somehow more real, and more relevant, than the deliverances of science.

Chapter Six stays within academia, but shifts attention from literary criticism to theology. Like literary critics, academic theologians turned to myth in an effort to demonstrate that their work was relevant to twentieth-century concerns. Christian theologians had long been accustomed to intellectual challenges, but by the mid-twentieth century many theologians concluded continuing to fend off such challenges was no longer tenable. Challenges to Christian

belief stemming from modern science and social science, critical history, and analytic

philosophy continued to mount.   But perhaps, some theologians concluded, the effort to resist

modern knowledge on its own terms was the wrong approach: perhaps the territory claimed by

modern knowledge should be surrendered and new defensive positions taken. Their strategy

amounted to conceding the validity of the modern forms of knowledge production while

simultaneously seeking refuge in the seemingly unassailable category of myth. This new

strategy burst on the British scene with the controversy provoked by Bishop John Robinson's

book-length exercise in popular theology entitled *Honest to God*. However, Robinson was only

one of a number of influential theologians who contended that myth was the natural idiom of

religion, a form of discourse that transcended the empirical realm, and that as such it was not

susceptible to scientific, historical, or philosophical critiques. By defending the religious

significance of myth British theologians hoped to sidestep some of the more pointed criticisms of

Christian theology, even as they attempted to insulate the faith itself from the intellectual

challenges of modernity.

This outline of this dissertation's ambit may alert readers to certain omissions in the

ensuing pages. I make no claims to offer here a comprehensive survey of mythic thinking in

twentieth-century Britain, and where omissions were deliberate it was not because I deemed the

topic irrelevant to examination of the mythic phenomenon. For instance, I offer no discussion

W.B. Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, or Robert Graves, though all three were undoubtedly significant

writers who were by my own definition mythic thinkers. I pass over them not because they are

unimportant but because there exist numerous excellent discussions of the role of myth in their

thought and because the points I wish to make about the extent of mythic thinking led me in a

different direction. The same is true for any number of writers and thinkers who are not

examined here. A general motivation behind this dissertation has been to highlight

particularly salient and revealing instances or sites of mythic thinking, concentrating when

possible on less prominent but nonetheless significant figures. And for various reasons I have

been unable to include a number of figures who meet these criteria. For instance, I have left out

the neo-romantic poets of the "New Apocalypse" group, even though their variety of mythic

thinking deserves attention.

A somewhat different matter is that I do not offer an extended discussion of the

opponents of mythic thinking, who certainly did exist. By the middle of the century arguments

for the value of myth had become so prevalent that an extensive debate had emerged between the

advocates and critics of myth. Perhaps the most vociferous of the critics was the Marxist

intellectual Philip Rahv, who denounced mythic thinkers as "mythomaniacs" who irresponsibly

retreated from history.[25] While the twentieth-century debates about the value of myth can

provide rich material to the cultural historian, the study of such debates at this point in time is

secondary to the task of identifying and describing mythic thinking itself—and it is to that task

we now turn.

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[25] See Philip Rahv, "The Myth and the Powerhouse," *Partisan Review* 20 (November-December 1953): 635-48.

CHAPTER 2

THE SHADOW OF *THE GOLDEN BOUGH*: ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE

POPULARIZATION OF MYTHOLOGY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN

What *The Golden Bough* implicitly shows us is that the interest in myth—which extends throughout the entire century and beyond—became a viable power in the creative world only when the full significance of mythic activity was revealed by the new forms of science and history.

John Vickery

Introduction

In a 1923 review of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the young poet and critic T.S. Eliot

announced the emergence of a method of criticism and writing that would change both literature

and the world:

> 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. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.... Psychology…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. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art....[1]

By the time this review appeared, Eliot had already begun his own experiments with the

"mythical method" in composing *The Waste Land*, a poem built around sustained reference to

myths ranging from the ancient to the Arthurian. The assumption underlying Eliot's mythical

method was that contemporary civilization faced cultural problems that could be set right only by

the deployment of myth.

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[1] T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *The Dial* 75 (November 1923), 483.

At about the time that Eliot's review appeared, a young English professor at the University of Leeds was forming his own conclusions about the importance of myth. By 1923, J.R.R. Tolkien had for several years been composing a complex cycle of mythology, which would eventually give birth to two popular novels, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. He undertook the project out of a desire to create a body of "mythology" for England. In a letter to his publisher, Tolkien confessed his "passion…for myth" and explained how he had intended:

> …to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story…which I would dedicate simply to: to England; to my country. It should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our "air"…and, while possessing…the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic…it should be "high," purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land long now steeped in poetry. I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama….
> These tales are "new," they are not directly derived from other myths and legends, but they must inevitably contain a large measure of ancient wide-spread motives or elements. After all, I believe that legends and myths are largely made of "truth," and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode.[2]

Thus, Tolkien's construction of a "mythology for England" was premised on assumptions similar to Eliot's "mythical method": namely, that British culture lacked something that could only be supplied by myth.

It may seem strange to juxtapose these two very different writers. Eliot and Tolkien are rarely, if ever, put in the same literary category, and with good reason. Eliot the writer of abstruse modernist poetry and Tolkien the author hugely popular fantasy literature seem to have little in common; the differences in their careers and work are manifold. Eliot was one of what Wyndam Lewis called "the men of 1914," who helped initiate the modernist literary campaign—

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[2] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 144-45, 147.

a movement that produced literature which Tolkien detested. In fact, the outbreak of war in

1914 forced Eliot to leave Germany for Britain, and the European conflagration deepened his

belief that civilization was in crisis. He did not fight in the war, but spent the war years

establishing relationships with literary figures like Pound, developing a new poetic idiom, and

trying to support a nascent literary career. Tolkien, on the other hand, fought in the War,

survived the Somme, and found his vocation as a philologist while passing time in the trenches

of Picardy.[3] He shared much of Eliot's cultural pessimism, but rendered in a very different

literary form, blending a childhood interest in fantasy and myth with his study of philology to

produce a new form of literature. Tolkien, no less than Eliot, must be credited with inventing a

unique genre of modern literature, fact that suggests deeper similarities.

Indeed, juxtaposing the two writers can be illuminating precisely because this reveals

unexpected and telling connections. Eliot and Tolkien were near contemporaries, the former

born in 1888 and the latter just four years later. For both, Britain was in some sense an adopted

home, Eliot having come from America as a college student and Tolkien having come from

South Africa as a boy. Both reacted to a period in British and European history defined by two

world wars by producing literature that aimed to document and criticize the modern condition

and that evinced a deep ambivalence about the modern world. Both developed novel literary

modes that depended heavily on allusion and a pattern of references to past literature. Both

embraced conservative religious beliefs, Eliot Anglo-Catholicism and Tolkien Roman

Catholicism.

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[3] See Erik Svarny, *"The Men of 1914": T.S. Eliot and Early Modernism* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1988).

More specifically, both advocated the importance of myth as a means of understanding and changing the world, and both built aesthetic theories around an emphasis on myth's importance. In doing so, both were building on and engaging with a body of scholarship on myth produced by that had become a significant component of British culture. In particular, Eliot's mythical method and Tolkien's mythology for England would have been unthinkable apart from the work of ethnographers, scholars of comparative religion, and comparative anthropologists going back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In fact, were it not for the body of writing on myth produced by these scholars, the careers of Eliot and Tolkien would be unrecognizably different. Both, for instance, engaged with and drew on the work of the various comparative anthropologists who presented the diversity of world mythology in vivid and exhaustive detail. In the Eliot review quoted above, Eliot mentions the importance of J.G. Frazer's *Golden Bough* for writers who seek to engage with the modern world. And Eliot drew on Frazer's work as an inspiration for his own work, and used the work of other scholars who were influenced by Frazer like Jessie Weston. Tolkien gave the most detailed explanation of his understanding of myth in a lecture dedicated to Andrew Lang, the late-nineteenth-century scholar and compiler of myth who was one of Frazer's intellectual forebears in the study of mythology. Tolkien had been reared on Lang's collections of myth and folktale for children. The details of each writer's view of myth will be examined in a subsequent chapter.

The point of juxtaposing the above passages from Eliot and Tolkien is to show that they are both the product of a culture that by the early 1920s had become saturated with popular scholarship on myth. In order to describe the context that produced views like Eliot's and Tolkien's, this chapter seeks to accomplish two objectives in particular. First, it aims to provide a survey of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century scholarship on myth, in order to build a

cumulative case that early-twentieth-century Britain by about 1920 was in many ways a myth-saturated culture. Central to this story was the cultural impact of J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Second, it argues that from early on anthropological work on myth was linked with and motivated by a critique of modern culture, a critique that was premised in part on an approval of "primitivism." There was a distinct strain of anti-modernity in scholarship on myth that came to the fore especially in the work of the "Cambridge Ritualists." For early anthropologists, especially those of the ritualist school, the study of myth provided the opportunity to critique British culture and offered intellectual resources for responding to troubling cultural changes driven by an unbalanced rationalism. The work of these Cambridge Ritualists was a significant component of early-twentieth-century British culture, because it provided modernists writers like Eliot with much of their aesthetic vocabulary.

Before **The Golden Bough***: Lang, Tylor, and Smith*

Three figures defined anthropology in Britain prior to Frazer: Andrew Lang, E.B. Tylor, and William Robertson Smith. It was these three who pioneered a rationalist ethnographic approach to the study of myth in second half of the nineteenth century. Their work was a necessary prelude to the work of later scholars of the myth and ritual school. Concepts and methodologies originated by them would become foundational to the work of Frazer and the so-called Cambridge Ritualists that he inspired. But beyond their influence on later scholars of myth, they—especially Lang—were instrumental in inundating British culture with popular mythological literature, simultaneously creating and feeding a taste for myth in ways that Frazer and others would perpetuate.

Prior to Lang, Tylor, and Robertson Smith the study of myth in Britain was highly eclectic and not beholden to any one systematic approach or method. One reason was the Victorian idealization of the classical past, which made it difficult to conceive of myth as a discrete object of study apart from study of the classical past. When the study of myth did not take part as a branch of classical studies, it was largely subsumed within folklore. If there was a generally accepted theory of myth, it was that advocated by Friedrich Max Müller, a German philologist who settled in Oxford, where he eventually became a professor of philology. Müller applied the methods of comparative philology to the study of myth. According to Müller, the primitive Aryan language could not articulate abstractions, so the Aryans were only able to express their religious ideas in metaphor; language was originally the overflowing of a poetic impulse. Because they were forced to express their religious thoughts and feelings without recourse to abstraction, they produced myths. Building on the so-called Aryan hypothesis, which held that European languages and culture ultimately had their roots in the migration of Aryan peoples from Central Asia, Müller argued that Greek myths derived from Aryan originals. Moreover, he contended that these originals could be reconstructed by applying the laws of linguistic change. Because he held that most of the original Aryan myths concerned the sun, his theory of myth was labeled "solarism." In Müller's view, as the Aryan language evolved in Europe, the original myths were lost, leaving only the suggestive metaphors upon which they were built. It was this situation—metaphors no longer anchored to what they originally described—that produced Greek mythology. Müller's theory was that:

> …when we use a word that was first used metaphorically, without a clear understanding of the steps that led from the original to the metaphorical meaning, we are in danger of mythology; when the steps are forgotten and artificial steps are substituted, we get mythology or what he calls a "disease of language"….Led

astray by language men began to imagine natural processes as persons with a gender and started telling stories about these persons.[4]

Müller's theory of myth thus had implications for the history of religion, because it implied that as language evolved, what had been lost was an intuitive sense of the infinite, an "authentic religion" from the happy childhood of the human race.

By about 1860 Müller's theory of myth was the dominant explanation of the phenomenon, but when Müller died in 1900 his theory died with him. There were no students to carry the banner of solarism. This was in part because his theory had always been out of step with late-Victorian culture. But it was also because another approach to the study of myth, which was very much in tune with key elements of late-Victorian culture, had swept Müller's ideas from the field. Müller's solarism was vanquished by the combined forces of Lang, Tylor, and Robertson Smith, though it was Lang who engaged most aggressively with Müller's ideas. They were able to do this in part because their theories of myth accorded with late-Victorian culture in ways that Müller's did not. Specifically, the work of Lang, Tylor, and Robertson Smith grew out of a late-Victorian intellectual climate that was deeply shaped by rationalist, progressivist evolutionary social thought.

The combined effect of the work of Tylor, Robertson Smith and Lang was to replace the philological study of myth with the anthropological approach that would remain dominant well into the twentieth century. The methods they developed both reflected and reinforced salient features of late-Victorian culture. Perhaps the most significant is that the comparative anthropology of three was part of a general trend of evolutionary theorizing across the social sciences. Drawing of the work of Jerome Buckley and John Burrow, historian of anthropology

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[4] Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, trans. Barbara Harshaw (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 41-42.

Robert Ackerman suggests that the new evolutionary anthropology accorded in some specific ways with the evolutionary trend of late-Victorian thought. The passionate Victorian search for origins, inflected through evolutionary thought as a study of the organic growth and successive modification of all things over time, could readily be adapted to the study of human culture. In addition, evolutionary thought reinvigorated a faltering rationalism by offering a theory of human nature not susceptible to the objections that were undermining the utilitarian theory of human nature. Comparative anthropology reinforced this by purporting to illustrate the universal process of development that governed all human cultures.[5] The new comparative anthropology also reflected the Victorian penchant for incessant fact gathering, inasmuch as it depended on collecting as many examples of primitive thought as possible in order to illustrate the universality of the laws of cultural development. And in this respect, scholars like Lang, Tylor, Robertson Smith found themselves in fortuitous circumstances, because ethnographic data that poured in from all corners of the empire provided an inexhaustible supply of facts. Finally, the fraught issue of religious belief in late-Victorian Britain meant that anthropological work that shed light on the issue of religious belief was deemed highly relevant, since such work could be recruited into debates about the value of religion.

The man who pioneered the evolutionary study of human culture was Edward Burnett Tylor.[6] In 1884 Tylor was appointed reader in anthropology at Oxford and was chosen as first President of the Section for Anthropology of the British Association for the Advancement of

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[5] See Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 31-32.

[6] The first to take the measure of Tylor's career was fellow anthropologists R.R. Marrett, *Tylor* (New York: J. Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1936). More recently Tylor's thought has been examined by Joan Leopold, *Culture in Comparative and Evolutionary Perspective: E.B. Tylor and the Making of Primitive Culture* (Berlin: Reimer, 1980), who provides an excellent analysis of the sources and development of Tylor's thought.

Science, but only after taking a long and unusual path to achieve these laurels. He was born in 1832 into a wealthy Quaker family, and the Quaker faith proved to be an important interpretive filter for Tylor when he attempted to explain the religious mentality of primitive peoples. Tylor's weak health prevented him from taking over the family business, so to improve his health he traveled to the United States, Cuba, and finally Mexico 1855-56. His time in Mexico sparked an interest in anthropology and led to his first book. Tylor played a key role in overthrowing the prevailing view that primitive cultures were the degraded remnants of earlier, higher cultures, arguing instead that primitive societies represented an initial stage of human development. His argument rested on three main pillars: the presumption that human nature and human development were universally the same, the comparative method, and the notion of survivals. The first entailed the second: if contemporary primitive peoples were living links in the evolutionary chain, then it was a simple matter to conclude that, as Bruce Ackerman puts it:

> …to secure the needed dynamic view of prehistoric development, one might string together items of culture taken from the most diverse "primitive" societies if in their totality they showed the steady upward movement of human development.[7]

For Tylor, "primitives" everywhere and at all times could be treated as an essentially homogenous group because they were all at essentially the same stage of human evolution. In assuming that the goal of human cultural development was modern European civilization, Tylor exemplified the tendency of evolutionary anthropologists to interpret human development in terms of liberal British thought.[8] Finally, the doctrine of survivals completed the methodology. Survivals were cultural elements that had served a purpose in one developmental

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[7] Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual*, 37.

[8] See Henrika Kuklick, "Tribal Exemplars: Images of Political Authority in British Authority in British Anthropology, 1885-1945," in George W. Stocking, Jr., ed., *Functionalism Historicized* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 63.

stage, but had survived into a later developmental stage in which they had no function. Proper interpretation of these survivals allowed anthropologists to reconstruct the life of earlier developmental stages. Tylor brought this methodology to bear in the 1871 work that made his name, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Art, and Custom*. This was the book that, about fifteen years later, would open J.G. Frazer's eyes to the explanatory power of comparative anthropology.

Tylor's views on religion and mythology were of greatest interest to most of his readers, and most of *Primitive Culture* was devoted to these subjects. He saw myth as a kind of "savage philosophy" that had its roots in the unique character of primitive mentality. Myth was in fact an attempt by primitive people to explain their experience as rationally as they were able. But because they are not capable of abstract thought in the same way moderns are, they instead "animated" nature by projecting onto it the primitive doctrine of souls. Tylor coined the term "animism" to describe this mentality, which attributed souls or spirits to non-human objects as a way of explaining natural phenomena. This crude philosophy became myth as it was gradually elaborated into "sham history, the fictitious narrative of events that never happened."[9] For Tylor, then, mythology was something like failed science, a primitive attempt to explain the natural world in rational terms. Interestingly, Tylor thought that survivals of animism remained part of modern culture, and he interpreted late-Victorian spiritualism, which fascinated him, as a case in point.[10]

Tylor's interpretation of myth was based on the assumption that myth was the product of a certain cognitive state that could not be observed but could be inferred. William Robertson

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[9] Edward B. Tylor, *Anthropology: an Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization*, rev. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1924), 387.

[10] Kippenberg, 63.

Smith instead built his theory of myth on observable actions, namely rituals. Smith was born

in rural Aberdeenshire and before he was sixteen he had settled on becoming a minister in the

conservative Free Church of Scotland, like his father.[11] Early on it became apparent that Smith

was brilliant, and having won two highly competitive scholarships he entered New College,

Edinburgh in 1866. Thanks in part to his studies in Germany with scholars like the Old

Testament scholar Julius Wellhausen and the eminent theologian Albert Ritschl, Smith became

the leading Scottish expert on the Higher Criticism of the Old Testament. He advocated the new

German criticism as professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Free Church College at

Aberdeen, a position to which he was appointed in 1870. But it was one thing to advocate the

higher criticism in an academic environment and another to do so in a more public forum. In

1881 Smith was judged guilty of heresy by the Free Church as a result of two articles he wrote

for ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; it was the last successful heresy trial in Great

Britain. The charge was that his articles, on "Angel" and "Bible," had undermined the authority

of scripture. He was removed from his chair at Aberdeen but became co-editor of the

Encylopaedia Britannica. Thanks to the interventions of a friend, he was able to join his fellow

Scot Frazer at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1883.

Given his background in theology and Semitic studies, Smith's anthropological interests

were religious in orientation from the beginning. Motivated in part by "a Victorian

preoccupation with evolutionary origins," Smith wanted to reconstruct the worldview that

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[11] The main events of Smith's life are sketched in T.O. Beidelman, *W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974). See also Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860-1915* (Ph.D. diss.: Northwestern University, 1987); and idem, "Victorian Evangelicalism and the Sociology of Religion: The Career of William Robertson Smith," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 54, 1 (Jan. 1993): 59-78.

produced the ancient Semitic religions.[12] Though he appreciated the power of Tylor's

comparative method, he saw primitive religion very differently than did Tylor, and he argued

that it was nothing at all like modern Protestantism. For Smith primitive religion was a matter of

institutions, practices and rituals rather than belief; performance of sacred acts prescribed by

tradition, rather than belief in particular doctrines, was the basis of primitive religion. Smith

argued that myths emerge as elaborations on rituals, when the original meaning of the ritual has

been lost. As he explained in his major work, *The Religion of the Semites*:

> So far as myths consist of explanations of ritual, their value is altogether
> secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the
> myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual
> was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the
> myth was at the discretion of the worshipper.[13]

According to this view, the key to interpreting myths was first understanding the ritual the myth

explained, and this meant understanding how the ritual functioned with the social group. This

sociological emphasis explains why Emile Durkheim was so indebted to the Smith's work. But

Durkheim was not alone in owing an intellectual debt to Smith. Within the discipline, Robertson

Smith is today seen as perhaps the most relevant of the nineteenth-century anthropologists. But

the influence of his theory of myth was most profound in the fields of classical scholarship and

literature, though that influence was in part mediated through Frazer:

> It was [Robertson Smith's] theory of myth that led to the transformation of
> classical scholarship wrought by the "Cambridge ritualists" Jane Harrison, F.M.
> Cornford, and A.B. Cook, as well as the Oxonian Gilbert Murray; to the
> distinctive mythic elements in the works of Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, and Joyce;
> and to the "myth and ritual" school of literary criticism represented by Stanley
> Edgar Hyman. Almost without exception, however, the source acknowledged by
> these writers was *The Golden Bough* rather than *The Religion of the Semites*.[14]

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[12] Beidelman, 64.

[13] William Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites* (1889; reprint, London: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 17-18.

[14] Robert Alun Jones, "Smith and Frazer on Religion," in Stocking, Jr., ed., *Functionalism Historicized*, 38.

Smith's role in shaping early twentieth-century thinking about myth was profound, but largely unacknowledged.

Most discussions of Lang, Tylor, and Smith culminate with the latter. This is because most of such discussions are concerned with tracing an intellectual lineage in the history of anthropological thought, and Robertson Smith was in many ways the intellectual progenitor of Frazer, who himself acknowledged this. But when viewed from a broader perspective, Lang emerges as perhaps the key member of the trio. When the questions in view are how late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century British culture became saturated with mythological writings and how Britons of this period developed an appetite for the mythical, Lang's importance comes to the fore. More than any other figure prior to Frazer, Lang popularized the reading of world mythology, though he did so in an entirely different way than Frazer. This is because Lang was able to popularize myth from two angles: through influential, authoritative scholarship on myth, and through bestselling collections of world mythology that he compiled and edited.

The man who established himself as perhaps the most visible authority on myth in late-Victorian Britain was a remarkably prolific scholar and men of letters, in fact one of the most prolific and versatile of his, or any, day. Born in 1844 in Selkirk, Scotland, Lang went on to study at Balliol College, Oxford, and subsequently became a fellow of Merton College. He initially made his name in classical scholarship, producing well-received translations of the Homeric epics. He always maintained an interest in classical epic, and in 1890 he produced a sequel to *The Iliad* with his friend H. Rider Haggard. Partly inspired by Tylor's work, he turned to the study of myth in mid-1880s; it is his work in this field for which he is most known today.

Lang undertook extensive scholarship on myth, producing several major works on the subject, as well as the article on myth in ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which offered an extensive critique of Müller's views. His anthropological scholarship was not as original or careful as Tylor or Robertson Smith's, but it was opinionated, engaging, and reasonable. But during his lifetime, Lang's reputation was built on much more than just his scholarship. He was an active journalist, writing for various papers and also serving as literary editor for *Longman's* magazine, in which capacity he defended literary romance against literary realism. His talents as a writer and polemicist made him one of the most sought-after reviewers of the late-Victorian period.

In 1889 Lang published his own selection of fairy tales, folk tales and myths called the *Blue Fairy Book*. This was the first of his so-called colored "fairy books" which would appear at intervals of one to three years until 1910, when the twelfth and final volume appeared. The books, which were intended primarily for children, "made him king undisputed of the nursery shelf."[15] Among the children who were raised on Lang's tales was J.R.R. Tolkien. Although Lang selected all of the stories himself from printed sources in various languages, his wife and assistants actually undertook many of the translations. Many of the stories collected in the volumes were appearing in English for the first time. In addition, Lang wrote several book-length fairy-tales of his own, which remained popular into the 1940s.[16] Along with works by William Morris, Kipling, George MacDonald, E. Nesbit, J.M. Barrie, and Kenneth Grahame, Lang's work in this vein was one of the main tributaries feeding the remarkably widespread late-Victorian and Edwardian taste for the fantastic. In a unique way, Lang bridged the gap between

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[15] Roger Lancelyn Greene, *Andrew Lang: A Critical Biography* (Edmund Ward: Leicester, 1946), 86.

[16] Ibid., vii.

the scholarly and the popular in his advocacy of myth. Children absorbed his fairy books, the middlebrow public learned from his plentiful essays and reviews, and other scholars drew inspiration from his work—not least among them Jane Harrison, the pioneer of Cambridge ritualism.[17]

The arguments of Lang, Tylor, and Robertson Smith share a significant characteristic that has not been sufficiently appreciated in scholarship on their work. To be sure, this feature was inherent to their evolutionary approach, which saw mythmaking as a stage through which all human cultures had to pass. But this point could be overshadowed by another implication of the comparative method, which proceeded in part by the sheer amassing of examples from as many different cultures and time periods as possible. Lang demolished Muller's theory by producing numerous examples showing that cultures from all over the world—with no possible connection to the ancient Aryans—had versions of the same myth. One seemingly inescapable consequence of this was that mythmaking was a *universal human trait*; humans were by nature mythmakers. What had helped primitive man make sense of the world might help modern man do the same—a conclusion drawn by Eliot and Tolkien, as well as by others. Indeed, once this conclusion was drawn, it could overshadow the intended point that mythmaking was a primitive, passing evolutionary stage. There was thus an instability and tension at the heart of the comparative anthropological approach to myth: in trying to establish a universal, primitive mythical stage of human cultural evolution, such scholarship could leave the impression that mythmaking was more universal than primitive. This unintended consequence would become apparent in responses to Frazer's work and would be exploited by some of the Cambridge Ritualist scholars of myth who were the intellectual descendents of Lang, Tylor, and Smith.

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[17] See Kippenberg, 107.

J.G. Frazer and The Golden Bough

The importance of Tylor, Lang, and Smith in popularizing the study of myth was surpassed by the work of a classics don who turned to comparative anthropology after encountering their work. This was James George Frazer, whose monumental study of primitive mythology was to exercise a profound influence on the imagination and vocabulary of the twentieth century. Almost immediately after its many volumes first began to appear in 1890, *The Golden Bough*'s influence began to suffuse both literature and popular culture.[18] One of the first to take the measure of Frazer's cultural influence was the American critic Stanley Edgar Hyman, who in 1962 published a book that he considered his magnum opus, *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud as Imaginative Writers*.[19] Hyman chose four figures that he thought exercised profound influence over contemporary thought by providing basic metaphors for understanding the world. Though today it seems strange to see Frazer ranked with Marx, Freud, Darwin in terms of cultural influence, Hyman's choice of figures is indicative of how Frazer's cultural significance was estimated by many in the 1960s. One who echoed Hyman's judgment was Lionel Trilling, who observed that "perhaps no book has had so decisive an effect

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[18] There are four different editions of *The Golden Bough*. The first two-volume edition appeared in 1890. The second edition of 1900 had three volumes. The third edition ballooned to twelve volumes, which appeared between 1911 and 1915. This was followed in 1922 by a one-volume abridged edition. Perhaps the first piece of imaginative literature to draw on *The Golden Bough* was Grant Allen's novel *The Great Taboo* (1890), which explicitly takes its inspiration from Frazer's book. *The Great Taboo* is discussed in Gillian Beer, "Speaking for the Others: Relativism and Authority in Victorian Anthropological Literature," in Robert Fraser, ed., *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 38-60.

[19] Stanley Edgar Hyman, *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud as Imaginative Writers*. (New York: Atheneum, 1962).

upon modern literature as Frazer's."[20] Hyman identified Frazer as a scholar of myths who

was himself a modern mythmaker, because his great work was in the form of a "mythic quest"

by humanity for the grail of rationality. In his attempt to take the measure of Frazer's influence,

Hyman noted something that other students of Frazer had been noting for decades: his influence

was negligible within the field of anthropology, but was profound beyond the borders of that

discipline. In trying to explain this odd fact, Hyman drew attention to the epic sweep,

universality, and enduring imagery of *The Golden Bough*:

> *The Golden Bough* is not primarily anthropology, if it ever was, but a great
> imaginative vision of the human condition. Frazer had a genuine sense of the
> bloodshed and horror behind the gaiety of a maypole or a London-bridge-is-
> falling-down game, akin to Darwin's sense of the war to the death behind the face
> of nature bright with gladness, or Marx's apocalyptic vision of capital reeking
> from every pore with blood and dirt, or Freud's consciousness of the murderous
> and incestuous infantile wish. The key image of *The Golden Bough*, the king
> who slays the slayer and must himself be slain, corresponds to some universal
> principle we recognize in life. It caught the imagination not only of Freud and
> Bergson, Spengler and Toynbee, but of T.S. Eliot, and produced *The Waste Land*.
> F. Beck and W. Godin explain Soviet managerial mobility in *Russian Purge and
> the Extraction of Confession* by "the theory of the grove of Aricia"; John
> McNulty in a newspaper column sees a prize ring at Madison Square Garden as
> the sacred wood at Nemi.[21]

Hyman was correct to emphasize the compelling imagery of *The Golden Bough*, because

one of the primary reasons for the work's cultural impact was the range of potent metaphors in

contained. Frazer's compilation of strange customs, rituals, and myths amounted to a catalogue

of apt metaphors for a society overshadowed by two world wars. What is more, the final volume

of the third edition was an index, which effectively turned the work as a whole into a ready

reference for authors in search of metaphors to describe some aspect of British society. In short

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[20] Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 14.

[21] Hyman, 439.

order, leading modernist writers produced works that relied heavily on material drawn from *The Golden Bough*, including Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, Joyce, David Jones. Scapegoating, cycles of death and rebirth, cycles of drought and fertility, cycles of license and austerity, ritually efficacious violence, dying and reviving gods, the tension between reason and irrationality—all these key themes of Frazer's book came to seem potent, apt metaphors in period bracketed by two world wars.

The irony is that one of the most influential books of the century was originally intended to answer a straightforward and even inconsequential question: explaining why the high priest of Nemi in Aricia took office by killing his predecessor. But to understand how Frazer transformed such a simple task into an epic quest it necessary to understand something of his background.[22] Frazer was born in Glasgow in 1854 to pious Free Church parents. He had a happy childhood and recorded warm memories of his upbringing in an essay on "Memories of My Parents," which he published near the end of his life. In the Frazer household, daily worship was the norm and punishment was unheard of. It was an upbringing saturated by religion, which explains why an attempt to explain the mental processes behind religion would be central to Frazer's work. When he was sixteen Frazer entered Glasgow University, where he embraced the rigorous curriculum and developed relationships with professors, including Lord Kelvin, who instilled in him an abiding allegiance to the power of disciplined rationality. It was at Glasgow University that he decided to pursue classics as a career.

Frazer won a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge where he matriculated in 1874. His father was relieved that his son had avoided Oxford, which was suspect due to its High

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[22] The best recent biographical studies of Frazer are Robert Ackerman, *J.G. Frazer: His Life and Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Robert Fraser, *The Making of* The Golden Bough*: The Origins and Growth of an Argument* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

Church tendencies.[23] Trinity College would be Frazer's home for the rest of his life. When

his thesis on Plato earned him a fellowship in 1879, Frazer seemed poised for an ordinary career

as an unknown classics don. But a fortuitous encounter with anthropology would open up an

intellectual world to Frazer beyond the editing of classical texts.

Frazer was the intellectual heir of E.B. Tylor and William Robertson Smith. At the

urging of a friend, he read Tylor's *Primitive Culture* and soon after became friends with

Robertson Smith, who came to Cambridge in 1883. In fact, Smith came to Frazer's own Trinity

College where he became Reader in Arabic. Through Smith's influence, Frazer realized that

anthropological study might shed light on classical culture. Frazer was given the opportunity to

pursue his burgeoning interest in anthropology through Smith's patronage. As editor of the ninth

edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Smith commissioned Frazer to write articles on both

classical and anthropological subjects. It was at this point that Frazer began collecting the mass

of anthropological material that would be the basis for his articles and books. He solicited much

of this material by industrious correspondence with foreign travelers who had been in contact

with primitive peoples. These included explorers, missionaries, and colonial officials; hence he

became the great example of armchair cultural anthropologists.

Frazer married late, in 1896 at the age of forty-five. His wife, Lilly Grove, a widow with

two children, proved to be a highly capable manager of Frazer's career. It was a conspicuously

successful career, marked by honors, awards, titles and, ultimately, by financial success—after

1905 Frazer did not need to worry about money. Frazer was appointed to endowed chairs and

professorships, was awarded an annual Civil List pension, was knighted, and was awarded the

Order of Merit, to name only a few of his honors. By way of comparison, Hyman observes that

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[23] Hyman, 189.

Frazer received far more honors than did Darwin.[24] What is more, each edition of *The Golden Bough* was more successful than the last and Frazer's reputation outside the academic world continued to grow throughout his career.

The Golden Bough's remarkable sales figures testify to its popularity. It was a huge financial success for both author and publisher, and enjoyed a sustained popularity rarely achieved by multivolume works, which tend to fall off rapidly in popularity. Between March 1911 and November 1922, at least 36,000 copies of all volumes of the twelve-volume third edition were printed. In the eleven years after the abridged edition appeared, it sold at least 33,000 copies annually. The third edition remained in print throughout the 1920s, with each volume being reprinted two or three times.[25] Beginning with the second edition, the book's influence was amplified by the extensive critical attention it received—almost all of it positive. As one of Frazer's biographers has written:

> …the new and not-so-well-educated middle class were told by the newspapers that *The Golden Bough*, at least in its abridged form, was one of those books that any thoughtful person had to know about; the self-educated among the working class and aspiring intellectuals and radicals read *The Golden Bough* for its explanation of how society and religion had begun in primitive confusion and misunderstanding.[26]

Mary Beard has reinforced this point with her examination of the book's reception. She has shown that by the turn of the century, the press treated Frazer not just as an authority, but as a veritable oracle whose every utterance on the exotic or the primitive must be heeded. The press's consistent invocations of Frazer's unique authority played the crucial role in creating a

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[24] Hyman, 192.

[25] These figures can be found in Ackerman, *J.G. Frazer*, 256-57.

[26] Ackerman, *J.G. Frazer*, 256.

middlebrow "craze for Frazer" and elevating the status of *The Golden Bough* as a text.[27]

Indeed, Frazer's cultural authority became so entrenched that, well into the 1960s, his critics and

opponents within the field of anthropology were driven to extremes of vituperation in an attempt

to kill off his influence.[28]

  The Golden Bough's popularity is an occurrence that, retrospectively, seems

overdetermined. There were myriad reasons for the work to sell well, not all of which were

needed to produce robust sales. The book's popularity certainly had much to do with its subject

matter: strange myths, customs, and rituals. But *The Golden Bough* was also successful just

because of how Frazer treated and explained this subject matter. Frazer combined in a unique

way several intellectual trends of the late-nineteenth century. To begin with, the most obvious

characteristic of *The Golden Bough*, especially the twelve-volume third edition, is that it is an

encyclopedic, exhaustive collection of "facts." Frazer's book is perhaps the epitome of the

Victorian predilection for rational fact-gathering. These facts were put in the service of an

attempt to illustrate the laws governing the development of human culture. Frazer thus took an

evolutionary approach to anthropology that owed much to Darwin. At a time when the

evolutionary outlook was ubiquitous and evolutionary thinkers like Huxley and Spencer

immensely popular, this approach helped give *The Golden Bough* cultural purchase. For Frazer,

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[27] See Mary Beard, "Frazer, Leach, and Virgil: The Popularity (and Unpopularity) of *The Golden Bough*," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, 2 (April, 1992): 212-16. Despite the undeniable popularity of *The Golden Bough* in terms of commercial success, Beard remains skeptical of the book's contemporary cultural influence. She argues that, "It would be naïve to imagine that Frazer's theories and arguments had much to do with [*The Golden Bough's* contemporary] popularity," and she notes George Steiner's verdict that the book must rank with *Capital* and *The Origin of Species* as one of the great unread classics of non-fiction. See ibid., 223; and ibid. n. 55.

[28] The most vociferous of Frazer's critics was the Cambridge anthropologist Edmund Leach, who was insistent that *The Golden Bough* was a product of sustained plagiarism by Frazer. See his articles "Golden Bough or Gilded Twig?," *Deadalus* 90 (1961): 371-99; and "On the 'Founding Fathers': Frazer and Malinowski," *Encounter* 25 (1965): 24-36.

human culture was governed by universal laws of development. Though not a dogmatic

believer in progress, Frazer's view of human cultural evolution was optimistic. Human cultures,

in his view, would inevitably progress from savagery to civilization by passing through the ages

of magic and religion before ultimately arriving at the age of science. Frazer saw this cultural

development in terms of evolutionary adaptation: cultures abandoned magic, for instance, when

they realized that it did not work. In a related way, *The Golden Bough* also catered to the

Victorian enthusiasm for historical explanations. Frazer's epic tale of humanity's journey from

savagery to civilization appealed to late-Victorians who were trying to come to terms with their

place in history. Throughout the book Frazer describes and illustrates recurring patterns of

historical development while illuminating the origins of central components of Victorian culture

such as Christianity, which Frazer argued had its origin in primitive fertility cults.

Finally, Frazer raised the comparative method to new heights, though critics charged the

edifice was rickety, tenuous, and inconsistent.[29] Mountains of diverse facts were gathered and

subsumed under Frazer's theory. Never had a work of anthropology seemed to explain so much,

to bring into focus such a wide range of human experience. Frazer's comparative method

depended on a principle he termed "the law of similarity," an idea he borrowed from the

nineteenth-century German scholar Wilhelm Mannhardt. According to the law of similarity,

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[29] The critics were not just the next generation of anthropologists like Malinowski and R.R. Marett. Frazer's fellow comparativist Andrew Lang was highly critical of *The Golden Bough*, and exposed many of its flaws and inconsistencies in his *Magic and Religion* (1901). Even though its ultimate conclusion is questionable, one of the most sustained, careful, and interesting evaluations of the argument of *The Golden Bough* is Jonathan Z. Smith "When the Bough Breaks" chapter 10 in idem, *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 208-39. Smith suggests that Frazer knew the central argument of the book was untenable and he concludes that *The Golden Bough* was an elaborate joke. Smith's piece is only one of the better known representatives of a body of scholarship examining how *The Golden Bough* functions as text. In addition to the work of Beard (see above, n. 24) and many of the essays in *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination*, Marty Roth, "Sir James Frazer's The Golden Bough: A Reading Lesson," in Marc Manganaro, ed., *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 69-79 offers a postmodernist reading of *The Golden Bough* as an "imaginative construction."

similar customs in different societies can be assumed to be motivated by the same mental state.

It is this principle that gave Frazer license to adduce such disparate evidence to support his

assertions. Because of its scope, for many, Frazer's book represented a unique achievement in

the human sciences. As one commentator remarked: "If here and there he was mistaken, if on

this doubtful detail or other his guess has been discarded, the substance of his argument stands

erect among the noblest scientific monuments of a century that knew how to build in the grand

manner."[30]

   Frazer's comparative method further reinforced the cultural relevance of *The Golden*

Bough. The method contributed to *The Golden Bough's* appeal by allowing him implicitly to

link together and comment on a number of concerns that were central to late-Victorian culture.

In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer is equally willing to juxtapose and compare examples of customs

and rituals from Australia, India, Mexico, rural Britain, Italy, Germany, central Europe and

ancient Greece; neither time nor geography was a barrier to Frazer's comparative approach. As

Mary Beard observes:

> By bringing together these different areas of study, he set the subject of
> imperialism within the context of other central issues in the culture of Late
> Victorian Britain: the changing face of British traditions in the face of growing
> industrialization; the role and importance of the classical past. Through *The*
> *Golden Bough*, questions about British imperial domination became implicated in
> other questions about the relations between the peoples of the empire and those of
> rural England, about the nature of the rural and urban, the nature of the foreign,
> the domestic, and the past. The extraordinary appeal of *The Golden Bough*
> derived from the power of this combination: from its weaving together so many
> central problems of late Victorian, early twentieth-century Britain.[31]

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[30] Qtd. in Smith, 239.

[31] Beard, 219.

This multivalent relevance, Beard suggests, helps explain not just why *The Golden Bough* became a bestseller, but also why Frazer the man was so honored and, in fact, adored in his lifetime.

A survey of *The Golden Bough's* structure in its final, third edition gives some sense of the work's scope. The work is divided into seven parts, each examining some aspect of fertility myths and rituals. Part One, "The Magic Art," takes the example of the priest at Nemi in ancient Italy as an occasion to examine the role of priest-kings in primitive cultures. Frazer examines how priest-kings use magic to perform their functions, and he examines how sacred marriages between priest-kings and female spirits are thought necessary to ensure renewed vegetation each year. Part Two, "Taboo and the Perils of the Soul," examines the taboos that surround the priest-king in order to protect his soul, so that he can continue to engender fertility. Part Three, "The Dying God," examines the ritual killing of priest-kings so that their vital power can pass to a successor. Part Four, "Attis, Adonis, Osiris," illustrates the connection between fertility and the dying and reviving god, by reference to the myths of Adonis, Attis, and Osiris. Part Five, "Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild," examines myths that treat the spirit of fertility as something that resides in vegetation or in an animal, a belief that explains many primitive agricultural festivals. Part Six, "The Scapegoat," discusses how primitive communities use scapegoats to remove harmful forces from their midst, especially as way of preparing the way for a new priest-king. In Part Seven, "Balder the Beautiful," Frazer's argument comes full circle as he returns to Nemi. Frazer is now able to explain puzzling features of the ritual whereby an aspiring priest-king deposed the incumbent, and he is able to draw connections to Norse mythology about the god Balder. Throughout the work, it is extremely hard to follow Frazer's overall argument, because he is far more interested in amassing masses of folkloric,

mythological and ethnographic examples, many of which have only a tenuous connection to

the thesis he is trying to demonstrate. The more evidence Frazer presents in *The Golden Bough*,

the more his central thesis is obscured.[32]

Frazer always maintained that the book was "not a general treatise on primitive

superstition,"[33] but rather a work of science that attempted to solve only one problem: explaining

the custom whereby the high priest of Nemi in Aricia took office by killing his predecessor.

Though he reiterated this in the prefaces of subsequent editions, each iteration seemed more

tentative than the last. The larger and more unwieldy *The Golden Bough* grew, the more its

faults became apparent. In the preface to the third edition, Frazer contends that even if his

explanation were to collapse, "its fall would hardly shake my general conclusions as to the

evolution of primitive religion and society…."[34] Any reader of *The Golden Bough* soon realizes

that Frazer's scholarly objectives are far more numerous than simply explaining the priesthood

of Nemi. In particular, Frazer is interested in developing a theory of myth. Strangely, though,

Frazer was never able to decide for himself what myth was and how it worked. As various

scholars have pointed out, Frazer veered back and forth between endorsing at least three different

incompatible theories of myth. Ackerman argues that, "On no matter did he change his mind

more often than on the nature and origin of myth and its relation to ritual."[35] At one moment he

would describe myth as something like Tylor's savage philosophy (intellectualism), at another he

would take the view that myths grew out of stories about past heroes and kings (euhemerism),

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[32] For an excellent synopsis of *The Golden Bough* see Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual*, 50-53.

[33] Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 2nd ed., vol. I, xx.

[34] Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 3rd ed., vol. I, xxv.

[35] Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual*, 53.

and at still another he would argue that myths arise to explain rituals that have fallen into disuse (ritualism). Frazer himself was surprised when a reader pointed out that, though he claimed to be a disciple of Robertson Smith, on the evidence of *The Golden Bough* he did not in fact share Smith's view.

Frazer's work, and especially his use of the comparative method, drew increasing criticism in the years immediately following the appearance of *The Golden Bough's* third edition. Both his evolutionary assumptions and the conclusions they produced were called into question. For instance, Frazer's contention that the magical worldview was always and everywhere the first stage of human mental evolution was refuted, as was the underlying assumption that magical, religious, and scientific stages of mental evolution could be distinguished. Whereas Frazer's faculty psychology emphasized the study of mental states and of cultural practices as indicators of mental states, the emerging social anthropology rejected psychologism and tried to understand primitive cultures by studying the social function of cultural elements. Frazer's comparative method had little regard for cultural context, but the new social anthropology argued that cultural practices could *only* be understood in terms of their cultural context.[36] Frazer's approach came to be seen as uncritical and naïve. But these criticisms of Frazer did little to diminish the influence of *The Golden Bough*. Though a new generation of anthropologists found

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[36] The emergence of social anthropology in Britain has been examined by numerous scholars, an unusual number of whom are themselves anthropologists. Key studies include George W. Stocking, Jr., *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888-1951* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); idem, ed., *Functionalism Historicized: Essays on British Social Anthropology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), Jack Goody, *The Expansive Moment: The Rise of Social Anthropology in Britain and Africa 1918-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Adam Kuper, *Anthropology and Anthropologists: the Modern British School*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), Michael W. Young, *Malinowski: Odyssey of an Anthropologist, 1884-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), and Roy Ellen, ed., *Malinowski Between Two Worlds: the Polish Roots of an Anthropological Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Frazer's methods to be deeply, even irredeemably, flawed, most readers of *The Golden Bough* were not interested in his methods but in his myths.

Ultimately, then, criticisms of Frazer's assumptions and methods could do little to undermine the literary influence of the *The Golden Bough*; its popularity was due much more to Frazer's subject matter than to how he presented it. In particular, it was the mythic material in *The Golden Bough* that gave the work its purchase in British literary culture. In fact only by emphasizing the appeal of this subject matter can certain ironies about *The Golden Bough's* reception be understood. The appeal of *The Golden Bough's* mythic subject matter escaped Frazer's presuppositions and explanatory apparatus. What endured in readers' minds was not so much Frazer's explanations of how various myths embodied various primitive beliefs, but rather the myths themselves in their many vivid permutations. Thus what impressed the first generation of writers who took inspiration from Frazer was not his argument that myths of dying and reviving gods had their roots in fertility rituals, but instead the power and perceived relevance of the dying and reviving god myths. In Vickery's words two factors above all explain the book's literary influence, "one was the subject-matter or content of *The Golden Bough* itself, and the other, its singular appropriateness to prevailing literary tastes."[37] In the preface to the second edition of *The Golden Bough*, Frazer expressed the hope that even if his hypotheses should sooner or later break down or be superseded, "I hope that my book may still have its utility and its interest as a repertory of facts."[38] This was not quite correct: it was not as a repertory of facts but as a repertory of myths that *The Golden Bough* was able to remain relevant.

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[37] John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of* The Golden Bough (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 28.

[38] Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 2nd ed., vol. I, xx.

Frazer described *The Golden Bough's* comparative method as an artillery battery that would obliterate primitive beliefs and superstitions including, presumably, Christianity.[39] But this is not the effect his book had. The irony is that by cataloguing those beliefs so compellingly, he revivified them by awakening literary intellectuals to the imaginative power of myth. The myths that Frazer sought to destroy took on new life first in the works of modernists and subsequently in the works of many others. But the fact that *The Golden Bough* was important to the work of modernist writers only reinforced its authority by leading many to conclude that a work that inspired—and was recommended by—so many important writers must be highly significant.

The First World War, its aftermath, and tensions of the interwar period served as an ideal context for reception of the mythic material in *The Golden Bough*. This was a period in which many of Britain's intellectuals tried to come to grips with forces of irrationalism and disorder that seemed to threaten the very continuation of civilization in Europe. To many, the myths presented in Frazer's work offered both a key to understanding this irrationalism and an antidote to it. Frazer, following on the heels of Tylor, Robertson Smith, and Lang, drove home the point to a culture steeped in the classics that myths were more than adornments of the glory that was Greece. *The Golden Bough* played a key role in creating and feeding the desire for primitive as opposed to classical myth. As John Vickery has put it, thanks to Frazer, "Myths broadened their significance from that of a predominantly ornamental beauty to a dynamic illumination of the wellsprings of the human imagination."[40] And those wellsprings that Frazer illuminated were often savage, violent, and dark.

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[39] Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 3rd ed., vol. I, xxvi.

[40] Vickery, 36.

Frazer himself was apprehensive about reason's fate in Europe; his belief in progress was conventionally Victorian, yet tenuous. As more than one commentator has noted, *The Golden Bough* is a kind of ode to the progress of human reason; the dominant theme of the work is "human survival in the face of the forces of gigantic unreason."[41] This narrative of humanity's search for rationality was in a sense a recapitulation of Frazer's own life story. Frazer reacted against the staunch Presbyterianism of his upbringing, and his anti-clerical side often came to the surface often in *The Golden Bough* where time and again he pitted reason against bigotry and superstition. But, though Frazer never abandoned his evolutionary faith in the progress of reason, there were moments when he worried whether this progress was reversible, "Will the great movement which for centuries has been slowly altering the complexion of thought be continued in the near future? Or will a reaction set in which may arrest progress and even undo much of what has been done?"[42] And he worried elsewhere about how, "A mass, if not the majority, of people in every civilized country is still living in a state of intellectual savagery, that, in fact, the smooth surface of cultured society is sapped and mined by superstition."[43] Frazer was haunted by the fear that a resurgence of unreason would threaten to modern civilization. Students of *The Golden Bough* like Eliot saw in its myths a means of channeling and coping with unreason, and they were given encouragement in thinking this by the work of a group of scholars, the Ritualists, who drew inspiration from Frazer while taking the comparative study of myth in new directions.

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[41] Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual*, 50.

[42] Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 3rd ed., vol. xi, 308.

[43] J.G. Frazer, "The Scope of Social Anthropology," in *Psyche's Task. A Discourse Concerning the Influence of Superstition on the Growth of Institutions*, second ed., (London: Macmillan & Co., 1913), 170. See also Ackerman, *J.G. Frazer*, 212-23 for Frazer's concerns about the fragility of civilization.

"Reason is not Everything": Anti-Modernity in the Work of the Cambridge Ritualists

Apart from the intrusion of a few brooding moments, *The Golden Bough* was marked

from beginning to end by Frazer's optimistic, confident Victorian outlook. Frazer's faith in the

progress of science was apparent throughout the work as a central interpretive filter. It is ironic,

then, that some of the most prominent anthropologists who owed an intellectual debt to Frazer

did not share his Victorian faith in rationality and the progress of science. In fact, several of

Frazer's epigones produced work that was marked by distinctly strain of anti-modern primitivism

that emphasized the limits of reason and the dangers of an over-reliance on rationality. Because

of the university at which most of them worked and the theory of myth they held, these scholars

have been labeled the "Cambridge Ritualists," and the approach they took to the study of myth

afforded an opportunity to critique Victorian bourgeois complacency. In his own way Frazer had

tried to point out how the narrowness of the Victorian middle-class mentality was an obstacle to

a full understanding of past civilizations and their seemingly irrational practices. Frazer

admonished his readers that:

> We shall never understand the long course of human history if we persist in
> measuring mankind in all ages and in all countries by the standard, perhaps
> excellent, but certainly narrow, of the modern English middle class with their love
> of material comfort and "their passionate, absorbing, almost bloodthirsty clinging
> to life." That class…doubtless possesses many estimable qualities, but among
> them can be hardly reckoned the rare and delicate gift of historical imagination,
> the power of entering into the thoughts and feelings of men of other ages and
> other countries, of conceiving that they may regulate their life by principles which
> do not square with ours, and may throw it away for objects which to us might
> seem ridiculously inadequate.[44]

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[44] Frazer, *Golden Bough* 3rd ed., vol. III, 146.

Despite his willingness to criticize the provincial mindset of the Victorian middle class, he remained in other ways a typical, self-confident Victorian; the Ritualists went much further in challenging cultural assumptions.

For the Cambridge Ritualists, the study of the ritual origins of myth was an opportunity to expose the incomplete, self-serving picture of classical civilization that was central to the Victorian cultural establishment. The Ritualists recognized that one of the props to Victorian bourgeois culture was an idealization of Greek classicism and associated values.[45] Investigating the ritual origins of myth—and thereby exposing the irrational, Dionysian background of classical civilization—allowed the Cambridge Ritualists to suggest that what they perceived as a narrow bourgeois mentality was in fact built on a false foundation. Far from representing the epitome of enlightened rationality, the Cambridge Ritualists suggested, Hellenic civilization had contained within itself deep currents of ecstatic emotion and religious feeling—currents that were perhaps worth reappropriating. At the end of her vast study of ancient Greek religion, Jane Ellen Harrison quoted her friend and erstwhile collaborator Gilbert Murray: "Reason is great, but it is not everything. There are in the world things, not of reason, but both below and above it, causes of emotion which we cannot express, which we tend to worship, which we feel perhaps to be the precious things in life."[46]

The reversion to irrationality that Frazer feared was a source of fascination to Harrison, a brilliant scholar who drew inspiration directly from his works. But there was a difference. For Frazer, religion belonged to an earlier stage of evolution, to the childhood of humanity; for

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[45] On the Victorians' relationship to the classical past see Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

[46] Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 657.

Harrison it spoke to human cultural maturity. Whereas Frazer saw irrational superstition as a threat to civilization, Harrison saw it as a link to vital experience that could reinvigorate an emotionally arid civilization.

Students of Harrison's life are alike in approaching her with a mixture of fascination and admiration, whatever opinions they might have of her work and ideas. This was true not only of contemporaries like Virginia Woolf, who looked to Harrison as a mentor and a model, but is equally true of her recent biographers.[47] Even a cursory study of the facts of Harrison's life soon makes clear why the shadowy figure who stands as the inspiring presence behind Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* was one of the most remarkable intellectuals of her day.

Born in 1850 into a Nonconformist Yorkshire family, Harrison belonged to the first generation of women to attend university in England. In 1875 she entered Newnham College, Cambridge, where, unlike most Newnham students, she read for the classical Tripos. She decided to study classics. She expected to be invited to join the Newnham staff as a lecturer in classics after passing her Tripos in 1879, but this is did not happen: she was considered too independent-minded. Harrison was crushed, and after a year of teaching at girls' school she settled in London. She soon mastered German so that she could keep abreast of classical scholarship, and spent time studying in both continental museums and the British Museum. She supported herself by writing and lecturing on classical culture. Harrison had a particular gift for making Greek art come alive and lectures, often at the British Museum and at schools, were very

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[47] A number of biographers have tried to take the measure of Harrison's charismatic persona and her eventful life. The most thorough is Annabel Robinson, *The Life and Work of Jane Ellen Harrison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); the most interesting is Mary Beard, *The Invention of Jane Harrison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Sandra J. Peacock, *Jane Ellen Harrison: The Mask and the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) offers a psychobiographical approach. A shorter study that focuses on Harrison's significance for classical studies is R. Schleiser, "Jane Ellen Harrison," in Ward W. Briggs and William M. Calder III, eds., *Classical Scholarship. A Biographical Encyclopedia* (New York: Taylor & Francis,1990), 127-41.

popular. Around 1887 she underwent what was in many ways a typically Victorian personal and intellectual crisis, a crisis that Harrison herself described in explicitly religious terms. The details of this crisis remain uncertain, but she eventually emerged from a period of depression, loneliness and guilt with a renewed passion for her vocation and an entirely new perspective on it. In her scholarship, this personal transformation was evident as a new interest in the origins of religion.

One of the main factors in bringing Harrison out of her crisis was an 1888 trip to Greece with friends. On this trip, Harrison observed ongoing archaeological excavations in Athens. This was at a moment in the history of classical studies when younger scholars were controversially attempting to establish that archaeology was a source of valuable information about antiquity—making archaeology not simply a supplement to classical literature but a body of rich evidence in its own right. This was an affront to the nineteenth-century status quo position that the way to approach classical culture was through its literature. Harrison had gravitated toward the archaeological position in the 1880s, and her visit to Greece convinced her that archaeology offered a means of getting beyond the idealized Victorian picture of classical civilization. It was also on this trip that she hit upon what would become one of her central ideas, that: "in the large majority of cases *ritual practice misunderstood* explains….Some of the loveliest stories the Greeks have left us will be seen to have taken their rise, not in poetic imagination, but in primitive, often savage, and, I think, always *practical* ritual."[48] She put forth this view in *Mythology and Monuments of Ancient Athens*, the work that was the fruit of her trip to Greece. She acknowledged that in taking such a view she was taking a cue from Lang, among others. Later she would discover Robertson Smith, whose work would serve as further

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[48] Jane Ellen Harrison, *Mythology and Monuments of Ancient Athens* (London, 1890), iii. Italics in original.

inspiration. *Mythology and Monuments* earned Harrison some measure of scholarly renown, which was no small feat for a woman in what was then one of the most conservative fields of scholarship.[49]

The idea that rituals provided the basis of myths would remain central to all of her subsequent work in classical studies. It was an idea that she was able to explore so fully in part because she was able to gather around her a stimulating, supportive group of like-minded scholars. In 1898 she returned to Newnham College as a lecturer in Classical Archaeology. There she met Gilbert Murray and Francis Cornford, and later A.B. Cook. This group of classicists, who shared an interest in Frazer and were methodologically indebted to Robertson Smith, formed a group that would later be called the Cambridge Ritualists. Though they of course shared intellectual affinities, the Ritualists were initially drawn together by the force of Harrison's personality. From about 1900 to 1915 they together pursued a new course in the study of Greek religion and drama, each shaping and contributing to the work of the others. The year 1912, when three of them published major works, represented a high point in their association. Together these scholars took iconoclastic aim at an idealized nineteenth-century understanding of the Greeks, and tried to put flesh and bones on a merely skeletal understanding of the culture and religion of Archaic Greece. This meant that much of their scholarship was concerned with elucidating the unique characteristics of primitive psychology in a way that broke free of Tylor's simplistic formulations.

The implication of the idea the myth has its origins in ritual was that to understand myth it was necessary to understand what the primitives did, rather than what they thought. Thus a

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[49] Harrison was a lifelong campaigner for the removal of prohibitions against women, whether academic, social, or legal. She was a passionate and articulate polemicist for women's suffrage and in 1909 wrote *Homo Sum*, a highly-regarded pamphlet for the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies.

hallmark of Harrison's approach was an emphasis on religion as performed and felt rather than as believed—religion as, in her words, "social custom, embodying social emotion."[50] She was at pains to emphasize this distinction in her work, and her desire to understand and communicate to her readers the felt nature of religion led her to embrace what at the time were, in Robert Ackerman's words, "the newest irrationalist Continental sociology, psychology, and philosophy"—namely the works of Durkheim, Freud, and Bergson.[51] To this was added a career-long interest in Nietzsche. Harrison's sense that beneath the placid surface of classical Greece moved darker currents had first been mooted by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which Harrison had read with interest. This openness to other thinkers' theories marked her as one of the most intellectually voracious writers of the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. The latest work from various fields and in several languages became grist for her mill—Durkheim, Freud, Bergson, and Nietzsche were but a few of many examples. Late in life she would even develop a passion for Russian language and literature.

Harrison's two main works were *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) and *Themis* (1912). The former exposed the dimly understood religious stratum underneath the Olympian pantheon, while the latter extended this line of inquiry with the help of the theories of Durkheim and Bergson. The event that sent Harrison down the road that would lead to her *Prolegomena* was an encounter with archaeology. Around 1900 her friend Arthur Evans, an archaeologist, introduced her to Cretan artifacts—clay impressions of seal rings—that illuminated the pre-Olympian goddess cults of ancient Greece. The impressions depicted Greek

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[50] Jane Ellen Harrison, "Unanimism and Conversion," in *Alpha and Omega* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1915), 51.

[51] Robert Ackerman, Introduction to Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), xxii.

religious rituals prior to the worship of the Olympian gods, and the rituals were very different

than those of Olympian religion—much darker, more pessimistic, and colored by a deep sense of

evil. Harrison made this point in three long chapters that examine the meaning of the rituals

surrounding important Greek holidays. Whereas in the Olympian religion believers performed

sacrifices in order to maintain a coolly rational cycle of gift exchange between believers and

gods, the rituals she saw depicted in the impressions were ecstatic, intended to avert divine wrath

and ensure fertility, matriarchal (centered on Great Mother goddess rather than a Zeus-figure),

and chthonic (earthly as opposed to heavenly). This was the turbulent reality that lay behind the

placid façade of Olympian religion. Thus, Harrison's *Prolegomena* highlighted the irrationality

at the heart of archaic Greek civilization. And she did make a great effort to conceal the fact that

she felt something had been lost in the transition from the archaic cults to the Olympian pantheon.

As Hans Kippenberg has put it, she felt that, "With the victory of the Olympians, intellect

triumphed over feeling, cold rationality over female power."[52] This personal connection to her

subject mater was typical of Harrison's work. She recognized no boundary between personal

feeling and her scholarship, and she admitted that the latter was driven by the former.

Harrison's feeling that the Olympians represented "cold rationality" pointed to what was

a running theme of her work from about 1900 on: the limits and misuses of reason. For Harrison

reason was a tool, helpful only to the extent that it furthered understanding by producing unified,

synthetic explanations of the phenomena to which it was applied.   She thus reacted strongly

against scholars who conducted analysis only so as to fragment and atomize their subject matter.

For her this intellectual tendency indicated a deeper cultural malady: analysis that only

deconstructed, that merely broke down a subject into its constituent facts, was indicative of a

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[52] Kippenberg, 109.

society that was socially atomized and lacking in fellow feeling and a sense of common life.

This explains why Harrison was drawn to the collective thinking and feeling that characterized

archaic Greek religion. Such group unity seemed far preferable to the social atomism of her day.

This was a point she emphasized in her 1912 work *Themis*, which purported to reveal the social

origins of Greek religion. In *Themis* she wrote of the group-unity that undergirded totemism in

terms that imply a clear critique of the individualism of early twentieth-century Britain:

> [Totemism's] basis is group-unity, aggregation, similarity, sympathy, a sense, of common group life, and this common life, this participation, this unity, extended to the non-human world in a way that our modern, individualistic reason, based on observed distinctions, finds almost unthinkable…."[53]

In order to explain religious practices—such as totemism or mystery-god cults—that seemed

inexplicable to moderns, Harrison turned to Durkheim's theories about the social function of

primitive religion. Reading Durkheim led her to conclude that "the form taken by the divinity

reflects the social structure of the group to which the divinity belongs."[54] Likewise, Bergson's

notion of durée, "that life which is one, indivisible and yet ceaselessly changing" helped her see

primitive Greek religion as an instinctive, intuitive attempt to express that oneness, in contrast to

Olympian religion, which was "not an intuitive expression, but a late and conscious

representation, a work of analysis, of reflection and intelligence."[55]

In *Themis* Harrison applied this insight to the mystery cults of Dionysus and Orpheus,

which to her mind represented genuine religious expressions, in contrast with the Olympian gods

of Homer. Understanding the myth-ritual nexus revealed in the mystery religions was for

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[53] Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis; A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion, with an Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy by Professor Gilbert Murray and a Chapter on the Origin of the Olympic Games by Mr F.M. Cornford* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 122.

[54] Ibid., xi.

[55] Ibid., xii.

Harrison the key to transcending the false picture of Greek civilization that came from emphasizing the intellectual achievements of the Greeks. She argued that we really begin to understand how the ancient Greeks experienced life when we understand the rituals surrounding the mystery-gods rather than simply accepting the Homeric picture at face value. *Themis* attempted to show that by an examination of rites and rituals (*dromena* in Harrison's terminology), it is possible to see Greek myths for what they originally were: something like scripts that governed the performance of religious rituals; ritual was enacted myth, even though this fact was obscured by historical change. As Harrison explained:

> In the study of Greek religion it is all important that the clear distinction should be realized between the comparatively permanent element of the ritual and the shifting manifold character of the myth….This does not, however, imply, as is sometimes supposed, that ritual is prior to myth; they probably arose together. Ritual is the utterance of an emotion, a thing felt, in *action*, myth in words or thoughts. They arise *pari passu*. The myth…does not arise to give a reason; it is representative, another form of utterance, of expression. When the emotion that started the ritual has died down and the ritual though hallowed by tradition seems unmeaning, a reason is sought in the myth and it is regarded as aetiological.[56]

The implications of this view of myth were explored in two sections of *Themis* contributed by Harrison's fellow Cambridge Ritualists, F.M Cornford and Gilbert Murray. Cornford showed how the Olympics Games emerged from a ritual that welcomed the new year. Murray's contribution was briefer but more significant, because it was the first attempt to apply the key idea of the myth and ritual school to literary criticism. Murray attempted to show that Greek tragedy derived ultimately from Dionysian ritual. Murray aimed to expose an underlying mythic pattern in Greek tragedy by making an historical argument about how tragedy developed out of religious ritual. This attempt to find mythic patterns in other literary forms would become the central principle of later myth criticism, though subsequent critics, such as Northrop Frye, would

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[56] Ibid., 16.

replace the historical component of Murray's approach with an ahistorical psychological component.

As her *Prolegomena* and *Themis* clearly show, Harrison's analysis of Greek religion emphasized its communal, emotional, and irrational elements. Her depiction of Greek religion in these terms was linked to an explicit critique of British culture. Virtually every point that Harrison emphasized about the connection between myth and ritual in ancient Greece corresponded to her anxieties about cultural change in Britain or to her beliefs about Britain's pressing cultural needs. Three examples in particular stand out. In her scholarship she depicted religion as enacted emotion rather than as Victorian belief in dogma; she described a culture united by a communal experience of shared emotion rather a British culture marked by individualism and fragmentation; and she saw the vital emotion exemplified by the ancient Greek cults as a salutary contrast to the rationalism and intellectualism of her day. If the work of scholars like Tylor, Robertson Smith, and Frazer had demonstrated the universality of myth-making as a feature of human culture, Harrison was the first argue that the study of ancient myth could reveal resources for dealing with contemporary needs. In fact, this conviction was the source of the urgency and zeal that suffused her work. As one of her biographers has written, "She wrote with a passion that came from seeing her research as intensely practical. She believed that to study the origins of Greek religion was to discover the essence of the nature of religion…."[57] To Harrison, rediscovering the true nature of religion was a precondition for the religious reawakening she believed her age needed, a belief she came to in part through her research for *Themis*. In her introduction to the work she confessed that:

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[57] Robinson, 9.

> I have come to see in the religious impulse a new value. It is, I believe, an attempt, instinctive and unconscious,…to apprehend life as one, as indivisible, yet as perennial movement and change. But, profoundly as I also feel the value of religious impulse, so keenly do I feel the danger and almost necessary disaster of each and every creed and dogma….
>
> The only intelligible meaning that ritual has for me, is the keeping open of the individual soul…to other souls, other separate lives, and to the apprehension of other forms of life….Whether any systematized attempt to remind man, by ritual, of that whole of life of which he is a specialized fragment can be made fruitful or not, I am uncertain.[58]

By the time she published *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* in 1921, this uncertainty had become something more like hope. The influence of Bergson was palpable as she declared that there was one present form of religion that was "vital, creative" as primitive Greek religion had been. This was immanentism, the principle of which was "you, that is the best in you, is one with God, is God, your work is the divine activity…."[59] In immanentism she saw something close to the spirit of primitive Greek religion: "It is very near to that primal mystery, the impulse of life, which it was the function of primitive religion to conserve."[60] Rather than group ritual, the core of this immanentism was "the practice of asceticism," though she failed to specify what this asceticism entailed.[61] Despite this vagueness, Harrison's zeal was evident: the final chapter of the book was a passionate plea for immanentism achieved through ascetic discipline.

Harrison was not alone in parleying her study of myth and ritual into a call for spiritual renewal. Similar themes were sounded by Harrison's exact contemporary, Jessie Weston.[62] And,

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[58] Harrison, *Themis*, xix.

[59] Jane Ellen Harrison, *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 38.

[60] Ibid., 36.

[61] Ibid.

[62] There is a relative paucity of scholarship on life and work of Jessie Weston. Janet Grayson, "In Quest of Jessie Weston," in *Arthurian Literature* XI, ed. Richard Barber (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1992), 1-80, is perhaps the most thorough study of her life. A helpful biographical sketch is provided in Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Jessie

as Robert Ackerman has pointed out, there are further parallels between their careers.

Ackerman notes that both women were deeply influenced by Frazer's *Golden Bough*, both

moved from an initial interest in aesthetics to comparative religion and anthropology, and both

used evidence in similar ways.[63] But the similarities between the two scholars do not end there.

Like Harrison, Weston was an in many ways an outsider. Not only was she a woman in a field

of scholarship dominated by men, but she was also an academic outsider, working on her own

with no connection to a university and without being surrounded by a group of collaborators.

Though Harrison and Weston knew and admired each other's work, they were not

acquainted. For her part, Weston was deeply indebted to the work of the Cambridge Ritualists

and openly acknowledged this in her own work, singling out the work of Frazer, Murray, and

Harrison in particular.[64] Thus, though not associated with Cambridge, drew her inspiration from

the Cambridge Ritualists and applied their methods to the study of Arthurian myth and legend.

In fact, Weston was the first to see that ritualist approach could be applied to literature that did

not have its roots in ancient Greece. In 1920 she published *Ritual and Romance*, which, as the

title suggests, argues that the Grail legend derives from pre-Christian pagan fertility rituals. This

is one of the books that catalyzed Eliot's imagination and provided a wealth of images and

metaphors for *The Waste Land*. Weston also offers a mystical interpretation of the grail quest,

arguing that for moderns it can represent the quest for self-realization.

Weston and the Forest of Broceliande," *Centennial Review* 9 (1965): 509-21. Robert Ackerman's description of the connections between Weston and the myth and ritual school is illuminating but all to brief. See idem, *The Myth and Ritual School*, 181-84.

[63] Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual*, 219-20, n. 34.

[64] See Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1920), vii-viii; 35, n. 2.

Weston's religious reading of the grail bears more than a passing resemblance to Harrison's praise of immanentism in *Epilegomena*. Both Weston and Harrison were motivated by deep religious impulses and both saw their scholarship, in part, as part of an effort to reconceptualize religion for the needs of their contemporaries. Weston followed Harrison in concluding that one reason for the spiritual poverty of the modern age was reliance on a rationality that only dissected its subject matter, rather than allowing a holistic understanding of it. Such "criticism by isolation" had prevented a proper understanding of the grail material in Weston's view.[65] And, like Harrison, Weston's scholarship is marked by a deeply personal tone and a sense that ancient myths and rituals have contemporary relevance. At the outset of *From Ritual to Romance* she offered a defense of primitive religion, contending that "The more closely one studies pre-Christian Theology, the more strongly one is impressed with the deeply, and daringly, spiritual character of its speculations…."[66] Weston herself was active in occult circles, and she took her experience of the occult as confirmation for the ideas she advanced in her work. She alluded to her occult activities, particularly the historical significance of the tarot pack, in *From Ritual to Romance*. After making her name with *From Ritual to Romance*, she was in demand as a commentator on religious issues and could be found giving public lectures on such topics as "The Vital and Vitalizing Spirit of Religion."[67]

Weston's book seemed to mark a tipping point in the saturation of British literary culture with mythic ideas. Her application of the myth and ritual approach to a myth with British connections was a decisive intervention in the field. The ritualist method applied to Arthurian

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[65] Weston, 67.

[66] Weston, 7.

[67] See *The Times* (London), 10 February 1927, 15.

legend proved a potent combination that catalyzed literary interest in myth. Moreover, the

aspects of the grail legend that Weston chose to emphasize, such as the Waste Land; her

emphasis on the power and importance of symbols like the grail, lance, sword, and stone; and her

idealization of the primitive religious imagination, were all particularly appealing to modernists

and writers with modernist inclinations. Richard Barber, in his encyclopedic and authoritative

study of changing beliefs about the grail, describes Weston as someone who "unleashed"

powerful images in twentieth-century literature, images which have "haunted twentieth-century

literature to a degree quite disproportionate to [their] basis in fact."[68] The two decades after

From Ritual to Romance's appearance saw an unprecedented proliferation of grail-themed

literature, whose authors frequently acknowledged their debt to Weston. Eliot's poem *The Waste*

Land is the best known case, but there were a host of novels as well, including John Cowper

Powys' *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932), Mary Butts' *Armed With Madness* (1928), and Charles

Williams' *The War in Heaven* (1930). The influence of Weston's work on the Grail will be

examined more fully in the following chapter. Suffice it here to say that her work was one of the

formative elements of an intellectual climate in which, as Barber has observed, "insistence on the

limitations of rational thought and on the value of personal mystical experience untrammeled by

the bonds of ritual and doctrine was to be one of the main influences of on Grail literature in

England in the early twentieth century."[69]

Conclusion

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[68] Richard Barber, *The Grail: Imagination and Belief* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 249.

[69] Ibid., 297.

By 1920, when *From Ritual to Romance* appeared, scholars of comparative religion, folklorists, classicists, and, above all, anthropologists had produced a wealth of scholarship that both compiled myths from various cultures and times and sought to explain the purpose and meaning of those myths. John Vickery has suggested the term "classical anthropology" to encompass the diversity of work produced by the scholars whose era of productivity is marked by Lang's career on the one hand and Bronislaw Malinowski's on the other.[70] The mass of material produced by these classical anthropologists, much of it aimed at a popular audience, could not but have wide cultural repercussions. By 1920 British culture was saturated with this cultural production on myth, and literary deposits began to form from this saturation. This process was complex. Works on myth by scholars like Lang, Frazer, Harrison, and Weston were popular in their own right, but the cultural influence of these and related studies of myth was dramatically amplified by authors and poets who drew inspiration from them and produced a body of literature driven by the belief that myth had a pressing contemporary relevance. The group of writers who initially did the most to build on the work of classical anthropologists were the modernists.[71] They were able to powerfully and influentially articulate the contemporary relevance of myth in both works of imaginative literature and aesthetic theory.

Why the modernists were drawn to myth has much to do with how Frazer and the myth and ritual school wrote about it. In particular, the theme of primitivism that ran through their work exerted a powerful influence on British literary culture, first with the modernists in the interwar period and later with literary critics in the postwar period. The supposed virtues of "the

[70] John B. Vickery, "Frazer and the Elegiac: The Modernist Connection," in Manganaro, ed., 51.

[71] Martha Celeste Carpenter has undertaken a project that does for Harrison's literary influence what Vickery did for *The Golden Bough's*. See her *Ritual, Myth, and the Modernist Text: the Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998). There is a large and growing body of scholarship the explores the influence of myth and ritual anthropology on the modernists. See following chapter, n. 2

primitive mind" and of the myths produced by it proved attractive to both groups. After examining the central assumptions of the myth and ritual writers, one commentator offered his assessment of why their primitivism was so influential: "On the basis of these assumptions, critics are prepared to argue that the literature of Western civilization can be understood and evaluated by establishing its connection with, or similarity to, the religious rituals of an assumed world-wide primitive society and primitive mind, the last being an important idea, since it is assumed that the primitive or unspecialized mind has a greater contact with, a more complete view of, total reality than the modern mind."[72] For those disenchanted with modernity, the primitive mind depicted by Frazer and the ritualists seemed not just appealing, but worth rediscovering and reawakening. Harrison and Weston in particular had complained that the modern intellect fragmented all that it analyzed, while the primitive mind saw life more accurately as a whole. And, the ritualists argued, seeing life as a whole entailed communal spiritual experience that gave identity to the self, in contrast to a modern age when the self had no certain place, no stable identity. Writers and critics with similar complaints found depicted in ritualist scholarship a mode of experiencing life that had been sacrificed to modernity, and they acquired from ritualist scholarship a set of images, tropes, and analytic categories that could be used to articulate their discontent with modernity. For instance if Eliot was convinced that the distinguishing characteristics of his age were futility and anarchy, then it comes as no surprise that myths of fertility and rebirth were so central to his work. That process of how Frazerian and ritualist myth analysis was translated by modernist writers into poetry and prose is the subject of the next chapter.

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[72] Wallace W. Douglas, article "The Meanings of 'Myth' in Modern Criticism," *Modern Philology* vol. L, no. 4 (May 1953), 241.

CHAPTER 3

"THE GRAIL IS STIRRING": MODERNIST WRITERS, THE MATTER OF BRITAIN, AND

THE SPIRITUAL USES OF MYTH

Waste Land of all the Waste Lands. Yet there is…something like the Grail…sustaining us.
Mary Butts (1933)

Introduction

In 1937 Faber & Faber published the first literary effort by a David Jones, a Welshman

who until that time had been known primarily as a painter, illustrator, and engraver. The book,

entitled *In Parenthesis*, defied easy characterization with its unusual mix of poetry and prose, but

this did not stop T.S. Eliot from penning an admiring introduction. And Eliot was not alone: the

book's admirers included a veritable who's who of the literary establishment, including W.B.

Yeats, W.H. Auden, and Kathleen Raine. The book was in short order awarded the

Hawthornden Prize as the year's "best work of imaginative literature" and it established Jones's

literary reputation, a reputation he would enhance substantially with a subsequent poem entitled

The Anathemata, which came to be widely regarded as a late-modernist masterpiece.

There was good reason for Eliot's enthusiastic support of Jones's first foray into literature.

In many ways, *In Parenthesis* embodied the "mythical method" that Eliot had commended to

modernist writers as an aesthetic strategy for imposing order on "the futility and anarchy which

is contemporary history."[1] This is precisely what Jones's work did: *In Parenthesis* was his

attempt to make sense of the events he had witnessed as a soldier in the First World War. Events

that he had been unable to comprehend for decades were made comprehensible by being linked

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[1] T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *The Dial* 75 (November 1923): 483.

to a pattern of mythical references. Using literary techniques that Eliot himself had pioneered in *The Waste Land*, in *In Parenthesis* Jones drew on works such J.G. Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* as well as Arthurian and Norse mythology. Jones even borrowed the very image of the waste land itself and used it as a primary means of describing the war landscape that he inhabited, thus adapting for his own purposes the symbol Eliot had made an iconic representation of the modern condition.

Yet, probing deeper into how Jones made use of myth in *In Parenthesis* reveals some telling differences between his understanding of myth and Eliot's; Eliot's approval of Jones's work hides a deeper disagreement over their respective understandings of myth. In short, Jones's use of myth went well beyond the strictures of Eliot's mythical method. For Eliot, myth was a source of literary form, but for Jones it was much more than this, it was a narrative matrix in which religious truths were accumulated and preserved throughout the ages. The difference between Jones and Eliot opens onto a wider chasm running through the heart of the culture of modernism, dividing writers on the basis of whether or not they saw myth as spiritual resource or merely as a literary one. There were more understandings of myth on offer for modernists than Eliot's mythical method, and it is this diversity that this chapter proposes to examine.

Unfortunately, the diversity of modernist uses of myth has hitherto remained largely unexplored, in large part because Eliot's definition of the "mythical method" (examined in detail below) has been accorded an almost totemic status among scholars of modernism. Eliot's understanding of myth has essentially set the terms of the discussion for subsequent scholarly examinations of the modernist understanding of myth, examinations which adopt and reproduce

Eliot's categories of analysis.[2] It is thus commonly assumed that because Eliot identified the

mythical method as the fundamental modernist aesthetic approach, then modernists did in fact

practice the mythical method. Their recourse to myth, then, was essentially an attempt to seek

the consolations of a coherent aesthetic form given that the consolations of religious belief were

unavailable. Eliot's attempt to find meaning in well-constructed art was his response to a culture

that had lost it bearings. As one Eliot scholar has put it, "Eliot usually discusses the modernist

crisis in terms of an absence in contemporary life. Sometimes he calls the missing factor belief,

sometimes myth, sometimes tradition."[3]   In Eliot's view, the conditions of modernity dictated

that myth's role was simply to provide the elements for a pattern or structure in a given work, not

to convey religious truths or insights in which to believe.

Though many of Eliot's contemporaries deemed his analysis of the "modernist crisis"

trenchant and responded accordingly, the problem comes in accepting Eliot's diagnosis of the

crisis at face value and generalizing it with little warrant to encompass modernist writers who

may not have shared Eliot's sense that belief was impossible. This is a move often made,

whether implicitly or explicitly, in scholarship on the culture of modernism. A case in point is

Michael Bell's monograph *Literature, Modernism and Myth* which, through examinations of

early Eliot, Joyce, Yeats, and Lawrence, concludes that the belief that one may commit to a

worldview while still acknowledging its relativism was central to modernist aesthetics.[4] In

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[2] Notable exceptions to this tendency have tended to come from scholars pursuing or incorporating gender-based analysis. See, for example, Ruth Hoberman, *Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Twentieth-Century Women's Historical Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); and Jane Goldman, *Modernism, 1910-1945: Image to Apocalypse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2004).

[3] Jewel Spears Brooker, *Mastery and Escape: T.S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 11.

[4] See Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Bell's view, Frazer's *The Golden Bough* contributed to this awareness on the one hand by

fostering a skepticism toward myth, while on the other hand encouraging a degree of nostalgia

for it—a set of circumstances that essentially gutted the meaning of "belief" and reinforced the

modernist commitment to coping with modern fragmentation by imposing order on it through art.

The presumption implicit in such an analysis is that there was a typical modernist understanding

of myth based on a shared modernist reaction to anthropology. Though there are significant

elements of truth in this line of argument (many modernists *did* seek the consolation of literary

form as a substitute for religion), it places far too much weight on Eliot's dictates and the

examples of a select few modernists like Joyce and Lawrence. In short, too often it has been

assumed that what was the case for Eliot—or what Eliot *said* was the case for modernist writers

as a group—was in fact true of modernists generally.

Eliot's views on how to deal with the absence of belief by means of a mythical method,

however forcefully articulated and influential, cannot be assumed to have defined the

understanding of myth held by other modernists, simply because not all modernists shared

Eliot's convictions about the impossibility of belief. The purpose of this chapter is to examine

those modernists who looked to myth as an object of belief and a spiritual resource. It argues

that Eliot's dichotomy between form and belief cannot be sustained when the examination of the

modernist use of myth is expanded beyond the usual modernist suspects of Eliot, Joyce,

Lawrence, et al. When a wider variety of modernists is examined, it becomes evident that, far

from abandoning belief for form, a number of influential modernists looked to myth as an

indispensable spiritual resource. This becomes especially clear through an analysis of how four

particular modernist writers, John Cowper Powys, Mary Butts, Charles Williams, and David

Jones, engaged during the 1920s and 1930s with a particular set of myths: those related to Holy

Grail. This chapter argues that these four writers—whose work all displayed typical modernist characteristics but who were by no means part of the same Grail-preoccupied literary clique—turned to Grail mythology not just as a source of fragmentary raw material to be reshaped for literary purposes, but as a source of spiritual consolation and a resource for counterbalancing certain objectionable contemporary tendencies, such as excessive rationalism. They were able to use the Grail mythology this way in part because of the way they responded to and adapted the relevant anthropological scholarship of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Though some modernists, like Eliot, drew skeptical conclusions from such work, not all modernists did the same, concluding instead that anthropology provided not a skeptical demystification of humanity's religious impulse, but rather a record of how various cultures had experienced and understood the divine. Importantly, the context in which Powys, Butts, Williams, and Jones tried to work out the relationship between myth and belief followed close on the heels of a period during which, as Alex Owen has recently shown, notions of what counted as "belief" had undergone significant revision.[5] Consequently, these writers benefited from a new openness that freed them to think in new ways about myth's relevance to their predicament. They did this by turning to a myth that was familiar, indigenous, and that had its share of suitably numinous—and therefore spiritually suggestive—elements: Britain's own mythology surrounding King Arthur and the Holy Grail.

The Grail in Early Twentieth Century Britain

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[5] See Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Before contrasting Eliot's use of myth with that of Powys, Butts, Williams, and Jones, it is necessary to consider briefly the common mythical ground on which they met. One of the remarkable features of modernist writing is the spate of work based on the Grail myth produced by modernist writers in the interwar period. Indeed, such is the proliferation of such work that it amounts to a veritable modernist subgenre. Almost immediately after the First World War, the Grail myth became an all-purpose metaphor for modernist writers in search of aesthetic resources for coping with modernity. The are a variety of reasons for this boom in modernist Grail literature, including post-First World War cultural pessimism that provided a context in which the Grail's healing properties resonated as a powerful symbol; the influence of anthropological literature on myth and ritual, particularly Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*; and the British associations inherent to the Grail mythology, which suited an introspective cultural moment during which many writers were grappling with questions of Britishness and Englishness. Above all, by reworking the mythology surrounding the Grail modernist writers were able to articulate their desire for spiritual renewal; the Arthurian corpus proved to be the ideal idiom for expressing this desire. It is no coincidence that many of the writers who were fascinated by the Grail myth also explored spiritual matters through involvement with various forms of spiritualism, religious seeking, or the occult, as will be detailed further below. Arthur Machen, whose novel *The Secret Glory* (1915) was one of the first of the modernist Grail novels, was a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Mary Butts, whose novel *Armed With Madness* (1928) explores the revitalizing power of the Grail, had explored the occult with Aleister Crowley. Charles Williams, who wrote both poetry and novels that draw heavily on Grail mythology, was also a student of the occult and a member of the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, a Rosicrucian order. Powys and Jones had their own interests in

religious matters. Powys moonlighted as a religious philosopher and Jones was a convert to

Catholicism.

The popularity of the Grail myth among modernist writers is noteworthy in part for the

way it illuminates the influence of myth scholarship on twentieth-century British literary culture.

Put bluntly, the subgenre of modernist Grail literature is unimaginable apart from the late-

nineteenth and early-twentieth-century anthropological and archaeological work that had

illuminated so much about ancient myth and ritual. Not only did works like Jessie Weston's

From Ritual to Romance and A.E. Waite's *The Hidden Church of The Holy Graal* (1909)

suggest the Grail myth had greater historical significance than previously thought, recent

archaeological discoveries held out the prospect that the Grail itself might actually be discovered.

As Richard Barber has written, "The idea that the actual Grail, the dish of the Last Supper, might

be found again was strengthened by the rise of archaeology and the spectacular discoveries of the

late nineteenth century. If legendary cities such as Troy could be resurrected, why should the

Grail be beyond reach? The Catholic relics which claimed to be the dish or chalice of the Last

Supper were ignored, and new candidates emerged."[6] Several of these candidates emerged in

Britain. The early twentieth century saw a number of celebrated cases of supposed Grail

discovery in Britain, and the current association of Glastonbury with the grail myth is

attributable in part to two of these cases. These causes célèbres were reinforced by respectable

scholarly works that lent credibility to certain key elements of the Grail mythology. Many

writers of the period who were interested in the Grail pointed to R.G. Collingwood and J.N.L.

Myres' *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (1936). This volume in the *Oxford History of*

England by respected Oxford dons suggested that a historical personage corresponding to the

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[6] Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 297.

King Arthur of myth may well have existed. It all served to reinforce the notion that the Grail

myth was a distinctly British inheritance, and one that might well have some basis in fact.

Modernist meditations on the Grail myth thus took place in a context in which the possibility of

finding the actual Grail was widely entertained.

The Grail myth derived added appeal from its association with ancient Celtic traditions

and with actual British places. For instance, there were clear parallels between the Grail

mythology and some parts of Celtic mythology, one example being the character Bran the

Blessed in the Welsh epic *The Mabinogion*. Bran possessed a cauldron that could resurrect the

dead, though imperfectly, an idea that was a likely precursor to later stories about the Grail and

its miraculous properties. The Grail mythology's supposed roots in ancient Celtic mythology

only made it a more attractive source of material for modernist writers. The more ancient roots

that the Grail myth could be shown to have, the more it could be disentangled from the

supposedly superficial elements that had been added to it by the writers of medieval romances;

an ancient Celtic provenance equaled authenticity in the minds of the modernists. Not only did

ancient Celtic origins give the Grail mythology an added profundity, it also linked the mythology

firmly to the British Isles while providing a convenient pretext for dismissing Continental

versions of it.[7] The Grail mythology was deemed special in part because it was a British myth.

Disentangling the various strands of the Grail mythology, however, was no easy task for

those who chose to undertake it. Though the mythology itself existed in numerous different

versions of varying provenance, age and complexity, all the versions shared a number of

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[7] This attitude was expressed most forcefully by David Jones, who contended that ancient Celtic versions of the Grail myth were "far more solemn and significant" than late medieval versions, which utterly mangled the power and beauty of the Celtic originals. He then quotes C.S. Lewis to the effect that the medieval romance makers "destroyed more magic than they ever invented." See David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1937), 200-01.

common, richly symbolic elements that appealed to the imaginations of modernist writers.

The most fundamental of these was the Grail itself, thought to be the cup used by Christ at the

Last Supper. The Grail is invested with a number of magical properties, including the ability to

restore life or vitality to those who drink from it. The Grail is kept in a castle (often identified as

Carbonek or some variation thereof) ruled by the Fisher King, who is sometimes identified as

Pellam or Pellehan.[8] Perhaps as punishment for some sin, the King has suffered a "dolorous

blow" to his leg or groin and, inexplicably, his woundedness reacts on his kingdom, rendering it

barren and infertile and his subjects miserable. This is the "waste land" that proved to be such an

irresistible image for modernist writers. The king can only be cured by a virtuous, questing

knight or hero who asks the correct question, which is usually "Whom does the Grail serve?"

Doing so cures the king, restores the land to fertility, and rewards the knight with a mystical

vision of the Grail. The portion of Athurian and Grail mythology set in Britain is known as "the

Matter of Britain" to distinguish it from corresponding mythology set in continental locales. It

was this Matter of Britain that modernists writers would turn to again and again in attempts to

invest their work with mythic significance.

Belief, Form, and T.S. Eliot's "Mythical Method"

In a 1923 review of James Joyce's *Ulysses* T.S. Eliot first broached the possibility of a

"mythical method" in literature and criticism. In what would become the most famous and oft-

quoted statement on the relationship between myth and literature Eliot wrote:

> 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.

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[8] Confusingly, in some versions of the tale the castle is occupied by two kings, the "Wounded King" who is identified as Pellam or Pellehan, and his son or grandson Pelles who is called the "Fisher King."

> of They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.... Psychology…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. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art....[9]

The first thing to notice about this passage is the revolutionary nature of the claim Eliot is

making: he is not simply identifying the mythical method as one approach among many; it is a

desperately necessary means by which relevant, significant art can be produced in the modern

world. The narrative method, based on the premise that reality was coherent and unified, might

have been suitable for a past era, but the modern era, in which reality was chaotic and

fragmented, required a method that could deal with such conditions. But the urgency of Eliot's

tone prompts the question of how this mythical method is to be developed, and this leads to a

second, often overlooked, point about the passage: the mythical method relies on knowledge

produced and procedures pioneered by the social sciences. When the passage is quoted, Eliot's

comments about "Psychology…ethnology and *The Golden Bough*" are often excised and

replaced with ellipses, but these words are a key to the import of what Eliot is proposing.

Significantly, Eliot points out that the mythical method "was impossible a few years ago," a

comment which underscores the importance of anthropology for the mythical method: at the time

Eliot penned his review, "a few years ago" the work of Frazer and Weston did not exist. The

third point to note about the passage is its bearing on matters of belief, a matter closely

connected to Eliot's deference toward contemporary social science. The Eliot who formulated

the mythical method was a disciple of Matthew Arnold, and his method is grounded ultimately in

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[9] Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," 483.

Arnoldian presuppositions. Most significant of these for Eliot was the conviction that religious belief was impossible, but that some substitute for religion was urgently needed. As Eliot wrote elsewhere, "now there is nothing in which to believe….Belief itself is dead…."[10] Understanding Eliot's sense that religious belief was impossible helps explain his concern with "giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." If moderns could not look to religion for an explanation of the world, they would, out of pragmatic necessity, have to generate meaning themselves.

Eliot's review of *Ulysses* appeared in the November issue of the *Dial*, which also included a newly-completed poem by Eliot; he did not simply define the mythical method and recommend it to others, he himself put it into practice in his epochal poem, *The Waste Land*.[11] The poem shows us the mythical method at work, as Eliot attempts to address what he conceived of as the central modern problem: the lack of a given framework—whether from religion, tradition, or myth—that made sense of reality. This problem is at the heart of *The Waste Land*, expressed pointedly in the lines "I can connect / Nothing with nothing" (ll. 301-02). The poet's only recourse, however, is to find some way to make connections, to impose an order on the chaos of experience. Thus the necessity of the mythical method, and in the case of *The Waste Land* Eliot drew his mythic raw material from two sources in particular, as the very first of his notes on the poem makes clear:

> Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance*….Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston's book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do; and I

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[10] T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), 130.

[11] *The Waste Land* had first been published a few days earlier in the first issue of the *Criterion*. Both the version in the *Criterion* and the *Dial* appeared without notes. At the beginning of December the poem first appeared as a book and included Eliot's annotations.

recommend it…to any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble. To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough*….Anyone who is acquainted with these works will immediately recognize in the poem certain references to vegetation ceremonies.[12]

Notes like these were by no means superfluous to the poem; they were in fact necessary for the poem to perform for the reader its task of imposing order on reality. At the time, Eliot believed that art played an indispensable role in helping moderns cope with contemporary experience, thus it was imperative that readers be given the tools to comprehend art. The poem was an attempt by Eliot to create "a work in which aesthetic order is collaboratively constructed by the poet and his reader."[13] Eliot's notes offered tools for making sense of the confusingly disjointed fragments that comprised the poem. In theory, readers who used them would be able to say with Eliot at the poem's conclusion "These fragments I have shored against my ruins…" (l. 430).

Though Eliot explained that his work was indebted to Jessie Weston's "book on the Grail legend," the Grail never actually appears in what is the most famous Grail poem of the century. In *From Ritual to Romance* Weston had emphasized the theme in Grail mythology involving the "dolorous blow" which wounded the Fisher King and laid waste to his lands. This story, she argued, was central to the lost ritual from which the symbol of the Grail had eventually emerged. As Richard Barber has noted, the story is built around a powerful combination of sin, retribution, and redemption,[14] a formula that appealed to the imagination of T.S. Eliot, which was, as scholars have long noted, significantly shaped by his pessimistic Augustinian understanding of sin's radical effects on humanity and the world. (Eliot even quotes from Augustine's

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[12] T.S. Eliot, *The Annotated* Waste Land *with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 71.

[13] Brooker, 138.

[14] Barber, 328.

Confessions in *The Waste Land*; see line 307.) In Eliot's poem, however, the redemption is

left out; the Grail is evident only by its absence. Instead, a hesitant and diffident Fisher King

appears twice, fishing "with the arid plain" behind him and asking himself, "Shall I at least set

my lands in order?" (ll. 424-5). Late in his life Eliot expressed some regret that his endorsement

of Weston's work had contributed to the Grail enthusiasm of the 1920s and 1930s. By invoking

Weston, he had meant to recommend her method—the prototype for his own—rather than

inspire any belief in the mythical objects like the Grail.[15]

Eliot was thus emphatic that the point of the mythical method, in theory and in practice,

was not the reinforcement of belief but rather the production of meaningful, significant literary

form that made sense of contemporary chaos. Eliot's description of his modernist procedure as a

"method" is highly significant, as it is an indication of the fact that he conceived of the mythical

method as in essence a scientific approach to producing relevant art. As Jewel Spears Brooker

explains Eliot's motivations:

> For years, he had been working on some method that would enable him to
> construct a great poem without using a framework borrowed from religion or
> philosophy….In *The Waste Land*, instead of borrowing a framework, Eliot
> borrows a method. Using the comparative method of modern science, particularly
> of anthropology, he tries to force the reader to construct the abstraction that will
> serve as the framework of the poem.[16]

When properly applied, then, the mythical method resembles a kind of inductive scientific

reasoning, whereby seemingly disconnected fragments of data are compared and analyzed in

order to "generate comprehensive abstractions" that help make sense of experience. It was the

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[15] See T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 122.

[16] Brooker, 13. Brooker's volume, especially the four essays collected under the heading "The Mind of Europe: Anxiety, Crisis, and Therapy," offers what is probably the single best elucidation and analysis of Eliot's mythical method, in large part because of her skill in contextualizing Eliot's thought in relation early twentieth-century social science. My discussion of Eliot here relies heavily on Brooker's insights.

same method with which Frazer had approached his disparate ethnographic evidence, which

he in turn had adapted from Darwin. A further observation is in order regarding Eliot's use of

anthropology: he accepted it as yet another force that eroded the credibility of religious belief.

Anthropology did this by placing all myths on the same plane, granting privileged status to none.

Hence all were relativized, existing in the modern world solely as the fragmentary remnants of

past cultures, meaningful only if given their meaning by an artist.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to make a comment about the development of Eliot's

thought. The analysis of his views on myth offered here concentrates on his thought up to the

late 1920s, when his conversion to Anglicanism marked a significant change in his conceptions

about the purpose of art.[17] Already by the late 1920s Eliot was distancing himself from opinions

expressed in his earlier criticism and from views implied in his earlier poetry. Indeed, Eliot's

conversion can be seen from one perspective as a movement from seeing myth solely as a source

of aesthetic form and order to actually committing to belief in a particular myth that offered an

explanation of reality. To employ for a moment the sort of scientific language he made use of, it

can be said that Eliot's experiment with the mythical method failed, at least for him. The shift in

Eliot's thought, however, did not diminish the influence of his earlier views on function of myth

within a modernist aesthetic project, views which, as will be seen in subsequent chapters,

continued to reverberate across the cultural landscape for decades.

As we leave Eliot to consider other modernist writers, a key point to keep in mind about

his mythical method is that it was developed out of an absence of religious belief: it was a

method for generating meaning and order out of chaos that could serve as a substitute for the

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[17] For an excellent analysis of the gradual change in Eliot's thought from the time of *The Waste Land*'s appearance to the publication of *The Idea of a Christian Society* see John Margolis, *T.S. Eliot's Intellectual Development: 1922-1939* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972).

consolations of religion. For Eliot, at that stage in his intellectual development, there was no

myth that merited or commanded belief, but myth could supply art with raw material—images,

symbols, themes, tropes—that could be shaped into useful works of art, works that could help

moderns cope with their experience. But not all modernists were willing to relinquish belief, not

all were willing to reconstruct literature as science, and not all were willing to treat mythic

symbols like the Grail as mere material for a method. Eliot's mythical method was not the only

conception of myth at work among modernists, and it is to these alternate views that we move

next.

"Symbol of the Beyond-life": John Cowper Powys's Quest for the Meaning of the Grail

Though Eliot's views on myth were unquestionably influential, they did not necessarily

determine how his fellow writers—even those who accepted his views as a position to be

reckoned with—approached the question of myth. A telling case in point was the remarkable

writer John Cowper Powys, who respected Eliot but nevertheless developed his own powerful

interpretation of myth's role in the modern world. Attempts to categorize Powys and his work

are inevitably complicated by the very strangeness of the man. Yet for all his uniqueness, his

Grail-focused meditations on myth linked his work to that of contemporaries working along

similar lines. Powys is perhaps best described as a spiritually ambitious modernist mystic who in

the mid-twenties decided to disseminate his religious philosophy by writing novels, works which

he considered to be "simply so much propaganda…for my philosophy of life."[18] Central to that

philosophy of life was a heavy emphasis on the necessity of myth.

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[18] Qtd. in Morine Krissdottir, *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest* (London: Macdonald and Jane's
Publishing Group Ltd., 1980), x.

Powys was born in 1872 to parents who embodied what would become two of his most prominent personality traits: deep religious sensibility and an urge to write. His father was a firmly Evangelical clergyman, and though Powys would reject his father's faith, he retained a strong religious sensibility that ultimately developed into his own idiosyncratic belief system. His mother was a descendent of both John Donne and William Cowper, and with such a lineage it is perhaps unsurprising that Powys and three of his ten siblings became writers. The Powys children seem to have been very fond of their father, a fortunate fact considering he was the dominating figure in their lives at a somewhat isolated Derbyshire country vicarage.

At the age of ten, Powys was sent to Sherbourne public school and after that went on to Cambridge, where he took a second in history. After completing his studies he had no clear ideas about what career to pursue, and he began lecturing. Until 1910 he traveled the county as a University Extension lecturer, giving one-night public lectures on a variety of subjects, from literary and philosophical topics to moral and social issues. During these years he did quite a bit of writing, publishing works of poetry, criticism and philosophy. In 1910 he headed to the United States where he continued his career as a highly-popular iterant lecturer, returning each summer to England. This pattern would continue until 1936 when he moved to Wales, where he remained until his death in 1963. Powys did not turn to novel writing until he was in his forties, but he proved remarkably prolific and ultimately published fifteen novels, several of them immense. A great admirer of Dostoyevsky, he has been classed with Lawrence, Joyce, and Woolf as belonging to "that essentially 'modern' tradition of the novel that thinks in terms of symbol, and of the fluidity of personal awareness and relationships."[19]

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[19] Glen Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys: Novelist* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 183.

All of Powys's novels were written as expressions of an elaborate, mystical personal philosophy that he referred to as his "mythology."[20] Powys's work as a lecturer obliged him to keep abreast of intellectual trends and developments, and to this end he read avidly in a broad range of fields. Driven by a desire to resolve his spiritual questioning, some of his most extensive reading encompassed the fields of philosophy, religion, mythology, and anthropology; he was well-acquainted with the religious texts of South and East Asia, was a devoted student of world mythology, and was strongly influenced by the Cambridge Ritualist school of anthropology. Though Powys could be critical of modern science and was often wont to rail against the excesses of the "machine age," these attitudes were something more than a reflexive antimodernism. They were, rather, part of Powys's elaborate personal philosophy, one fundamental postulate of which was that matter itself had consciousness. Powys was a strange mix of pantheist and polytheist, seeing a flame of immortality in all things and believing in the existence of divine beings to whose status humans could aspire. His belief in the vitality and consciousness of all matter was linked to a dualistic conception of the universe as a continual struggle between the forces he called "malice" and "love," a struggle that was continually shaping the universe. The dualistic nature of existence derived from the struggle between malice and love in every individual's soul; in his words, "Its duality comes from the duality in us."[21] To grasp the nature of reality, Powys argued, was to be confronted "with the spectacle of innumerable 'souls,' human, sub-human and super-human" who are part of a universe "which in their interaction with one another they have half-created and half-discovered."[22] This

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[20] See, e.g., John Cowper Powys, *Petrushka and the Dancer: The Diaries of John Cowper Powys, 1929-1939*, ed. Morine Krissdottir (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1995), 15.

[21] John Cowper Powys, *The Complex Vision* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1920), 111.

[22] Ibid., 105-06.

metaphysical truth about the universe could only truly be grasped by what Powys termed "the complex vision," which was achieved by individuals in those rare moments when reason and sense experience were balanced with imagination, instinct, and intuition.

The foremost example of malice, according to Powys, was "the illusion of dead matter," or the view that all matter was simply "impersonal chemistry," which in the modern world tended to be encouraged by scientific reasoning. Succumbing to the illusion of dead matter resulted when "we visualize the world through the attributes of reason and sensation alone," neglecting our imagination, instinct and intuition.[23] Falling prey to the illusion of dead matter replaced "the only vivid and unfathomable reality we know…the reality of innumerable souls," with a vision of the "eternal soullessness and deadness of matter."[24] An individual who has succumbed to the illusion of dead matter feels "the eternal malice of the system of things conquering the creative impulse in the depths of his soul…."[25] The result was a deep sense of spiritual isolation and alienation from the natural world of which we are a part. It was not modern science itself then that Powys objected to, but rather "the heresy that underlies modern attitudes to science, the heresy that denies a man's derivation from, and participation in, a physical universe as alive as himself."[26] The rational and sensory faculties from which science derived were of great benefit to humanity, but only when balanced by the faculties of imagination, intuition, and instinct. This was a point that Powys reinforced with the conclusion of *A Glastonbury Romance*, the novel that most fully expressed his views.[27] At the end of the

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[23] Ibid., 249.

[24] Ibid., 249, 250.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 5.

novel neither the forces of imagination, instinct, and intuition (represented by John Geard), nor the forces of rationality and scientific modernity (represented by Philip Crow) triumph. Instead, a balance between the two is restored for the time being.

The only way to break free of the illusion of dead matter, according to Powys, was to restore the complex vision by a rebalancing of the faculties. One way to restore such balance was by partaking of myth, which exemplified how rationality, sense experience, imagination, intuition, and instinct could be held in equipoise. Powys contended that the complex vision could not be attained by the use of "pure reason divorced from poetic imagery," because the fundamental nature of reality simply could not be apprehended by normal categories of thought. The best, albeit imperfect, way to describe the nature of reality was with symbols, images, and metaphors borrowed from mythology. In words that seem to anticipate Eliot's *Waste Land* he noted, "The mythological symbolism of antique thought was full of this pictorial tendency and even now the shrewdest of modern thinkers are compelled to use images drawn from antique mythology."[28] The mythological symbol that Powys accorded special importance was the symbol of Christ, whose significance he reinterpreted according to his worldview. In Powys's view Christ was the supreme symbol of how love could transcend malice, and therefore was an ideal for all who strove to realize the complex vision. As the "embodiment of Love itself,"[29] Christ gave evidence of the benevolence of the gods, a fact which could be trusted even though his connection to the actual figure of Jesus was unimportant. Powys argued that it was necessary to be "merciless and drastic" in separating the symbol of Christ from the person of Jesus in order

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[27] See Cavaliero, 60.

[28] Powys, *Complex Vision*, 17.

[29] Ibid., 243.

to be "saved from all controversy as to the historic reality of the life of Jesus." Only in this way could Christ be rescued from the "clutches of dogmatic religion."[30] Thus, for Powys, Christ was a symbol that had all the reality of the thing itself, whether or not the thing itself had existed in history. In a passage that conveys well the unique flavor of his philosophical style, Powys explained:

> We arrive…at the very symbol we desire, at the symbol which in tangible and creative power satisfies the needs of the soul. We owe this symbol to nothing less than the free gift of the gods themselves; and to the anonymous strivings of generations….[O]nce having been reached this has become…a definite objective fact, whose reality turns out to have been implied from the beginning.[31]

The fact that Christ-figures were common throughout world mythology was of little concern to Powys. Having read Frazer he acknowledged that this was the case, but he argued that this did not diminish the power of the symbol of Christ. Making an intellectual move common to so many of his contemporaries, he argued that other dying-and-reviving god myths culminated in, rather than undermined the force of, the Christ myth: "In him all mythologies and all religions must meet and be transcended. He is Prometheus and Dionysus. He is Osiris and Balder. He is the great god Pan."[32] The passage is indicative of Powys's general attitude toward mythology, which he saw as a record of human experiences of the transcendent or the divine, not, as the anthropologists would have it, a record of pre-scientific superstition. As such, mythology represented a vast body of data about humanity's spiritual history that modern thinkers ignored to their detriment. A philosophy that failed to "include and subsume" such data "has eliminated

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[30] Ibid., 240; 234.

[31] Ibid., 243.

[32] Ibid., 241.

from its consideration one great slice of actual living fact."[33] The complex vision that Powys

advocated was thus premised on a recovery of myth: "And it is in this aspect of the

problem…that the philosophy of the Complex Vision represents a return to certain revelations of

human truth—call them mythological if you please—which modern philosophy seems to have

deliberately suppressed. In the final result it may well be that we have to choose, as our clue to

the mystery of life, either 'mathematica' or 'mythology.'"[34]

Powys put these views into practice with his novel *A Glastonbury Romance*, almost

certainly the most remarkable piece of Grail-themed literature to appear in the interwar period.

Powys's immense, sweeping tome is almost impossible to summarize, dealing as it does with a

vast cast of characters (more than fifty), a host of plotlines, and a wide range of key themes and

ideas; in most editions the novel runs well over 1000 pages. The book is also distinguished by a

variety of stylistic innovations, including sudden shifts of perspective that Powys developed in

an attempt to portray more accurately the nature of consciousness. Powys's narrative thus often

careens suddenly from minutely-observed psychological realism to macroscopic pronouncements

because of his concern to illustrate the debt each individual consciousness owes to a collective

unconscious. And for Powys it is through myth that the meaning and contours of the collective

unconscious could be most accurately discerned.

Given such views, it comes as no surprise that, for all its sprawling scope and gratuitous

proliferation of plots and themes, the undercurrent that gives *A Glastonbury Romance* its

structure is its thematic reliance on elements of the Grail mythology. The sprawl of characters,

events and subplots in the novel is held together by what Powys called "a constant undercurrent

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[33] Ibid., 318.

[34] Ibid.

of secret reference to the Grail legends, various incidents and characters playing roles parallel to those in the old romances of the Grail, not without furtive dips into that world of weird ritual and mythology made so much of in T.S. Eliot's 'Wasteland.'"[35] Powys was obsessed with Grail-related mythology and was preoccupied with the symbol of the Grail, which he saw as the mythological symbol above all symbols, representing life itself. In fact, Powys thought of his own life as a sort of Grail quest, and in his diaries he often remarked on what he saw as mystical correspondences between his life and the history of the Grail. Much of his knowledge of mythology came from Frazer and from the Cambridge Ritualists,[36] whose work crops up repeatedly in his novels in the form of allusion and borrowed ideas.   His studies of mythology led him to conclude that the Grail was far more ancient than Christianity, with counterparts in various mythologies from Asia to Greece to Wales and Ireland.[37] The Grail was the ultimate symbol of "conscious identity after death" of "the beyond-life" that could not be believed in with certainty, but that could be glimpsed through the intimations that came via myth.[38]

For Powys the Grail was inseparable from a particular, mystically powerful place: Glastonbury and its environs. The point of *A Glastonbury Romance* was to examine, according to Powys, "the effect of a particular legend, a special myth, a unique tradition, from the remotest past in human history, upon a particular spot on the surface of this planet…."[39] Like Butts, Powys was a believer in the power of certain parts of the English landscape to bring about

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[35] Qtd. in Krissdottir, 84.

[36] Krissdottir, 17.

[37] John Cowper Powys, *A Glastonbury Romance* (London: Macdonald and Co. Publishers Ltd., 1955), xv. The novel originally appeared in 1932, but the 1955 edition included a new preface in which Powys explained some of the motivations and ideas behind the work.

[38] Ibid., xiii; xv.

[39] Ibid., xi.

spiritual renewal, and nowhere exemplified this more than Glastonbury, a place that had

become inseparably intertwined with what was in his mind the most profound of all myths. The

Grail myth had "not only stained, dyed, impregnated the atmosphere of this particular spot but

has associated itself with every detail of its local history."[40] In the novel, then, Powys is keen to

explore how a particular myth-locale nexus might bring spiritual renewal to England.

To work out this theme the novel dramatizes a conflict, played out against the backdrop

of the myth-suffused Glastonbury landscape, between myth on the one hand and scientific

modernity on the other. The latter is represented in the novel by Philip Crow, a wealthy

industrialist with dreams of transforming Glastonbury "from an idle show-place into a

prosperous industrial centre."[41] He wants to do so in part to eradicate the mythology associated

with Glastonbury, which he despises as nonsense that stands in the way of scientific progress.

To break the power of the myth he knows he must somehow remake the very landscape;

destroying the power of the myth and destroying the landscape itself are to him inseparable

objectives: "Arthur and the Holy Grail, Abbey Ruins and Saint Joseph—he was the man to blow

them all sky-high!"[42] Enthralled by modern technologies such as the airplane, he dreams of a

world "dominated absolutely by Science" and remade by industry.[43] Opposed to Crow are two

main protagonists, both questers for the Grail in their own ways. One, Sam Dekker, renounces

his love for the married Nell Zoyland, commits himself to a life of ascetic devotion to others, and

is eventually rewarded with a vision of the Grail. The other, John Geard, is an itinerant preacher

[40] Ibid., xii.

[41] Ibid., 230.

[42] Ibid., 233.

[43] Ibid., 232.

and spiritualist who wants to make Glastonbury the center of a religious revival. Caught up in the events of the novel is John Crow, a relative of Philip's who is a modernist intellectual and Grail-skeptic. He is a type of character common to several of Powys's novels: the thoughtful but uncommitted intellectual trying to adjust to modern life.

As mentioned above, Powys was deeply influenced by the Cambridge Ritualists, and once wrote that his "imagination inevitably converts every mental process which is at all important to me into a ritualistic symbol."[44] His daily life was structured around dozens of personal rituals including, during the time he was writing *A Glastonbury Romance*, ritual reenactments of the waste land myth.[45] Unsurprisingly, then, for a writer so preoccupied with the power of ritual, Powys chose to structure the climax of his novel's first half around a ritual. And it was not just any ritual, but what amounts to a fertility ritual premised on enacting the Grail myth. It is with good reason that one of Powys's most perceptive interpreters has remarked that "His work partakes more of anthropology than prophecy."[46] Powys's use of insights derived from anthropology to structure his narrative is perhaps what led him to describe the novel as "mythological and yet modern."[47]

The ritual, which constitutes the climax of the book's first part, takes the form of a pageant-play orchestrated by Geard, who has become mayor of Glastonbury. The pageant enacts a variety of episodes connected to the Grail myth and, though its actual performance turns out to be a chaotic, virtually incoherent mess, it nevertheless brings about real renewal for Glastonbury.

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[44] John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1934), 104.

[45] See especially the entries for 1931 in Powys, *Diaries*.

[46] Cavaliero, 181.

[47] Powys, *Diaries*, 15.

Prior to the pageant the town was dying: it was a waste land, an image that preoccupied

Powys no less than it did Eliot. However, after the Grail-based fertility ritual it begins to revive,

not just spiritually, but socially and economically as well. Suddenly in Glastonbury "there began

to spring up—out of the void as it almost seemed—a very exciting and most original school of

Glastonbury design…an art for which the whole western world seemed especially to thirst for, an

art which embodied in it…the new religion of Glastonbury's Mayor!"[48] The revived town

becomes of a symbol of the possibilities for how a belief system that draws on Britain's mythic

past can temper the barren, rationalist secularity of modernity. The dying town is not saved by

the industrial schemes of Philip Crow, who wants to demolish everything related to the area's

mythic past. Instead, it is saved by Geard, who embraces that mythic past and taps its power to

unleash forces of renewal—a renewal that is not merely spiritual. What is revived at

Glastonbury is a coherent culture unified around a spiritual center; the town becomes

economically and socially healthy because it is spiritually vibrant. This revival of Glastonbury

thus serves Powys's purpose of creating a modern retelling of the Grail myth that would help his

readers navigate the challenges of modernity.

Ultimately the revival of Glastonbury does not last, and when the novel closes the town's

future is uncertain. The novel concludes with an immense flood that sweeps away both the

religious edifices built by Geard and the industrial projects of Philip Crow. It is doubtful

whether Geard's pseudo-Christian Grail-based religion will endure, especially since he gives up

his life in the flood in an attempt to transcend physical existence and unite mystically with

Cybele, the primeval goddess of fertility whom, he has come to understand, is the supreme deity.

The novel thus concludes with an indeterminate balance of powers: the cycle of death and rebirth

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[48] Powys, *A Glastonbury Romance*, 923.

has completed its revolution, and awaits reawakening by performance of the correct ritual.

All that remains of the Glastonbury revival is the way it has changed certain individuals like the

skeptical intellectual John Crow, who finally has to admit that Glastonbury does indeed possess

an undeniable spiritual power. He finally begins to cope effectively with the fragmenting

pressures of the modern world, and for the first time begins to build healthy relationships with

those close to him. According to Powys, the purpose of the book was to examine the effect of a

particular myth on the inhabitants of twentieth-century civilization. He seems to conclude that

the effect can be profound, but that it can in the end only be measured by its lasting impression

on human hearts and minds.

"Come Out, Grail": The Modernist Mysticism of Mary Butts

Though Eliot's *Waste Land* was perhaps the most prominent modernist work that

engaged with the Grail myth, Powys's work is indicative of the modernist penchant for

constructing novels around the significance of the holy cup. Another such novelist was Mary

Butts, a writer who had interesting connections to Eliot and who envisioned herself as engaged in

a similar quest to plumb the Grail's significance. Though Butts was a respected writer and

reviewer in her day, a long period of scholarly neglect has only recently given way to a renewed

interest into her life and work, such that a recent observer has spoken of a "Butts renaissance."[49]

Butts played a key role in establishing Eliot's literary reputation in England in part because she

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[49] Bradley W. Buchanan, "Armed with Questions: Mary Butts's Sacred Interrogative," *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 360. One consequence of this renewed interest is recent biography of Butts: Nathalie Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life* (Kingston, N.Y.: McPherson, 1998). In addition to the works cited below, see also the entry on Mary Butts by Robin Blaser in Jennifer Gariepy, et al, ed., *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, vol. 77* (Detroit: Gale Research 1998): 69-109; Christopher Wagstaff, ed., *A Sacred Quest: The Life and Writings of Mary Butts* (New York: McPherson & Company, 1995); Andrew D. Radford, "Defending Nature's Holy Shrine: Mary Butts, Englishness, and the Persephone Myth," *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, no. 3 (Winter 2006): 126-49; Laura Marcus, "Mysterious Mary Butts," *Times Literary Supplement*, August 24, 2001: 3-4.

was co-owner of the press that published Eliot's second book of poems, *Ara Vos Prec* (1920).

She believed that she and Eliot were working along similar lines to examine the spiritual state of

the culture through use of the Grail. (Interestingly, like Eliot, she also eventually converted to

Anglo-Catholicism.) After reading Weston, she noted in her journals "A fruitful book, cf. Eliot,

& as Jane Harrison & Frazer are to me. (Eliot & I are working on a parallel.)"[50] This brief

comment serves as a succinct summary of the key influences on Butts's thought. She was deeply

indebted to the anthropological and classical scholarship of Frazer, Gilbert Murray and Jane

Harrison, whose work fed both her fascination with classical antiquity and her interest in things

spiritual and mythical. Butts idolized Harrison, borrowing much of her conceptual vocabulary

from Harrison's work and turning to it in time of spiritual and personal distress.[51]

Butts career was likewise characterized by an ongoing fascination with Frazer's *Golden Bough*, a text which haunted her imagination like the Grail. After reading Waite's book on the

Grail in 1925 she observed somewhat cryptically, "he cannot conceive the answer—no one yet

has—that has to be made to *The Golden Bough*."[52] She echoed this thought a few years later

remarking, again enigmatically, "we have not yet got the full content, let alone the implications

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[50] Mary Butts, *The Journals of Mary Butts*, ed. Nathalie Blondel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 263-64. Butts's use of the Grail myth is contrasted with Eliot's by Jennifer Kroll, "Mary Butts's 'Unrest Cure' for The Waste Land," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 45, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 159-173.

[51] See Blondel, introduction to Butts, *Journals*, 8. A fascinating discussion of the ways in which modernist women writers made use of the work of the myth and ritual school is offered in Hoberman, *Gendering Classicism*. Hoberman argues that female modernists used myth "to explore and challenge their culture's assumptions about gender" (22). This was unquestionably the case. Hoberman, however, contends that modernist women writers did not experience the supposedly typical modernist anxiety about cultural fragmentation, because they could not mourn the dissolution of a culture premised on their exclusion. This seems less clear, especially in light of the work of a writer like Butts, who certainly did express anxiety about cultural fragmentation. Jane Garrity's assessment (quoted herein, p. 26) is much closer to the mark than Hoberman's.

[52] Butts, *Journals*, 216.

out of *The Golden Bough*."[53] In a subsequent journal entry she clarified what she meant by

an "answer" to *The Golden Bough*: "…as for our anthropologists—they will write up the facts of

every belief in every quarter of the globe; but even the best of them, Frazer hardly, gives one the

least idea, the least suggestion of the passion, the emotion that made men behave like that." But,

she concluded, where the anthropologists fell short, writers like herself could step in: "It is for art

to take over the anthropologist's material."[54] Butts, then, saw her vocation in part as working

out the implications of anthropological research through literature, with the aim of constructing a

response to the cultural fragmentation and spiritual emptiness of modernity. Jane Garrity puts it

well when she observes, "Like other modernists, Butts laments the cultural and economic

dispossession of life in postwar Europe—'everywhere there was a sense of broken continuity'—

looking to mythic structures and contemporary anthropology to help her re-order an England that

appeared not only chaotic and faithless, but seduced by plasticity."[55]

Butts was convinced that Britain both desperately needed, and stood on the brink of, a

new age of spiritual renewal, and she avidly sought such renewal on a personal level through her

extended involvement with the occult and various forms of spiritualism. She was tutored in

magic by Philip Heseltine and Aleister Crowley and was a frequent participant in séances,

automatic writing, and astral journeys. As her biographer Nathalie Blondel points out however,

Butts eventually became suspicious of the impulse to control that seems inherent to magical

practices as well as of magic's tendency to denigrate the material world.[56] Though she remained

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[53] Ibid., 285.

[54] Ibid., 325-36.

[55] Garrity, 189.

[56] Blondel, introduction, 8.

interested in the occult for most of her career, she eventually drew more spiritual solace from

the classical past, the world of myth, and the work of fellow writers. Butts was bothered by the

sense that however fascinating scholarship on the Grail might be, it always failed to explain the

spiritual power of symbols like the Grail. Taking her cue from Harrison, Butts concluded that

the rationality exhibited by modern forms of scholarship had distinct limitations which moderns

would do well to recognize and accept. It was the realm of the spiritual that highlighted these

limitations: anthropologists and psychologists simply could not explain the depth and persistence

of the human religious impulse.[57] For all the erudition displayed by Harrison, her works failed

to convey "What gave greek myth & the beliefs of all mankind their power to save or kill…."[58]

This criticism of the limits of certain disciplines did not mean that Butts demeaned the sciences

and modern forms of rationality. On the contrary, in addition to her avid interest in anthropology,

she was deeply interested in the physics of Einstein and Eddington, the philosophy of Russell

and Whitehead, and the psychology of Freud and Jung. To Butts, the work produced by such

figures was spiritually provocative and full of suggestions and intimations about a spiritual world

that she was certain lay just beyond the reach of modern forms of inquiry. Though immensely

valuable, modern rationality could ultimately only produce flawed, reductionist accounts of

spiritual realities:

> Our state today is due to the fact that we are trying to make purely intellectual
> formulae do the work they were not intended to do. We take the non-intellectual
> factors & try & describe them intellectually, i.e. we take man's "infra-rational
> nature," emotional, imaginative or mystical, & derive it, by assumption, from
> nothing but animal instinct….

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[57] See e.g. Butts, Journal, 342; 367.

[58] Ibid., 342.

> [W]e want to try & reduce all things to order. Only it's essentially un-intellectual—this applying of reasonable intelligence to subjects it has nothing whatever to do with.[59]

Butts longed for a discovery of spiritual realities that would force science to revise its materialist accounts of reality. Speaking of the supernatural beings of Celtic myth she wrote, "What I should like to see most in the world. Proof that the Sidhe exist, & all the others & the scientist having to square up with it."[60] Butts, however, was able to transform her frustration with the scientific reductionism into inspiration for her own literary work, which she conceived of as something like science of the spiritual, capable of producing a "formula for the whole truth; not intellectual truth only."[61]

Throughout her life Butts struggled make sense of the spiritual yearning that she repeatedly termed "this mysticism of mine."[62] This ongoing endeavor led eventually to a disillusionment with occultism as self-indulgent and rooted in an excessive subjectivism. Even when she was still involved with occult pursuits, certain aspects of occultism repelled her. She observed that, "These books on occultism with their bastard words, credulities, falsities on facts, emotion & aesthetic falsities, inwardly revolt me."[63] The same skepticism toward self-serving spiritual philosophizing led her to later criticize, "People who chat airily about esoteric Buddhism & its advantages…."[64] Toward the end of her life, Butts took the path previously taken by T.S. Eliot and converted to Anglo-Catholicism. A key factor in her conversion was her

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[59] Ibid., 461.

[60] Ibid., 218.

[61] Ibid., 461.

[62] Ibid., 249.

[63] Ibid., 149.

[64] Ibid., 410.

ability to resolve a conundrum that had long troubled her: the relation between recent

anthropological scholarship and Christianity. The myth scholars—Harrison, Murray, Weston, et

al.—whose work she revered seemed to cast doubt on the validity of the Christian myth, yet the

longevity of that same myth seemed to indicate that at the very least it encapsulated some

significant spiritual truths. She was able to resolve the problem when she was suddenly struck

by "another reason why Christianity clicked; that it helped give a final shape to the other beliefs

in gods & heroes who were born of virgins & who lived & died for men. The idea was about,

had always been about….Christianity gave it a personality, books, gossip even; exalted it &

brought it nearer home."[65] This interpretation of Christianity as a culmination of other dying

god myths was a reversal of the anthropologists' view that the Christian myth was a late and

unremarkable example of ancient near-Eastern vegetation god myths. Butts was thus an avid

appropriator of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century anthropology who refused the

relativizing implications of that scholarship. As such, she exemplified a complex and largely

overlooked response to anthropology that was replicated by a number of her contemporaries.

At the center of Butts's literary attempts to examine the spiritual condition of British

culture and make sense of her own mysticism stood the Grail and the myths surrounding it.

Along with associated symbols like the waste land, the Grail was one of her favorite symbols,

and considerations of its meaning surface with regularity throughout her journals. While still in

her youth she concluded that the Grail was "the most wonderful thing to think about in the

world."[66] Her thinking about the Grail was catalyzed by a visit to Glastonbury in the summer of

1918 and she remained deeply interested in it until her death in 1937. She seems to have

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[65] Ibid., 426.

[66] Mary Butts, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns* (Manchester, Eng.: Carcaret Press Limited, 1988), 33.

envisioned herself as engaged in Grail quest, seeing her purpose as a writer as plumbing the

true meaning of the Grail, perhaps in a way that would even lead to discovery of the physical

Grail itself. After Butts moved to Cornwall in 1932, the intensity of her meditations on the Grail

seems to have increased, fed by the influence of a landscape that had connections to the Grail

myth. In December of that year she enigmatically remarked, "I think that the Grail might be

seen here this winter. It is time anyhow." Convinced that the land she had moved to was truly

"the Grail Country," she reiterated a month later, "I believe the Grail is stirring at [the village of]

Sancreed." A few months later she implored "It is a wild night. Come out, Grail."[67] Butts's

fascination with the Grail made her an avid reader of scholarship that touched on the Grail,

including Waite's *The Hidden Church of The Holy Graal* and Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to

Romance*, a work she reread annually. Her work as a reviewer exposed her to a steady flow of

new works, so she was quick to take note of any new literature that touched on the Grail. It was

in this way that she discovered the work of Charles Williams, whose novels and literary criticism

would become a source of fascination and inspiration for her.

    Mary Butts's gave expression to her meditations on the significance of the Grail in her

novel *Armed With Madness*, which centers on the Grail's power to bring about spiritual renewal.

Armed With Madness is probably her best known novel and, as she herself acknowledged, it

explored the power of the Grail in ways that intersected with Eliot's explorations in *The Waste

Land*. Both Eliot's poem and Butt's novel depict barren landscapes that are reflections of

spiritual barrenness in the characters. The significant difference was that the Grail is

conspicuous in Eliot's poem by its absence—no one finds or even seeks it in order to restore the

barren landscape—whereas the characters in Butt's novel are, in their own ways, desperately

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[67] Butts, *Journals*, 407; 430; 410; 421.

seeking the Grail and its revivifying powers: *Armed With Madness* has been summarized as a

search for Life by characters trapped in a waste land.[68] Though Butts and Eliot handle the Grail

differently, the message of its symbolism is essentially the same in both works: the cup stands

for spiritual renewal. Yet Butts's willingness to entertain the possibility that the Grail offered

real solutions to modernity's spiritual emptiness, along with her linking of the Grail's power to

the power of the English landscape, place her work closer to that of Powys than that of Eliot.

Like Powys, she was far less equivocal about the Grail than Eliot, and like Powys this in part

derived from her ability to see anthropology as an ally rather than an enemy of belief. As Butts

scholar Roslyn Reso Foy has summarized Butts's intentions, "Clarification of the significance of

the Grail and its offer of spiritual truth…becomes the core of her novel and a means of resisting

the spiritual depravity of civilization."[69]

    Armed With Madness centers on a group of five men and one woman, most of them

alienated artists and intellectuals, who have gathered in a remote country house; they constitute a

community of grail knights. One of them has stolen, and subsequently hidden, an ancient cup

from his father's collection. This prompts a search for the cup that temporarily transfigures the

characters and the locale, which becomes "a land enchanted." The two main characters are

invested by Butts with mythic significance, their names, Scylla and Picus, indicating how Butts

interweaves classical with Grail mythology.[70] The echo of myth and ritual scholarship is evident

in how Butt's frames questions of the of the cup's significance. The characters' search for it,

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[68] See Roslyn Reso Foy, *Ritual, Myth, and Mysticism in the Work of Mary Butts: Between Feminism and Modernism* (Fayetteville, Ark.: The University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 60.

[69] Foy, 58.

[70] In classical mythology, Picus is both a wise and foolish trickster, a role the Picus of Butts's novel plays by initiating and manipulating the game that becomes a Grail quest. There are two Scyllas in classical mythology, one a monster and one a royal scion whose love for the King of Minos destroys her father's kingdom.

motivated by their inchoate desires for rebirth and renewal, is described as "something like a ritual," a point Butts reinforces throughout the novel with a constant stream of ideas about the power of ritual drawn from the work of the Cambridge Ritualists.[71] Butts also links the power of the cup to the power of the land itself. As Jed Estey has perceptively noted, when at one point in the novel it appears as if the cup is of Indian, rather than English, origin, it immediately loses its value and appeal.[72] The characters ultimately abandon their "quest"; the rebirth offered by the Grail is deferred, awaiting a day when its questers are better prepared to receive it. The novel thus concludes on a note that is open-ended, an ambiguity underscored by the fact that it is never clear whether or not the cup the party is searching for is indeed the Grail or merely a stand-in for it. What is clear is that in England spiritual realities are ready to be awakened and that something like the Grail is needed to shatter the arid intellectualism that Butts saw as the main obstacle to the spiritual revival she hoped for and expected.

"The Central Matter of the Matter of Britain": The Grail in Charles Williams' Christian Mysticism

In the last few years of her life, Mary Butts became enamored by the work of a poet and novelist whose work seemed to have many affinities with her own. This was Charles Williams, a gifted writer who worked in a variety of genres, writing poetry, plays, novels, criticism, and even history. The two began corresponding, eventually met, and struck up a friendship that was cut short by Butts's premature death in 1937. There were good reasons for Butts to think that she

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[71] Mary Butts, *Armed with Madness* (London: Penguin, 2001 [1928]), 140. The novel's reliance on ideas drawn from the Ritualists is exhaustively documented by Foy, see especially Chapter Three, "'Dis-ease,'" 51-71.

[72] Jed Estey, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 118.

and Williams were working along similar lines. Like Butts, Williams had a background in

occultism and was deeply concerned with matters spiritual. Williams was also preoccupied with

the mythology of the Grail, a symbol he approached with a spiritual reverence that Butts herself

knew well. He was proudest of his two books of Grail-themed poetry, *Taliessin through Logres*

(1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944) in addition to writing best-selling novels and

essays that also dealt with the Grail. Butts and Williams were connected by another significant

link, their common acquaintance with T.S. Eliot. Eliot and Williams became close friends while

the latter was an editor at Oxford University Press in the 1930s, and they admired and published

each other's work. Eliot's thought influenced that of Williams in some very fundamental

ways.[73] Williams's novels, which began appearing in the early 1930s and for which he was

well-known during his lifetime, blended the conventions of pulp fiction thrillers with weighty

mythological and spiritual subject matter. For this reason they were described variously as

"supernatural thrillers" and "theological shockers." Williams was thus in his day a significant

figure in modernist literary networks and a writer who was able to effectively disseminate his

ideas about myth through highly popular novels.

Despite Williams's prominence in the literary world of the 1930s, and a recent revival of

interest in his life notwithstanding, his work has certainly become, in the words of one

commentator, "marginal to today's modernist canon."[74] Another scholar of the period has

described Williams as, "an odd and charismatic man about whom it is difficult to write with

justice or even clarity."[75] This difficulty is in part due to Williams's unusual ability

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[73] For instance, Williams's idea of the "coinherence" of the divine and universal in the human and particular was an elaboration on Eliot's notion of the co-presence of historical and eternal time.

[74] Estey, 75.

[75] Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 196.

simultaneously to inhabit very different literary circles, which has caused problems for

scholars seeking to place Williams within a literary taxonomy of the interwar period. In addition

to his modernist connections, Williams was part of the "Inklings" or "Oxford Christians" circle

that included C.S. Lewis and J.R.R Tolkien, and his work is often viewed in relation to theirs.

There are good reasons for this. Apart from the fact that Williams was friends with both men

and also a Christian, he shared their taste for fiction that had strong fantasy elements.

   However, the greatest difficulties in approaching Williams stem largely, as the foregoing

assessment suggests, from his oddness and charisma, characteristics which were closely related

to his spiritual explorations. Friends and acquaintances noted that there was something strangely

compelling about being in his presence, and when T.S. Eliot attempted to describe this effect he

linked it to Williams's spiritual gravitas, remarking that he "seemed to me to approximate, more

nearly than any man I have ever known familiarly, to the saint."[76] In short, Williams's life and

work can simply not by understood without appreciating his background in Christian mysticism,

a mysticism that was heavily influence by the Grail-oriented, Christianized hermeticism

associated with the writer, scholar, and Grail enthusiast A.E. Waite. As Grail historian Richard

Barber has noted, "the attempt to involve the Grail in occult matters is an important element in

its image in the twentieth century, with wide artistic repercussions,"[77] a trend that is amply

illustrated by Williams's life and work.

   As already noted, Waite, author of the widely-read *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal*,

was a key figure in the creating the wave of Grail enthusiasm that was building in the early

twentieth century. Waite was in part a product of the resurgence of Rosicrucian orders that

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[76] Qtd. in Charles Williams, *The Image of the City and Other Essays*, ed. Anne Ridler (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), xxviii.

[77] Barber, 293.

ensued in the 1880s after Madame Blavatsky was discredited, bringing her Theosophical

Society into disrepute. One result was the emergence of new hermetic groups that tended to

emphasize the mystical rather than the occult and paranormal. Such groups, like the Hermetic

Society or the better-known Order of the Golden Dawn attracted a number of disenchanted

Theosophists and prominent literary figures, the most famous of which was W.B. Yeats. Such

orders promised initiation into moral and religious truths as preserved in ancient rituals. Waite

founded his own Rosicrucian order in 1915, the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, which Williams

joined two years later. Waite's innovation was to make the Grail central to his mysticism;

previously that Grail had not been a prominent feature of Rosicrucian philosophy and practice.

This featuring of the Grail was a reflection of Waite's attempt to effect a synthesis of

Rosicrucianism and Christianity. Though Waite did at one point experiment with magical rituals

he moved away from these experiments, and his Fellowship of the Rosy Cross is seen by

scholars as "mystical rather than magical; its membership was open to those desiring 'knowledge

of Divine Things and union with God in Christ."[78]

It was this synthesis of the hermetic and the Christian that impressed Williams when he

first read Waite's *Hidden Church of the Holy Graal* between 1912 and 1914.[79] In that book

Waite argued, with evident scholarly seriousness, that there was a secret, mystical tradition in

Christianity that was connected with the Grail. This tradition, involving a supposed original,

primitive form of the Eucharistic rite, was outside the bounds of official church teaching and,

according to Waite, was kept alive by an unidentified "Secret School of Christian Mystics." This

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[78] Roma A. King, "The Occult as Rhetoric in the Poetry of Charles Williams," in Charles A. Huttar and Peter J. Schakel, eds., *The Rhetoric of Vision: Essays on Charles Williams* (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 1996), 165.

[79] See Scott McLaren, "Hermeticism and the Metaphysics of Goodness in the Novels of Charles Williams," *Mythlore* 24, no. 3-4 (winter-spring 2006): 5-6.

group understood the Grail's power as a master key to ecstatic mystical union with God. "All sacred symbols," wrote Waite, "serve a need to open figurative gates and everlasting portals" to the world of mystical experience, and of these the Grail was paramount.[80] At the time he encountered *The Hidden Church*, Williams was a young poet, and this new interpretation of the Grail within a hermetic framework seemed to open up an entirely new realm of significance for the Grail. Waite's emphasis on the limits of rational thought and his insistence that the Grail was a key to realms of mystical experience were highly appealing to Williams. His use of the Grail in his writing would subsequently owe much to the ideas advanced in *The Hidden Church*.

The influence of hermetic ideas on Williams's interpretation of the Grail is clearly evident in his 1930 novel *War in Heaven*, which deals with the events that ensue when the Grail is discovered in an English village. One of the novel's interesting leitmotifs is its implicit critique of skeptical anthropological understandings of myth. Williams seems to have been suspicious of anthropological research on myth, and he was critical of those scholars who, making a fetish of their objectivity, failed in his view to appreciate the spiritual realities to which the Grail pointed. This attitude shapes his portrayal of the cynical adventurer-archaeologist-folklorist Sir Giles Tumulty. Tumulty's scholarly training (he has just authored the book *Historical Vestiges of Sacred Vessels in Folklore*) enables him to locate and identify the Grail, but it has also made him indifferent to moral questions of good and evil. He views the Grail in the same way he does the occult: with the detached curiosity of scholar; he is himself no practitioner of magic. Nevertheless, he falls in with a group intent on obtaining the Grail and using it magically for evil purposes. They are thwarted by an impromptu alliance of three who

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[80] Arthur Edward Waite, *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal* (London, 1909); revised as *The Holy Grail: the Galahad Quest in the Arthurian Literature* (London, 1933), 534.

are aided by Prester John, the legendary priest-king. It is largely through the eyes of these

protectors that the Grail's true nature is revealed. It is "an object which over time has become a

focal point for spiritual powers, through the veneration which has been accorded to it. And it is

also a gateway to the invisible world of the spirit which co-exists with the material world, a point

where the forces of good and evil can be concentrated through the belief of their worshippers."[81]

The novel concludes with Prester John performing a mass using the Grail as the chalice, enacting

the very theory at the heart of Waite's book.   Interestingly, Tumulty appeared again in

Williams's next novel, *Many Dimensions*. Whereas in *War in Heaven* he had been a somewhat

equivocal figure, in *Many Dimensions* his descent into unambiguous evil results in his death.

Williams continued to develop his ideas about the Grail in his two collections of

Arthurian poetry, *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*, which deal with

the efforts of Arthur, the Welsh bard Taliessin, Merlin, and others to bring order to Logres

(Britain) by means of the Grail. Williams wrote the poems in order to bring coherence to the

sprawling mass of Arthurian mythology by centering it on the symbol of the Grail, "the central

matter of the Matter of Britain."[82] Failure to deal with the Grail "in all its meanings and

relationships" left "a much smaller myth."[83] The cycle of poetry that Williams produced is

simply too intricate and even opaque to examine here. The significance of his Arthuriad for this

investigation is that it testifies to the strength of Williams' conviction that the Grail be recovered

for twentieth-century Christians as a deeply meaningful symbol. Throughout the cycle of poems,

the Grail is efficacious only for those who rightly understand its meaning. But in the poems, the

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[81] Barber, 341

[82] Charles Williams, "The Figure of Arthur," in idem and C.S. Lewis, *Arthurian Torso* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 83.

[83] Ibid. 84, 83.

power of the Grail is linked to distinctly modernist concerns about a fragmented culture, though these concerns are inflected through Williams's Christian presuppositions. For Williams the Grail was a "symbol of the possibility of the perfect union of earth and heaven; not simply the encounter of the individual soul with God…."[84] This union is not achieved in his cycle of Grail poems, but the Grail is achieved by Galahad. Williams was suggesting that any attempt to redress the fragmentation of modern culture may require a recovery of Christianity's vision of the power of self-sacrifice, a concept symbolized in the cup of Christ.[85]

Given his convictions about the importance of the Grail for Christian belief, Williams was at pains to underscore the cup's origins in Christian theology, arguing that it subsumed all analogous symbols in European mythology. This was in part because it could be associated with identifiable historical events, whereas the magic cauldrons and enchanted vessels of European myth belonged to an indefinable mythic prehistory. The Grail's perceived concreteness as an object thus enabled it to subsume and overshadow similar symbols. But a deeper reason was the power attributed to the Grail, which exceeded the powers attributed to the other magical vessels of European myth. In his uncompleted study of the history of the Grail myth he describes it as "that Cup which in its progress through the imagination of Europe was to absorb into itself so many cauldrons of plenty and vessels of magic."[86] Williams was thus hostile to those scholars who argued that the Grail's origins were not in Christian theology but rather in pre-Christian fertility cults. Though he does not name Jessie Weston, he likely had her in mind when he wrote:

> Something perhaps should be said…about those fabulous vessels, which from
> Celtic or whatever sources, emerged into general knowledge. There has been

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[84] Barber, 347.

[85] See Angelika Schneider, "Coinherent Rhetoric in *Taliessin through Logres*," in Huttar and Schakel, eds., 186-87.

[86] Williams, "Figure of Arthur," 13.

much controversy about them…and they have been supposed by learned experts to be the origin of the Grail myth. That…they certainly cannot be. Cup or dish or container of whatever kind, the Grail in its origin entered Europe with the Christian and Catholic Faith.[87]

It was a point that Williams had made earlier in his cycle of Grail poems in which one of Mordred's failings is viewing the Grail merely as a magical cauldron of plenty.

Given the spiritual significance with which he invested the Grail in his work, it is perhaps reasonable to wonder what Williams though about the Grail's existence and location. His enthusiasm for Waite's meticulous work tracing the history of the Grail, at a time when stories about the finding of the Grail were common, make it possible that he did entertain thoughts of the Grail's discovery. Whether Williams expected the actual, physical Grail to be found, and what powers he attributed to it, is not clear. The nearest indication we have as to his thoughts is the character of the Archdeacon in *War in Heaven*. When it appears as if the actual Grail may be located in his parish church, the Archdeacon is asked what he thinks of the possibility:

It interests me very deeply….In one sense, of course, the Graal is unimportant—it is a symbol less near Reality now than any chalice of consecrated wine. But it is conceivable that the Graal absorbed, as material things will, something of the high intensity of the moment when it was used, and of its adventures through the centuries. In that sense I should be glad, and even eager…to study its history.[88]

Yet the passage conveys Williams's feeling that Grail itself was less important than the Christian ideas it symbolized. This same issue would be taken up from a somewhat different angle by another poet who was indebted to Williams's work.

Beyond the Mythic Method: David Jones and the Uses of Arthurian Myth

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[87] Ibid., 23.

[88] Charles Williams, *War in Heaven* (London 1930), 37.

Charles Williams's work and Arthurian imagination were deeply respected by the Welsh poet and artist David Jones, whose modernist writing shared many similarities with, and was admired by many of the same critics as, Williams's work. Jones's work can be linked to Butts's and Powys's as well, insofar as they took similar attitudes to anthropology and the spiritual power of the Grail mythology. The work in which Jones first began to make use of Grail mythology at length was his 1937 piece entitled *In Parenthesis*, an unusual mix of verse and prose. In 1952 Jones published another major work called *The Anathemata*. Though it received mixed reviews largely due to its difficulty, it was also acclaimed by a number of influential critics including W.H. Auden, who regarded it as the most important long poem in English of the twentieth century. Without wanting to deny the significance of *The Anathemata* as an important document of Jones's mythic thinking, this section will concentrate primarily on *In Parenthesis* because of its appearance during the historical moment of high modernism.

Though Jones owes his current reputation primarily to his work as writer, he initially made his name as a visual artist and he continued to produce visual art throughout his life. Jones was born in 1895 to a Welsh father and an English mother. He showed an affinity for art at a young age and attended Camberwell Art School after convincing his parents that such a route suited him much better than a more traditional education. It was at Camberwell that he first became acquainted with recent trends in art. After the First World War began he enlisted in the Royal Welch Fusiliers and served with that regiment from January 1915 until the end of the war. Jones's battalion was involved in the assault on Mametz Wood during the First Battle of the Somme, and he depicts this fighting strikingly in *In Parenthesis*.

After demobilization, Jones continued his artistic training at the Westminster School of Art. A period of post-war spiritual seeking ended with his conversion to Catholicism in 1921

after which he quickly became involved with the Guild of St. Joseph and St. Dominic, a guild

of artists founded and run by the Catholic artist Eric Gill. Jones learned new artistic techniques

while involved with the Guild and when Gill left it in 1924, Jones did as well, after which he

lived with the Gill family in Wales for several years   During the late 1920s and early 1930s

Jones enjoyed increasing success as an illustrator and engraver. His work was used to illustrate a

number of reissued classics (such as *Gulliver's Travels*) and notable literary works by writers

including T.S. Eliot.

Despite his success as an artist, it is for his writing that Jones is best known today. After

the war he had thought often about producing a literary work based on his war experiences and

he made several abortive attempts to do so. It was with *In Parenthesis* that Jones first began to

put his ideas about myth into a literary form. He had explored mythological themes before in

some of his visual art, but writing afforded his imagination an entirely new scope for

experimentation. Because of its mixture of verse and prose, *In Parenthesis* cannot quite be

termed a poem and Jones himself referred to it simply as a "writing."[89] The work is Jones's

attempt to make sense of his experiences as a soldier in the First World War between December

1915, when he arrived in France, and July 1916, when the Somme offensive began.

The mythology that informs *In Parenthesis* above all others is that surrounding King

Arthur and the Grail. Jones signaled the significance of this myth from the outset by invoking

the image of the waste land to describe the war environment. It was a landscape that shaped

deeply those who inhabited it during the war: "I think the day by day in the Waste

Land…profoundly affected the imaginations of those who suffered it. It was a place of

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[89] Jones, *In Parenthesis*, ix.

enchantment."[90] By this Jones meant that the landscape seemed to speak to the soldiers of

deeply significant matters. In an attempt to articulate what these matters were Jones turned to

Grail mythology for a vocabulary and a set of images that would do justice to his wartime

experience.

Though there were a number of reasons why Grail mythology recommended itself to

Jones, but one reason in particular made it an especially natural choice. The regiment Jones

served in was composed largely of men from London on the one hand and Wales on the other. It

was an inauspicious combination for, in Jones's words, "no two groups could ever be more

dissimilar." Yet the war revealed a fundamental unity between these two groups who "bore in

their bodies the genuine tradition of the Island of Britain." [91] This bonding of the Welsh and the

English both touched and impressed Jones, and it is little surprise that he concluded there was no

better way to illustrate this almost mystical British unity than by drawing on that body of myth

known as "the Matter of Britain."

In building *In Parenthesis* around a frame of mythological references, Jones was both

heeding the example set by Eliot in *The Waste Land* while also going beyond Eliot in his

conception of myth's significance. A key emphasis of Eliot's mythical method was the use of

myth to generate meaning from chaos. A carefully controlled pattern of references to myth was

the only literary method equal to the task of making contemporary history comprehensible. This

was a notion that held significant appeal for Jones. Indeed one reason he turned to Arthurian

mythology again and again in *In Parenthesis* is because of Arthur's symbolic status as "the Lord

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[90] Ibid., x.

[91] Ibid.

of order carrying a raid into the place of Chaos."[92] *In Parenthesis* is shot through with a

constant stream of mythological references. Many of these might be too esoteric or subtle to

catch, were it not for the fact that their meaning is disclosed in the copious annotations that Jones

provided at the end of the work. The reader who follows Jones's recommendation to consult the

notes because they are "integral" to the work is able to see immediately the degree to which it is

built upon a sustained pattern of mythological allusions. Moreover, in true Eliotic fashion,

Jones's explanations are often backed by references to scholars like Frazer and Weston.[93]

Up to this point Jones appears to be a prototypical practitioner of the mythical method,

yet some probing reveals that he had a much more robust understanding of myth than Eliot. For

Jones, unlike for Eliot, myth was more than simply the raw material for literary form, it was a

form of discourse that communicated wisdom deriving from "true, immemorial religion."[94]

After establishing his literary reputation with *In Parenthesis*, Jones was increasingly in demand

as an essayist and reviewer, work which gave him the opportunity to elaborate on his

understanding of myth. The most notable examples are two essays from the 1940s in which

Jones considered the complex history of "the Myth of Arthur" and its relevance for the twentieth

century. The essays amount to extended amplification of the views expressed by Jones in his

annotations to *In Parenthesis*. Jones made clear that he considers the entire body of Arthurian

myth to be a cultural artifact of great importance, such that accumulating as much knowledge as

possible about the many permutations of the myth should be an ongoing priority for artists and

scholars. But the myth is more than a cultural artifact for Jones; it is also a repository of wisdom

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[92] Ibid., 201.

[93] See for example, ibid., 203-04, n. 12; 204, n. 15; 206, n. 24; 210, n. 37; 219, n. 15; 223, n. 29.

[94] Ibid., 200.

that is of perennial relevance. Seeking to capture the function of myth in a single, rambling

sentence he explained:

> To conserve, to develop, to bring together, to make significant for the present
> what the past holds, without dilution or any deleting, but rather by understanding
> and transubstantiating the material, this is the function of genuine myth, neither
> pedantic nor popularizing, not indifferent to scholarship, nor antiquarian, but
> saying always: "of these thou hast given me have I lost none."[95]

Jones emphasized the distinctly British nature of Arthurian and Grail mythology and expected

that each generation would appropriate it in ways that served its present needs. By countering

the philosophical materialism of the machine age, the mythology offered resources for coping

spiritually with the "confusion and complexity" of the contemporary world.[96] This salutary

effect would result from the continued imaginative use poets and writers made of the Matter of

Britain:

> We do not know what songs may yet be possible or what shape our myth will take,
> but it looks as though the waste land before us is extensive; and it is certain that in
> our anabasis across it we shall have reason to keep in mind the tradition of our
> origins in both matter and spirit.[97]

Though the comment is somewhat opaque in a fashion typical of Jones, his point was that the

Matter of Britain offered spiritual sustenance in a spiritually arid age.

As one who had read extensively in modern anthropological scholarship on myth, Jones

was well aware of the attempts to debunk myth by painting it as a primitive thought form.

Though he valued such scholarship, he did not accept many of its presumed implications. He did

not, for instance, accept that Jessie Weston's work vitiated the Christian associations of the Grail.

He conceded that, "It was salutary and necessary that fairly recent scholars—the name of the late

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[95] David Jones, "The Myth of Arthur," in idem, *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 243.

[96] Ibid., 242.

[97] Ibid., 241.

Miss Jessie Weston suggests itself—should have concentrated on the supposed or actual

derivation of elements in the theme from origins in primitive ritual and symbolism; to have

directed our attention…to horns of plenty, inexhaustible cauldrons and life-giving dishes….”

Nevertheless, Jones maintained, “nothing of all this invalidates the identification of the grail with

the Horn of Plenty, *Calix sanguinis mei*….”[98] This had been the position of Charles Williams,

who for Jones was the exemplary modern exponent of Arthurian/Grail mythology. According to

Jones, Williams had distinguished himself among appropriators of the mythology by successfully

integrating in his work recent scholarly insights into the “whole complex of myth and ritual”

with a relevant response to “the very convulsions and stress which have characterized fairly

continuously the lives of all of us living today….”[99] In doing so, he had demonstrated how

anthropology need not necessarily rob symbols like the Grail of their spiritual force and meaning.

Jones thus saw in Williams's work a validation of his own view that anthropological research

had “in fact assisted a re-appreciation of some of the deep validities of the Faith….”[100] In short,

Jones drew inspiration from myth and ritual anthropology that reinforced rather than undermined

his own religious beliefs. For Jones, as for Williams, the works of Weston and others only made

the Grail a more mysterious and powerful symbol by revealing its continuing appeal through the

ages and by illustrating the Grail's “historic ability to absorb, integrate, develop, [and] fulfil

[sic]” its pre-Christian or non-Christian analogues.[101]

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[98] David Jones, “The Arthurian Legend,” in idem, *Epoch and Artist*, 203. The meaning of the Latin is “cup of my blood.” Jones is quoting from the words of consecration of the wine in the Roman Catholic mass. Se also ibid., 206.

[99] Ibid., 205; see also ibid., 210.

[100] Ibid., 206.

[101] Ibid., 203.

Conclusion

The modernist recourse to myth was one of the most salient symptoms of a deeper loss of faith in the idea of a shared reference point that provided the common ground for cultural unity or spiritual renewal. Jewel Spears Brooker has helpfully described the modernist project in terms of an attempt to cope with this predicament: "The herculean effort to cope with the loss of a shared reference point, involving ingenious attempts to retrieve or to discover or to create substitutes, characterizes modernism in all the arts."[102] To many, the work of the late-Victorian anthropologists had contributed to this sense of loss by relativizing European beliefs. If myths were simply relics of a primitive stage of human development, and if all cultures produced remarkably similar myths, then what validity could be claimed by the Christian myth at the heart of European culture?   Some modernists, such as Eliot, attempted to make a virtue of this necessity by using the primitive relics of mythology as so much suggestive raw material, to be shaped into something meaningful by the artist.

The work of Powys, Butts, Williams and Jones, however, testifies to an alternative modernist approach, one that both complicates and enriches our understanding of the culture of modernism. Their work shows how modernists could use myth to conjure with questions of belief in ways that belie the common characterization of modernist poetics as concerned with form rather than belief. They did this in part by creatively drawing on forces usually understood as being aligned with the secularizing tendencies of modernity, in particular anthropology. Their work invites us to reconsider received interpretations of modernity as strictly inimical to religious belief. On the contrary, characteristically modern forms of knowledge production like

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[102] Brooker, 141.

anthropology could and did enable new forms of spiritual seeking and religious speculation,

of which the meditations on the Grail examined above are but one strain.

CHAPTER 4

MAKING A MYTHOLOGY FOR ENGLAND:

THE INKLINGS AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF MYTH

Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the valley.

C.S. Lewis (1944)

Introduction

In June 1942 *Time and Tide* reported that the Nazi party had chosen Hagen over Siegfried as their national hero. Passing over the noble but credulous hero of the Niebelungenlied, the Nazis instead identified a scheming, malicious villain as the epitome of the Germanic spirit. When he heard the news, C.S. Lewis could barely suppress his elated laughter. Lewis, then a young Oxford medievalist, had long been an admirer of the Niebelung mythology and in the years leading up to the Second World War he had watched with increasing dismay as the Nazis appropriated that mythology for their own ideological purposes. "It was," he wrote, "a bitter moment when the Nazis took over my treasure and made it part of their ideology."[1] But with the news that the Nazis had chosen Hagen, Lewis's dismay was replaced by a relieved amusement: "[N]ow all is well. They have proved unable to digest it. They can retain it only by standing the story on its head and making one of the minor villains the hero….[T]hey have given me back what they stole."[2] Lewis observed that the Nazis' attempted appropriation of Norse mythology was only part of a no less ridiculous attempt to appropriate "the Nordic" as a whole: "What

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[1] C.S. Lewis, *First and Second Things*, in idem, *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: Harper CollinsPublishers, 2000), 653.

[2] Ibid.

business have people who call might right to say they are worshippers of Odin? The whole

point about Norse religion was that it alone of all mythologies told men to serve gods who were

admittedly fighting with their backs to the wall and would certainly be defeated in the end."

"How is it that the only people in Europe who have tried to revive their pre-Christian mythology

as a living faith should also be the people that shows itself incapable of understanding that

mythology in its very rudiments?" he wondered.[3] In Lewis's view there was truth in the

Niebelung mythology and in Nordic mythology as whole, but the Nazis had utterly failed to

grasp it.

Lewis's friend and colleague, J.R.R. Tolkien was of a similar mind about the Nazi

appropriation of Nordic mythology, but could not bring himself to view it with Lewis's

amusement. For years Tolkien had been at work on his own mythology that drew heavily on the

body of myth the Nazis were now claiming as their own. Moreover, Tolkien was a scholar of

this very material, and he took scholarly offense to the way Hitler and his followers were

distorting it. Writing to his son in June 1941 he gave vent to his frustration:

> I have spent most of my life…studying Germanic matters (in the general sense that includes England and Scandinavia). There is a great deal more force (and truth) than ignorant people imagine in the "Germanic" ideal….You have to understand the good in things, to detect the real evil….I have in this War a burning private grudge…against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler….Ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making forever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light.[4]

In reality, Tolkien's anger indicated more than a "burning private grudge." His irritation

stemmed from his conception of myth's proper function, a conception that Lewis largely shared.

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[3] Ibid.

[4] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), 55-6.

According to these writers, part of an informal group of dons and writers of the 1930s

and '40s who called themselves "the Inklings," myth had a unique ability to communicate moral

and religious truth that distinguished it from any other form of discourse.[5] This explains their

reaction to the Nazi use of myth: Hitler's abuse of myth to disseminate blatant falsehood was, in

the eyes of Lewis and Tolkien, a perversion of myth's true function.

Lewis and Tolkien's reaction to the Nazis's appropriation of Nordic mythology thus

brings into focus some of the key assumptions underlying their understanding of myth's

significance. The most important of these was the conviction that myth was a vehicle of

significant truths. By the early 1940s, Lewis and Tolkien were already in the midst of an

extended literary project premised on, and intended to demonstrate, myth's unique status as a

discourse of moral and religious truth. A related assumption, evident as well in their reaction to

the Nazis's use of mythology, was that the health of a culture is indicated by its relationship to

myth. A healthy culture, they held, was one which availed itself of myth's benefits by attending

to the perennial truths that myth conveyed. Lewis and Tolkien were convinced that Britain was

in danger of losing a proper relationship with myth. This is why Tolkien sought to create a

mythology that he "could dedicate…to England; to my country" and why Lewis insisted that

"myth is relevant as long as the predicament of humanity lasts…."[6] The problem both saw was

that the increasing cultural authority of science, which they perceived both in the culture at large

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[5] There is a substantial body of scholarship on the Inklings as group. Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978) was for a long while the standard reference, though it has recently been superseded in both thoroughness and theoretical sophistication by Diana Pavlac Glyer, *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2007). Pavlac Glyer places much greater emphasis than Carpenter on the degree to which the Inklings influenced each other. See also Gareth Knight, *The Magical World of the Inklings* (Longmead: Element Books, 1990); Colin Duriez, *Tolkien and C.S. Lewis: The Gift of Friendship* (Mahwah, N.J.: HiddenSpring, 2003).

[6] Tolkien, *Letters*, 144; C.S. Lewis, "The Mythopoeic Gift of Rider Haggard," [1960] in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 100.

and in the universities in which they worked, was displacing myth's proper cultural function.

They found this trend troubling because a culture in which science defined what counted as

knowledge was a culture in which people were inclined to dismiss myth as source of truth. More

specifically, this meant that the culture was not receptive to the Christian ideas Tolkien and

Lewis sought to communicate, because Christianity was inescapably tied to myth and as such

was viewed skeptically by many. In short, Tolkien and Lewis were concerned about a culture in

which the advance of science had conditioned people to see science as the only valid source of

knowledge and to ignore myth—and by extension Christianity—as a source of truth. This state

of affairs led Lewis to observe in the mid-1950s that "the apologetic position has never in my life

been worse than it is now."[7]

Having observed the increasing cultural authority of science, in the 1930s Lewis and

Tolkien had concluded that their culture was dangerously out of touch with myth in general and

with the Christian myth in particular. Their suspicion of science was deepened by the fact that

they had seen firsthand its malign potential during the Great War. This had convinced them,

along with many of their contemporaries, that science was essentially amoral; scientific

advancement did not entail moral advancement. But the moral basis of culture that science could

not provide could be provided by myth if people were once again reminded of myth's power.

Hence Lewis and Tolkien responded to the ascendancy of science by engaging in an extended

attempt to rehabilitate myth's authority as a source of moral and religious truth.

The aim of this chapter is to show how myth played the central role in Lewis and

Tolkien's ongoing campaign to reshape a British culture in which, they believed, science had

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[7] C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950-1963*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 462.

exceeded its proper bounds and threatened to usurp the proper role of ethics. This campaign

was conducted at the level of epistemology, as they tried to establish through both polemic and

example myth's credentials as vehicle of moral and religious truth, an endeavor which obliged

them to confront the late-Victorian and Edwardian anthropological work that had sought to

dissolve myth's status as a privileged form of discourse. Though he does not examine Lewis and

Tolkien's theory of myth, literary historian Jed Estey has recently come close to capturing the

motivations behind it when he observes that their "vision of the writer's role was determined

neither by market relations nor by freestanding aesthetic ideologies but by the production of a

complete allegorical system of truth that would resonate with an English audience's latent

Christianity…."[8] Estey's recognition that Lewis and Tolkien were interested in developing a

"system of truth" captures the epistemological thrust of their project: they not only aimed to

convince through argument that myth communicated truth in a unique way, but they also sought

to exemplify this with their fiction. At a minimum they hoped to counteract the influence of

science while reorienting the culture's moral bearing, and at best they hoped to reawaken an

interest in Christianity.

Examining the thought of Lewis and Tolkien also reveals the different work the concept

of myth was asked to do by different groups of writers and intellectuals. The instructive

comparison and contrast here is with the modernists. Whereas in the 1920s and 1930s

modernists of Eliot's stripe sidestepped questions of belief and attempted to use myth to impose

aesthetic meaning on past and present, from the late 1930s through the 1950s Lewis and Tolkien

were concerned with using myth to convey what they took to be perennial truths through popular

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[8] Jed Estey, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 122.

fiction. Lewis and Tolkien thus drew on myth in a way that bore some striking resemblances to the way myth was used by those modernists who did not employ Eliot's mythical method. Examining how the Inklings used myth thus contributes to the recent scholarly shift toward appreciating the connections between them and other major figures in twentieth-century British literary history.[9]

Such an examination also highlights the cultural centrality of myth in twentieth-century British popular culture, because the mythic fiction that Tolkien and Lewis produced achieved—and still enjoys—a remarkable level of popularity with a diverse range of cultural groups. In Tolkien's case the relevant works are of course his three-volume novel *The Lord of the Rings* (1955) and its precursor *The Hobbit* (1937). Lewis's output of mythic fiction included the influential sequence of science fiction novels known as the Space Trilogy (1938-46), a retelling of the Cupid and Psyche myth called *Till We Have Faces* (1956), and the Chronicles of Narnia, a series of seven children's novels (1950-56). This chapter, however, will not offer detailed analyses of these works, but will concentrate instead on the theory of myth underlying them, a theory that Tolkien and Lewis developed and defended in collaboration from the 1930s on, though its roots went further back to the years before the two men became colleagues and friends.

The Making of a Mythmaker: Tolkien's Background and Early Views on Myth

The foundations for Tolkien's interest in myth were laid early in his life, and many of the features of the mythology he would develop grew out of his childhood experiences. Ironically, the man who would construct a mythology that glorified the beauty of England was born in

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[9] The shift has been furthered by works like Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Estey, *A Shrinking Island*.

Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, a dusty town surrounded by the open veldt that could

not have been more different from the West Midland countryside that he would later come to

think of as his true home.[10] John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, known to his family as Ronald, was

born in 1892 to parents who had roots in Birmingham. His father, Arthur, had tried to make a

career with Lloyds Bank, but had gone to South Africa where the chances of promotion seemed

greater. His initiative was rewarded as he quickly rose to manager of the Bloemfontein branch

of the Bank of Africa. But it was Tolkien's mother, Mabel, who, for tragic reasons, would have

a greater influence on his life. In 1895 young Ronald, his mother, and his younger brother left

Bloemfontein to visit England, leaving Arthur behind. While they were in England they received

news that he had suffered a severe hemorrhage and died.

Inevitably Tolkien's memories of his father faded as he adjusted to life in England. He

also grew close to his mother, who was his first teacher. During these lessons it became clear

that he had a strong emotional response to the sound and appearance of words and language. He

was "excited by the Welsh names on coal-trucks, by the 'surface glitter' of Greek, by the strange

forms of the Gothic words…and by the Finnish of the *Kalevala*…."[11] He also was fascinated by

fairy tales, especially those collected in Andrew Lang's *Red Fairy Book*. In 1896 the family

moved to the Warwickshire hamlet of Sarehole, where the English countryside became inscribed

on Tolkien's imagination. A few years later Mabel Tolkien converted to Catholicism and was

essentially disowned by her family. In the same year Tolkien began school, which necessitated a

move back to Birmingham. Four years later his mother, who had developed diabetes, died

suddenly after collapsing into a diabetic coma. Tolkien felt afterwards that she had been driven

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[10] See Tolkien, *Letters*, 54.

[11] Humphrey Carpeter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), 131.

to her death by the cold treatment she received after her conversion, and this in part drove

him to cling to the Catholicism she had passed on to him. Tolkien's biographer has suggested

that, "after she died his religion took the place in his affections that she previously occupied."[12]

After his mother's death, Tolkien was also helped by the good companionship he found

at King Edward's School in Birmingham. In particular, Tolkien developed close friendships

with a group of three or four other boys. The group, known as the T.C.B.S., became an informal

club devoted to reading, discussion, and intellectual exploration in general.[13] The friendship

among the core members of the group survived their departure from school, and they took with

them a conviction that they had been brought together in order to do something important in the

future. Though the four members of the club who remained in close contact never exactly stated

what this important task would be, it had to do with sparking some kind of cultural renewal.[14] It

was this shared belief that encouraged Tolkien to first think of himself as a creative writer and

poet.

Tolkien was fascinated with myth from an early age, and this fascination was closely

linked with an interest in language. His interest in the relationship between myth and language

took on more concrete form after he began his studies at Oxford in 1911. Tolkien read Classics

at university and chose Comparative Philology as his special subject. This was a fateful decision

for a variety reasons. First, it meant he came under influence of Joseph Wright, who had risen

from a boyhood working in a Yorkshire woolen mill to become Professor of Comparative

Philology. Wright was a man of immense presence and charisma who focused and directed

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[12] Carpenter, 31.

[13] The story of the T.C.B.S. and its profound influence on Tolkien's life and work has recently been told in John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshhold of Middle-earth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

[14] See Carpenter, 73; Garth 57-9.

Tolkien's nascent interest in philology. But Wright's tutelage was not all rigor and discipline:

he also encouraged Tolkien to pursue his interest in the languages, like Welsh, that had long

fascinated him. The study of Comparative Philology only increased Tolkien's desire to seek out

beautiful languages, and he eventually switched from reading Classics to English so that he

could concentrate more directly on philology. Reading English allowed him to study Old and

Middle English and other Germanic languages that interested him.

The language that captured Tolkien's imagination above all others, however, was Finnish.

Though he never formally studied it as part of his set coursework, he taught himself the

rudiments with the help of a Finnish grammar he found in the Exeter College library in 1912.

Ever since reading the *Kalevala* in English he had hoped to read the poem in its original

language and now set out to do so. He never mastered the language, but nevertheless made it the

basis of the private language that he been fitfully developing since boyhood. His encounter with

Finnish also convinced him that England lacked the sort of rich mythology found in the Finnish

epics. He read a paper on the subject to a college society and after describing the merits of the

Finnish mythological ballads he concluded by wishing for "something of the same sort that

belonged to the English."[15]

Tolkien's interest in mythology and the strange power of languages, and his inclination

for inventing languages and writing stories and poetry, might have remained no more than

typical undergraduate enthusiasms were it not for the Great War. If Joseph Wright had focused

Tolkien's interest in philology, the war focused his interest in myth and language and his creative

impulses. Tolkien would later say that his "taste for fairy-stories was wakened by philology on

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[15] Carpenter, 59.

the threshold of manhood, and quickened to full life by war."[16] In June 1915 he completed

his final examination in English Language and Literature and earned a First that positioned him

for an academic career once the war was over. But several months earlier he had enlisted under

a scheme that allowed him to complete his degree before taking up a commission, so almost

immediately after finishing at Oxford he was posted to the 13th Battalion of the Lancashire

Fusiliers. Though a second lieutenant, he opted to specialize in signaling rather than command a

platoon; because such a position played to his longstanding interests in codes, alphabets, and

language it was more appealing to him than the drudgery of command.[17] In March of 1916 he

married and less than three months later his battalion was sent to France as part of the buildup for

the Somme offensive. His company first saw action two weeks into the offensive and was

subsequently involved in a series of intense bloody engagements, including the infamous assault

on the Schwaben Redoubt. Tolkien survived the offensive uninjured, but in November he was

invalided home with trench fever.

The war continued the pattern of Tolkien suddenly losing those who were closest to him,

deepening the pessimistic strain in his personality that had emerged after his mother's death.

Two of his closest T.C.B.S. friends died in the fighting on the Somme, first Rob Gilson and then

G.B. Smith. He could have let this push him into the disillusionment and despair that afflicted so

many of his contemporaries. Instead, Tolkien decided to impose a shape and meaning on the

tragedy of the war. When Tolkien had learned of Gilson's death he had written, "I honestly feel

the TCBS has ended."[18] But when Smith was also killed Tolkien's attitude changed. Shortly

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[16] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), 64.

[17] See Garth 114; and Carpenter, 78.

[18] Tolkien, *Letters*, 10.

before Smith was killed he wrote to Tolkien enjoining him to carry on and "as a member of

the great T.C.B.S. to voice what I dreamed and what we all agreed upon."[19] Tolkien took the

words to heart.

Tolkien's experience of war thus impelled him to create the mythology that he had been

contemplating for some time. Prior to the war both his mythology and his motivations for

creating it were inchoate and fragmentary, but after the Somme they began to take shape. While

recuperating from trench fever he began to write the first of stories that would provide the basis

of his mythology. All that he had seen in the war—the bleak landscapes, the corpses, the

destructive capabilities of modern technology, the violence, and the heroism and self-sacrifice—

would be given meaning by becoming part of a vast mythology. Indeed, it is difficult to

overstate the impact of the First World War in particular, and war in general, as influences on

Tolkien's work. Begun in the shadow of one world war, his mythology would be brought to

completion in the shadow of a second; it is no coincidence that Tolkien's mythology is pervaded

by war and the threat of war.[20]

At the same time, by creating his mythology Tolkien felt that he would be supplying what

England sorely lacked: a mythology of its own. After his undergraduate days he became more

deeply convinced of, "the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own

(bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient)

in the legends of other lands."[21] He resolved to remedy this deficiency, using his philological

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[19] Carpenter, 86.

[20] See Verlyn Flieger, *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien's Mythology* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2005), 14.

[21] Tolkien, *Letters*, 144. On Tolkien's desire to create "a mythology for England" see Paul H. Kocher, "A Mythology for England," in *J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2000), 103-11; Jane Chance, *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England*, rev. ed. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000).

expertise and his own invented language to give his mythology the tone and air of the stories that had long fascinated him. Tolkien scholar Verlyn Flieger has summed up well the factors that coalesced to give rise to Tolkien's mythmaking project: "The innate impulse that gave rise to Tolkien's mythology was sparked by his natural literary inclinations and talent, fired by his scholarship and fueled by war."[22] Tolkien's mythmaking project was thus initially driven by a range of motivations, ranging from the intimately personal to the almost ridiculously grandiose. Tolkien's surname derived from a German word meaning "foolhardy," a word that many would think an apt description of his intention to single-handedly provide a mythology for England.

But the architecture for his vast mythology did not come to him all at once during his convalescence from trench fever. What struck him then was the resolve to continue writing individual stories; the connections between them would form later, culminating in 1954 with the publication of his novel *The Lord of the Rings*. At the same time Tolkien was developing his mythology, he began to develop a theory of how myth functioned as a form of discourse in order to explain the strange power that myth seemed to have. But before examining this theory, it is necessary to turn to the man whose friendship played a significant role in Tolkien's development of that theory.

Gods and Heroes, Atoms and Evolution: Lewis's Background and Early Views on Myth

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There are also numerous studies of the making and development of Tolkien's mythology, the best of which have tended to come from medievalist. See for example the essays collected in Jane Chance, ed., *Tolkien the Medievalist* (London: Routledge, 2003). T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982) focuses on the philological material from which Tolkien constructed his mythology; it is a rigorous, groundbreaking study by one of the best Tolkien critics. Also excellent is a recent work by another leading Tolkien scholar: Verlyn Flieger, *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien's Mythology* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2005).

[22] Flieger, 15.

Like Tolkien, the roots of Lewis's fascination with myth went back to a childhood marked by tragic loss. Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast in 1898 to parents who both had Irish roots, though they were vaguely Anglican in religion. His father was a successful solicitor and his mother something of an intellectual who had taken a B.A. in mathematics at Queen's College, Belfast. She was a voracious reader, especially of novels. She started Lewis on French and Latin at a young age. He grew up in a book-loving family and quickly developed a love for reading, in part because of physical awkwardness that kept him from taking an interest in physical activities. He was particularly fond of fairy tales, E. Nesbit, Beatrix Potter, and anything with the flavor of myth and legend. The family was happy until Lewis's mother died in 1908. From that point much of the stability in Lewis's life was gone, one result being that he took increasing refuge in the imaginative side of his personality—the side that was drawn to myth and fairy tale.

Lewis was thus intrigued by myth from and early age, but his thinking on myth underwent a long evolution. Until the 1930s his conception of myth was shaped by two somewhat contradictory instincts. One was a love of any literature that had the flavor of myth or the fantastic. The other was a rationalistic skepticism about the epistemic value of myths, which he saw as essentially beautiful lies. The former instinct he became aware of as an adolescent while reading Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Norse Ballads," particularly Longfellow's translation of a poem on the death of the god Balder. The poem's opening lines, "I heard a voice, that cried / Balder the Beautiful / Is dead, is dead!" would remain with him for the rest of his life.[23] The intensity of the experience he had reading these lines led him to seek out literature that would produce a similar effect. One result was an appetite for Victorian fantastic literature

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[23] C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1955), 17.

by writers like William Morris and George MacDonald. Yet none of this satisfied his

appetite for mythology that smacked of what he could only describe as "Northernness." He did

not encounter the same mythic quality again until, as a teenager, he discovered the mythology

behind Wagner's Ring Cycle of operas. Mere synopses of the operas in the magazine *The*

Soundbox set him off on a quest to acquire and read everything possible on the subject of Norse

mythology, including various compilations and William Morris's versions of Norse myths.

However, Lewis's appetite for the mythical was countered by an anthropological

skepticism about myth. This skepticism was instilled in him by William T. Kirkpatrick, the

family friend who privately tutored Lewis before he went up to university. A ruthless

dialectician, Kirkpatrick was the man Lewis credited with teaching him how to think.

Kirkpatrick had grown up in Ulster, where he had trained to become a Presbyterian minister

before losing his faith. He had become a confirmed atheist, in part through the influence of J.G.

Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. In Lewis's words, "having said that he was an Atheist, I hasten to

add that he was a 'Rationalist' of the old, high and dry nineteenth-century type….At the time

when I knew him, the fuel of Kirk's Atheism was chiefly of the anthropological and pessimistic

kind. He was great on *The Golden Bough* and Schopenhauer."[24] The facility and zeal for debate

for which Lewis became known owed a great deal to the time he spent under Kirkpatrick's

tutelage.

Kirkpatrick had been convinced by Frazer's argument that Christianity was but one

among many dying god myths, and a late, uninteresting one at that. Thanks to Kirkpatrick's

influence this became Lewis's own belief, and provided a rationalization for his own loss of faith

a few years earlier. In encountering Frazer, Lewis was also glad to discover that there existed a

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[24] Lewis, *Joy*, 139.

body of scholarship that aimed to explain the mythopoeic impulse in human culture. Though

the young Lewis found Frazer's materialist explanation that myths ultimately emerged as a way

of giving meaning to the cycle of the seasons highly convincing, his reading of scholarship on

myth did not end with Frazer. Throughout his career he kept up with scholarship on myth

produced by a variety of disciplines beyond his own field of English literature, including

anthropology, psychology, and philosophy. He was especially familiar with the work of the

Cambridge Ritualists and with the psychological explanations of Freud and Jung, and he credited

both Ritualists and the psychoanalysts with offering important insights into myth.

As a young man, then, Lewis was of two minds on the subject of myth: on the one hand

he had an imaginative taste for myth that he fed at every opportunity, and on the other he was

convinced that all myth was ultimately false and meaningless. He wrote of this tension that, "the

two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea

of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow 'rationalism.' Nearly all that I loved I

believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought to be grim and

meaningless."[25] He summed up, "Such, then, was my position: to care for almost nothing but

the gods and heroes, the garden of the Hespirides, Launcelot and the Grail, and to believe in

nothing but atoms and evolution and military service."[26]

One way Lewis tried to resolve this conflict was by taking an interest in the occult.

Indeed, he described it as "a passion for the Occult," to which he had been introduced by a

school matron who was deeply involved in spiritualism of various forms: "Theosophy,

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[25] Lewis, *Joy*, 170.

[26] Ibid., 174.

Rosicrucianism, Spiritualism; the whole Anglo-American Occultist tradition."[27]   Another

way to resolve the dilemma seemed to be offered by the religious ideas of Yeats, whose

occultism began to intrigue Lewis as young man. Occultism was appealing because it offered a

potential answer to a question that continued to nag him: why did myth affect him so powerfully

if indeed it was false?   Because occultism acknowledged the existence of unseen, deeper,

preternatural forces, it seemed to Lewis like a philosophy that could accommodate and even

explain the power of myth. Even so, he never fully embraced the spiritualism of his school

matron or the occultism of Yeats; they remained possibilities that he considered and investigated

in an attempt to make sense of the experiences he had through myth.

Lewis's thinking about myth thus remained very much unresolved when he began his

studies at Oxford in 1917, which were quickly cut short by the War. Lewis had enlisted in the

Officers' Training Corps and in November 1917 he was sent to the front near Arras. Not long

after arriving he contracted trench fever, but after recuperating he was sent back to the front lines

in the spring on 1918, just when the Germans were preparing to launch a massive offensive.

During this offensive Lewis was wounded by a shell—a British one that had fallen short of its

intended target. Though wounded in three places by shrapnel, he survived. Afterwards, he was

reticent about his experience during the war, but it shaped him deeply nonetheless, in ways

similar to how it had shaped Tolkien. The same shell that wounded Lewis killed a close friend

and fellow Oxford undergraduate, a loss that would help push Lewis into a postwar pessimism.

Like Tolkien, Lewis also found that the War catalyzed the desire to write creatively. During his

spare time at the front and while recovering from his wounds, he began to write a cycle of poems

in an attempt to make sense of his experiences, and, though he eventually abandoned poetry for

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[27] Ibid., 60; ibid., 59.

fiction, he would continue to write creatively for the rest of his career. The images and memories of war that remained fixed in his mind were much the same as those that were recorded by the better-known writers, memoirists, and poets of the War. What brief descriptions of the conflict Lewis published read like digests of the well-known war memoirs by Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden and the like, with the same mix of ironic humor, glowing tributes to beloved subalterns and fellow officers, and matter-of-fact description of the horror and absurdity of trench warfare.[28]

After recuperating he returned to Oxford to resume his studies at University College. He took the path of a future academic, taking a Double First in Honour Mods and Greats, after which he applied for a fellowship in philosophy at another Oxford College. When the fellowship was given to someone else, he decided to take another degree in English to improve his chances on the job market. It was, he rightly recognized, a rising subject, and it would not hurt to add another string to his bow.[29] After taking his English degree he filled in for a year as a don at University College before being elected as a fellow in English at Magdalen College in 1925. One year later, Tolkien would also come to Oxford as an English don.

Tolkien, Lewis, and the Epistemology of Myth

Thus by the mid 1920s both Lewis and Tolkien were young dons at Oxford, and the friendship that would develop between them would help both men clarify and refine their views on myth. This was particularly true of Lewis, whose conversion to Christianity in the early 1930s would turn on the issue of whether or not myth conveyed truths about reality. In the end,

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[28] See Lewis, *Joy*, 187-196.

[29] See C.S. Lewis, *Collected Letters: Volume I, Family Letters 1905-1931*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 601.

and in large part through friendship with Tolkien, Lewis concluded that myth was a unique

form of discourse that conveyed profound truths in ways that other forms of discourse could not.

At the same time, friendship with Lewis pushed Tolkien to refine his own ideas of the nature of

myth. The well-documented story of Lewis's conversion thus highlights the importance of myth

to the epistemology that would become central to their work, and reveals how the work of the

late-Victorian anthropologists continued to shape debates about myth in Britain, for Lewis and

Tolkien developed their theory of myth in reaction to scholars like Frazer and Lang. The shared

understanding of myth that they developed during repeated conversation and argument in the late

1920s and early 1930s would become foundational to their work as writers for the rest of their

careers.

When the two met in spring 1926 at a meeting of the Oxford English faculty they did not

warm to each other. In fact, there was cause for suspicion on each side. At the time there was

upheaval among the English faculty at Oxford about what the structure of the English curriculum

should be, and Tolkien and Lewis were on opposite sides of this debate. Tolkien suspected that

Lewis was in the "Lit." camp, which defended the study of literature as a field of serious

scholarship, while Lewis knew that the philologist Tolkien was in the "Lang." camp, which saw

the study of Anglo-Saxon and Middle English as the only rigorously academic part of the

English curriculum.[30] And on Lewis's side there were other reasons for mistrust that had been

instilled in him as a child. Reflecting later on the unlikelihood of his friendship with Tolkien he

summed up, "At my first coming into the world, I had been (implicitly) warned never to trust a

Papist, and at my first coming into the English Faculty (explicitly) never to trust a philologist.

[30] Carpenter, 143; C.S. Lewis, *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C.S. Lewis 1922-1927*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), 393.

Tolkien was both."[31]

Nevertheless, the two men ended up becoming fast friends. What brought them together initially was a shared interest in myth. When Tolkien learned that Lewis had an interest in Norse mythology the mutual suspicion that divided them began to dissolve. In the late 1920s Tolkien started an informal group devoted to studying, reading and discussing Icelandic sagas. Lewis immediately joined, eager for the chance finally to read in their original language the myths that had long fascinated him. After the sessions ended, Lewis would typically remain behind with Tolkien to continue the discussion well into the night.

One of the central issues in these late-night discussions was the unique power that myth seemed to possess. Lewis, having imbibed the skepticism of Frazer and others, insisted that whatever power they might have, myths were still "lies," even though "breathed through silver."[32] By about the summer of 1929 Lewis had moved from his earlier agnosticism, through brief dabbling in occultism, to a vague theism. This added a theological dimension to their discussions of myth. Though Lewis conceded that myths could be deeply moving and powerful on an emotional level, he could not accept Tolkien's Christian understanding of myth's significance. Following Frazer, Lewis saw the Christian story as but one dying and reviving god myth among many, with nothing in particular to distinguish it. In short, for him myths were beautiful, but ultimately false; his appreciation for myth was aesthetic rather than philosophical.

Lewis reversed this approach when assessing the Christian myth, however, taking little interest in it because he found it philosophically unconvincing. In his attempt to defend Christianity, Tolkien sought to expose this seeming inconsistency in Lewis's views. This took

[31] Lewis, *Joy*, 216.

[32] See Carpenter, 147; Tolkien, "Fairy-Stories," 71.

place in extended conversation on September 19, 1931, when Tolkien, Lewis, and Hugo

Dyson, a lecturer at Reading University, again took up the questions of myth's significance. A

few weeks afterward Lewis gave an account of the conversation in a letter to a friend:

> Now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it at all: again, that is I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself…I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere *except* in the Gospels. The reason was that in the Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho' I could not say in cold prose 'what it meant.'[33]

Lewis thus concluded that, "the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in

the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*…."[34]

Moreover, Tolkien had convinced him that the power of myths derived from the fact that they

reflected, albeit imperfectly, profound truths. Myth was the language of describing truth, a

language that humans could speak by virtue of the fact that they had been divinely created. In

the words of one of Tolkien's biographers, "just as speech is invention about objects and ideas,

so myth is invention about truth."[35] This was a view that Tolkien worked out in verse a few days

after the momentous discussion of September 19. In a poem he called "Mythopoeia" that was

framed as an appeal to Lewis, he elaborated his views on the innate truth of mythology. But

Lewis was already largely convinced; he had come to embrace a view of myth that resolved the

aesthetic and philosophical issues with which he had wrestled: aesthetically, myth did have

unique power, but this ultimately derived from the truth it conveyed. And, standing Frazer on

his head, he now believed that the Christian myth was not one myth among many, but the myth

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[33] Lewis, *Letters*, i, 976-77. Emphasis in the original.

[34] Ibid., 977. Emphasis in the original.

[35] Carpenter, 147.

to which all others pointed. In accepting the Christian myth, he thus made an intellectual move similar to that made by Mary Butts prior to her conversion.[36] Thus Lewis's conversion to Christianity, and a precipitous moment in his friendship with Tolkien, centered on the epistemic status of myth, that is, on questions relating to its truth value.

Their friendship and their shared understanding about the significance of myth would prove to be highly conducive to literary creativity; without the friendship between Tolkien and Lewis it is unlikely that they would have produced the body of fiction they did.[37] Lewis's prompting and encouragement of his friend played a key role. Sometime in the late 1930s Lewis suggested to Tolkien that they both begin writing mythic fiction. "[T]here is too little of what we really like in stories," Lewis observed, "I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves." They agreed that Lewis should try to produce a space travel story and that Tolkien should produce a time travel story. They also agreed that their stories should communicate truth through myth. [38] The result of this agreement was Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), the first volume of his Space Trilogy. Tolkien never finished his story time travel story, but his attempt convinced him to take up the mythology that he had been developing intermittently since the 1920s. Lewis was one of the first to read early chapters of what would become *The Lord of the Rings*, and his enthusiastic encouragement combined with pestering ultimately helped Tolkien to complete the novel.[39]

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[36] See above, Chapter 2.

[37] For an extended investigation of this premise see Pavlac Glyer, *The Company They Keep*. See also Andrew Lazo, "A Kind of Mid-Wife: J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis—Sharing Influence," in Chance, ed., *Tolkien the Medievalist*, 36-49.

[38] Carpenter, 170.

[39] See Tolkien, *Letters*, 34; 36; 38; 41; 68; and 366.

However, coming to a shared understanding of myth's significance was one thing, but developing a theory of how their own fiction could function as myth was a task that required further thought. Tolkien was the first to take on this problem, one he had been thinking about since his undergraduate years. Unable to shake the sense that in his fiction he was somehow recording "a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth," he decided to work out a theory of how and why myths came to be written.[40] Developing his theory of mythology required him to both interact with and react against the nineteenth and early twentieth-century investigations of mythology produced by philologists and anthropologists. He engaged with these investigations in a 1939 address that constituted the most thorough statement of his views on the nature of myth and the sort of fantasy stories that he composed.[41] The address, entitled "On Fairy-Stories," was given as the twelfth Andrew Lang Lecture at St. Andrews University. In it Tolkien explained his objections to the theories of myth offered by scholars such as Max Müller and Lang. As a boy, Tolkien had read with enjoyment Lang's compilations of fairy tales, but had also come to object to Lang's attitude toward such mythic material. Tolkien used his Lang Lecture to lay out his case for the value and usefulness of "fairy-stories," a category he said could not really be defined, but which for him meant essentially myths in literary form; throughout the lecture he often used the terms "myth" and "fairy-story" interchangeably. Because the lecture constitutes the most extensive and detailed expression of Tolkien's views on the topic, and because those views were shared substantially by Lewis, it merits a thorough analysis.

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[40] Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 83.

[41] Verlyn Flieger offers a helpful discussion of Tolkien's engagement with alternative theorists of myth in "'There Would Always Be a Fairy-Tale': J.R.R. Tolkien and the Folklore Controversy," in Chance, ed., *Tolkien the Medievalist*, 26-35.

Tolkien brought several types of expertise to his treatment of the topic. By 1939 not only had he established himself as a respected scholar but had also in the previous year published *The Hobbit*, a fairy-story of his own. More than that, he had been an enthusiast of the genre since his youth, and had been raised on Lang's compilations of fairy tales. In order to discern the proper use of myth it was first necessary for Tolkien to clear away mistaken views on the subject. The two approaches at which he aimed his criticism were the philological approach represented by Müller and his follower George Dasent and the anthropological approach of Lang. Though these two schools of myth interpretation were at odds with each other—Lang after all was a tireless critic of Müller[42]—from Tolkien's perspective they committed the same error. The error was to approach mythic stories with strictly scientific motivations. Philological, folkloric, and anthropological theories of myth were produced by "people using the stories not as they were meant to be used, but as a quarry from which to dig evidence, or information…."[43] Tolkien acknowledged that there was a place for scholarly inquiry into the origins and development of mythic tales, but maintained that such investigations did little to reveal the meaning, power, and value of "the story as it is served up by its author or teller."[44] By emphasizing the internal coherence and integrity of mythic stories as works of literature, Tolkien was setting the stage for one of his central points: that myth-making was a fundamental human activity; it was not a primitive activity which humans outgrew as Lang argued, nor was it a "disease of language" as Müller had claimed. On the contrary, Tolkien argued, "Mythology is not a disease at all….You

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[42] See above, Chapter One.

[43] Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 47.

[44] Ibid., 49.

might as well say that thinking is a disease of the mind."[45] Myth was an inevitable and

perennial product of interactions between the human mind and language. Language gave the

human mind the means to form imaginative visions into stories, thereby injecting the world with

"fantasy." The wood with silver leaves, the ram with a golden fleece, and the dragon with fire in

its belly were all products of the human tendency to remake the world through imagination.

Human life and myth-making went hand-in-hand; thinking mythically was constitutive of being

human.

　　　Establishing that humans were myth makers by nature still left the question of "what, if

any, are the values and functions of fairy-stories now?"[46] First, Tolkien confronted the common

charge that fairy stories comprised a genre suitable only for children. A key theme of his essay

is how much contemporary understandings of myth use unwarranted condescension to trivialize

its significance. Tolkien felt that this was particularly the case with Lang's views. First, Lang

patronized the presumed "primitives" who had originally produced many myths and fairy tales.

And he similarly patronized the children who read fairy tales in modern times. Tolkien singled

out one sentence that encapsulated Lang's attitude: "Their taste remains like the taste of their

naked ancestors thousands of years ago; and they seem to like fairy-tales better than history,

poetry, geography, or arithmetic."[47] According to Tolkien, Lang's false sentimentality toward

children prevented him from recognizing that "the association of children and fairy-stories is an

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[45] Ibid., 50.

[46] Ibid., 57.

[47] Ibid., 62.

accident of our domestic history."[48] Children did not as a rule gravitate toward such stories and had not made the decision to stock Victorian nurseries with volumes of them.

Lang's condescension toward fairy-stories and the children who read them prevented him from appreciating the value of such tales: they should not be relegated to the nursery as children's fare, but should be considered "a natural branch of literature."[49] As such, well-written fairy-stories would have the same value as any other form of literature, although they were also unique in some very significant ways. Specifically, they offered "Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation, all things of which children have, as rule, less need than older people."[50] Tolkien's argument here depended on a distinction between what he termed the "Primary" and "Secondary" worlds, the former being the everyday world and the second being a world created in imaginative literature by writers acting in their capacity as "sub-creators." This notion of the fantasy writer as a sub-creator had been broached by Tolkien earlier in his debates with Lewis about the nature of myth. The concept was at bottom a theological one. In "Mythopoeia," his polemical poem to Lewis on the subject, he had argued that by making stories humans were acting on a divinely-implanted impulse; having been created in God's image humans themselves were driven to create. [51] This impulse in fact lay behind all forms of artistic creation, but was most evident in the secondary worlds of "fantasy" stories, a term that Tolkien used as a synonym for fairy-story. Fantasy was thus, according to Tolkien's particular understanding of Christian

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[48] Ibid., 58.

[49] Ibid., 66.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Tolkien quotes the relevant passage in "On Fairy-Stories," 71-72. See also, Carpenter, 147-8.

anthropology, a natural human activity.[52] Moreover, it was an activity by no means at odds

with human reasoning capacities or scientific pursuits. Tolkien maintained that fantasy "does not

destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the

perception of, scientific verity….For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that

things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to

it."[53] For Tolkien, then, mythic fantasy offered a way of coping with the modern world by

providing a venue for the imagination to create a secondary world that offered both a respite

from, and different perspective on, the primary world. In doing so, fantasy also conveyed truths

that life in the primary world could all too often obscure.

It is here that the fairy-story's capacity to offer what Tolkien called Recovery, Escape,

and Consolation came into play. He defined Recovery as "regaining a clear view."[54] Creative

fantasy could wipe clean the windows of perception by freeing the everyday world "from the

drab blur of triteness or familiarity…."[55] By drawing on the material of the primary world to

create their secondary world, writers of fantasy presented those materials in a new light,

counteracting the disenchantment of daily life. Similarly, fantasy's ability to offer what Tolkien

termed Escape offered another avenue of enchantment. Fantasy offered a temporary reprieve

from the limitations and constraints of life—hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow injustice, death,

and even gravity. Escape denoted the fairy-story's capacity to provide a temporary imaginative

satisfaction of the perennial human desire to transcend these constraints. Tolkien was at pains to

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[52] Jed Estey describes Tolkien and Lewis's notion of sub-creation as "shamanistic," a misleading description in light of the theological rationale that Tolkien gave for the concept.

[53] Ibid., 72.

[54] Ibid., 74.

[55] Ibid., 74.

distinguish escape from escapism, the former premised on a healthy relationship to the primary world, and the latter characterized by a desire to ignore permanently the primary world and its problems and concerns. Finally, Tolkien argued that fairy-stories were distinguished by their capacity to offer Consolation; just as tragedy was the truest form of drama, he contended, the happy ending was the truest form of the fairy-story. Tolkien coined the word eucatastrophe—"the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn'"—to describe this aspect of successful fairy-stories.[56] Eucatastrophes offered "a piercing glimpse of joy" that seemed to transcend the story itself, and this was the essential "mythical fairy-story quality."[57] Tolkien concluded his essay with an epilogue in which he ascribes theological significance to the glimpses of joy offered by fairy stories. The joy stimulated by the best fairy-stories—those that presented internally consistent and convincing secondary worlds—in fact testified to truths of deep significance: "The peculiar quality of the 'joy' in successful Fantasy can…be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth."[58] The consoling joy in successful fairy stories was at bottom an intimation of a world in which all sorrows would be abolished; in other words, the eschatological future that Tolkien's faith led him to anticipate.

It is not difficult to understand why Lewis found the views Tolkien expressed in "On Fairy-Stories" so amenable. He had already made them his own through conversation with Tolkien well prior to 1939, and once the piece appeared in print in 1947 he recommended it enthusiastically to others as the final word on the unique power and function of mythic fantasy. Not only was he by nature sympathetic to Tolkien's defense of the genre, he was convinced at

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[56] Ibid., 81.

[57] Ibid., 82.

[58] Ibid., 83.

both an emotional and intellectual level by his friend's explanation for how that genre both

offered ways of coping with the pressures of modern life and communicated truths in ways that

other genres did not. As he explained in an essay on science fiction:

> The Fantastic or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers; for
> others, at none. At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right
> reader, it has the same power: to generalise while remaining concrete, to present
> in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience,
> and to throw off irrelevancies. But at its best it can do more; it can give us
> experiences we have never had and thus, instead of "commenting on life", can
> add to it.[59]

Tolkien's account of how myth worked through story thus rang true with Lewis though,

interestingly, he concedes that myth may have no effect on some readers.

Though Lewis also agreed with the epistemological thrust of Tolkien's Lang lecture, he

felt compelled to work out some of the philosophical implications that Tolkien did not make

explicit. Lewis was always more philosophically inclined than Tolkien, and he was especially

eager for any opportunity to challenge the linguistic philosophy and logical positivism ascendant

in Oxford of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. He took particular exception to logical positivism and its

claims that myth was essentially meaningless. So articulating the epistemological import of

myth was precisely the kind of task he welcomed and was one he took up in print more than once.

One of the clearest examples was a 1944 essay in which Lewis tried to work out just what

myth communicated and how it did so. The reason for the air of profundity that myth evoked

was that myths actually provided contact with reality in a deeper, more direct way than did other

forms of knowledge. To establish this, Lewis pointed out that all thought was "incurably

abstract" whereas "the only realities we experience are concrete." [60] That is, while bearing pain

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[59] C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," in *On Stories*, 48.

[60] Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," 65.

or enjoying pleasure humans could not simultaneously intellectually apprehend pain or

pleasure; as soon as one began to contemplate pain or pleasure, concrete realities suddenly

became mere instances or examples. Here he was drawing on the ideas of the former Oxford

metaphysician Samuel Alexander, whose work had made a strong impression on Lewis early in

his career.[61] In Lewis's view, then, humans found themselves in a dilemma: they were unable to

both experience and contemplate simultaneously, causing reality to dissipate by the very act of

grasping at it. Thankfully, though, "Of this tragic dilemma myth is the partial solution. In the

enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be

understood only as an abstraction."[62] By bridging the immediacy of experience and the

abstraction of thought, what myth provided access to was not exactly truth, which was after all

an abstraction, but reality itself. He explained:

> What flows into you from myth is not truth but reality (truth is always about
> something, but reality is that about which truth is)….Myth is the mountain
> whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the
> valley….Or, if you prefer, myth is the isthmus which connects the peninsular
> world of thought with that vast continent we really belong to. It is not, like truth,
> abstract; nor is it, like direct experience, bound to the particular.[63]

Such a comment makes clear what was at stake for Lewis and Tolkien in their attempt to define a

privileged epistemic status for myth: to lose touch with myth would be to lose connection with

reality itself.

History, Science, and Myth

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[61] See Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 217-19.

[62] Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," 66.

[63] Ibid.

Though Lewis and Tolkien were convinced that myth was a form of discourse with a unique capacity to communicate truth, this does not explain why the need for myth struck them as a matter of pressing cultural significance. The answer involves how they viewed their culture's relationship with history and science. Their views on both history and science revealed their anxieties about modernity and their sense of how myth could redress certain cultural imbalances that characterized modernity.

Lewis and Tolkien's conception of myth's significance was intricately bound up with their understanding of history. Both lamented the tendencies and narrow horizons of their own age and drew most of their inspiration from what might be called "old books," for lack of a better term. Both made their livings as scholars of old books and both often found themselves compelled to defend old books. For the most part, they were not given to what Lewis once called "rash idealization of past ages," but both were in many ways more at home intellectually in past ages.[64] Tolkien dreamed of a life in the era before the advent of the "infernal combustion" engine,[65] and after he had attained financial security through the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, he annotated one of his large tax checks with the words "Not a penny for Concorde."[66] Lewis did not read a daily newspaper and in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge, he described himself as one of the last of the species of "Old Western men," by which he meant those formed by, and at home in, the literature of pre-modern Europe. Neither felt much fondness for the modern world, a fact which contributed to their limited knowledge of it.

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[64] Lewis, "First and Second Things," 4.

[65] Tolkien, *Letters*, 77.

[66] Carpenter, 244.

Nevertheless, their sense of being out of place in history was not simple nostalgia or reactionary antimodernism. Lewis, who thought of himself as a type of historian, argued that one of the primary reasons for historical study was to liberate people from the past, and he observed that no one was "less enslaved to the past than historians."[67] At bottom their fondness for the past had an epistemological motivation; it was driven by a desire to expose and contest what Lewis called "chronological snobbery" or "the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited."[68] Indeed, Tolkien and Lewis's skepticism about modern thought was evident in the way they took an almost personal offense to any presumption against ideas that preceded the nineteenth century.

This sense of living on the wrong side of a historical rupture was most systematically worked out by Lewis in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance literature at Cambridge, a chair created to lure him from Oxford in 1954.[69] Lewis used his lecture to defend the very notion of "medieval and renaissance literature" based on the growing consensus that the barrier between the two periods had been greatly exaggerated, but the address also gave him occasion to consider which moments in history really did classify as profound historical breaks. He explained that he had "come to regard the greatest of all divisions in the history of the West that which divides the present from, say, the age of Jane Austen and Scott."[70] This opinion was based on his sense of the impact of four major cultural shifts: the advent of modern

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[67] Lewis, "*De Descriptione Temporum*," in idem, *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 12.

[68] Lewis, *Joy*, 207.

[69] On the reasons for Lewis's failure to obtain a chair at Oxford see A.N. Wilson, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1990), 158.

[70] Lewis, "*De Descriptione Temporum*," 7.

mass politics, the unprecedented increase in the opacity of modern art, the decline of

Christianity, and, above all, the birth of machines. Of these, Lewis argued that, due to its

profound psychological effect, the last had by far the greatest significance. The idea that

permanence was really stagnation, the fact that "primitive" had become a pejorative, and the

assumption that "latest" was synonym for "best" all testified that "a new archetypal image" had

been stamped on the human mind:

> It is the image of old machines being superseded by new and better ones. For in the world of machines the new most often really is better and the primitive really is the clumsy….[A]ssuredly that approach to life which has left these footprints on our language is the thing that separates us most sharply from our ancestors and whose absence would strike us as most alien if we could return to their world. Conversely, our assumption that everything is provisional and soon to be superseded, that the attainment of goods we have never yet had…is the cardinal business of life, would most shock and bewilder them if they could visit ours.[71]

Though medieval and renaissance Europe would seem like an alien world to residents of the

twentieth century, it could be explained and demystified by those who understood it, and this

was Lewis vocation. Lewis understood his scholarly role as serving as a "spokesman of Old

Western Culture" by crossing back over this barrier and then returning with the past knowledge

that lay on its far side. What separated Lewis from other scholars was that he used fiction as

well as scholarship to do this. He intentionally used his mythic fiction to resurrect and convey

ideas from Old Western Culture as a way questioning and subverting modern assumptions.

   The modern assumption that Lewis and Tolkien challenged above all was the

unquestioning acceptance of science's increasing cultural authority. Neither was hostile to

science as such, rather they argued that science must be balanced with other forms of knowledge;

they wanted to make the case that scientific knowledge had limits while at the same time

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[71] Ibid., 11.

showing that myth conveyed particular kinds of truths that science could not.[72] In his Lang

lecture, Tolkien tried to make clear that he had no interest in attacking science, and he tried to

reassure his audience that an appetite for mythic fiction should neither "blunt the appetite for, nor

obscure the perception of, scientific verity." On the contrary, he acknowledged the value and

importance of scientific reasoning, while urging that scientific knowledge must be balanced by

the metaphysical truths that were uniquely delivered by myths. In Tolkien' words, "legends and

myths are largely made of 'truth', and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in

this mode…."[73] This was a view that Lewis likewise embraced. Lewis was frustrated that his

attempts to point out the misuses of science were often interpreted as outright hostility, once

virtually throwing up his hands and acknowledging, "Nothing I can say will prevent some people

from describing this lecture as an attack on science."[74]

The problem they saw, then, was not science but rather the use of science. At a time

when the cultural and academic stature of science was increasing, they were concerned that it not

dominate other forms of knowledge and erode ethics. As Lewis explained to a correspondent

who had inquired about university reform, "One must not…distort or suppress the sciences. It is

rather…a question of reducing them to their proper place…."[75] This of course raised the

question of what was the proper place of the sciences and what it looked like when they

aggrandized beyond that place. The answer was that science was, at bottom, "hypotheses (all

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[72] One of Lewis's most highly-regarded novels, the allegorical *Till We Have Faces*, is an extended meditation on precisely this issue.

[73] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 72; idem, *Letters*, 147.

[74] Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* [1943] (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1955), 86.

[75] Lewis, *Letters*, ii, 1010.

provisional) about the *measurable* aspects of *physical* reality."[76] Lewis and Tolkien's opponents were those who tried to extend science beyond this sphere to the point where it eliminated basic moral principles. As Lewis wrote to the novelist Arthur C. Clarke "Technology is *per se* neutral: but a race devoted to the increase of its own power by technology with complete indifference to ethics *does* seem to me a cancer in the universe."[77] Lewis and Tolkien feared that advancements in humanity's ability to control nature would lead to the elimination of all ethics. They envisioned the possibility of a post-human future in which the scientific conquest of nature would lead to a world where individuals would be treated as "mere nature to be kneaded and cut into new shapes for the pleasures of masters who…have no motive but their own 'natural'" impulses."[78] Despite the fact that a critique of science was part of their project, Tolkien and Lewis had little understanding of modern science. Those who knew Lewis have commented on how [79] Tolkien liked to read science fiction,[80] but seems to have had no interest in science.

Nevertheless, they were both willing to speculate extensively about a future dominated by science, particularly Lewis, as evidenced by the Riddell Memorial Lectures he delivered at the University of Durham in 1943. He argued that this possible future would be characterized by the dominance of technocrats, by "the rule of the Conditioners over the conditioned human material," resulting in a "world of post-humanity."[81] Lewis traced the power-seeking tendencies

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[76] Ibid.

[77] Lewis, *Letters*, ii, 594. Emphasis in original.

[78] Lewis, *Abolition*, 84.

[79] See, for example, Alistair Fowler, "C.S. Lewis: Supervisor," *Yale Review* 91, 4 (October 2003): 64-80.

[80] See Tolkien, *Letters*, 377.

[81] Lewis, *Abolition*, 86.

of modern science to the historical conditions under which science emerged, hand-in-hand

with magic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Drawing on his work as a scholar of the

medieval and the early modern periods, Lewis contended that, "The serious magical endeavour

and the serious scientific endeavour are twins: one was sickly and died, the other strong and

throve. But they were twins. They were born of the same impulse." The common impulse was

the desire "to subdue reality to the wishes of men…."[82] Lewis dramatized this link between

magic and science in the third volume of his Space Trilogy, in which a government bureaucracy,

the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments, pursues a nihilistic, totalitarian agenda using

methods that make no distinction between science and magic.[83] But he thought this dystopian

future could be averted:

> It might be going too far to say that the modern scientific movement was tainted
> from its birth: but I think it would be true to say that it was born in an unhealthy
> neighborhood and at an inauspicious hour. Its triumphs may have been too rapid
> and purchased at too high a price: reconsideration, and something like repentance,
> may be required.[84]

Lewis and Tolkien believed that this reconsideration could be prompted by the mythic fiction

they produced, which aimed to present the necessity of a realm of moral principles beyond

science.

Lewis, Tolkien, and the Politics of Literary Significance

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[82] Ibid., 87; ibid., 88.

[83] See C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* [1945] (New York: Macmillan, 1965). There is some reason to think that the book influenced George Orwell's *1984*. Orwell reviewed Lewis's novel, which shares many elements with *1984*, positively in the *Manchester Evening News* in 1945. See George Orwell, "The Scientist Takes Over," in idem, *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, vol. xvii, ed. Peter Davidson (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 250-51.

[84] Lewis, *Abolition*, 89.

Lewis and Tolkien's convictions about privileged epistemic status of myth compelled them to confront other cultural groups who offered rival understandings of myth. First and foremost, it was necessary for them to challenge the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropologists who had relativized myth. The implication of anthropological scholarship on myth, as Tolkien and Lewis well knew, was that myth was an artifact of a particular stage of human cultural evolution. Far from having any privileged epistemic status, it was rather a primitive, pre-scientific form of human thought. As noted above, Tolkien's response was on the one hand to remove the wedge that anthropologists had driven between myth and higher forms of rational thought, and on the other hand to call attention to the unquestioned presumption of modern cultural superiority on which anthropological theories of myth rested.

Lewis, as a literary critic by profession and controversialist by nature, was eager to engage with anthropological theories of myth. His conversion set him against the anthropological skepticism about myth that he had previously embraced, even though he continued to accept that anthropology could shed light on the cultural conditions in which particular myths emerged. For instance, he accepted the argument of the Ritualists that most myth emerged as explanations of a ritual.[85] And he saw some merit in the Jungian explanation of myth that focused on archetypes produced by the collective unconscious.[86] But ultimately Lewis turned the methods of his discipline on the anthropologists themselves, arguing that the very proliferation of theories about myth only testified to the indisputable power of myth—they were latter-day quests, with the goal not a grail but the explanation of myth's power.

Because much of Lewis's scholarship was in a field (medieval and renaissance literature)

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[85] See Lewis, *Letters*, iii, 1324.

[86] See C.S. Lewis, "Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism," in *Selected Literary Essays*, 286-300.

that attracted anthropologically-driven myth and ritual criticism, he had good reason to ask whether anthropology really was of benefit to the study of literature. In an essay on "The Anthropological Approach" he set out to discover whether anthropology could make a valuable contribution to literary criticism. Though he acknowledged that anthropologists might well shed light on the anthropological dimensions of myth, he remained skeptical about how valuable such knowledge was for the understanding of literature. Just as anthropologists had brought their methodology to the study of literature, Lewis applied the methods of literary criticism to anthropology. He pointed out that myth and ritual scholars seemed motivated by the idea of uncovering hidden ritual origins of a work of literature. In reference to myth and ritual scholars of the Grail myth, he observed that their work gave the impression "that they have surprised a long-kept secret, that there are depths below the surface, that something which the uninitiated might pass over as a triviality is big with meaning."[87] They were, he argued, inventing around themselves a quest story that gave them an experience that mirrored the experience the myth was intended to invoke. As he wrote to a correspondent, "Their quest for Pagan ritual is itself another romantic quest and gives just the same sort of pleasures as the romances they think they are explaining. The same holds for the Jungians."[88] The would-be debunkers of mythic stories unknowingly succumbed to the power of myth themselves. Lewis's critique of the myth and ritual scholars was thus intended to protect the imaginative power of mythic literature; the methods of anthropology did not comprise that power.

In defending their conception of mythic fiction Lewis and Tolkien were also compelled to challenge competing views of literature, in particular those offered by the modernists and by

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[87] Ibid., 309.

[88] Lewis, *Letters*, iii, 1084. For further comments by Lewis on Jung see idem, "On Science Fiction," in *On Stories*, 66-7.

F.R. Leavis. Much has been written about how a conception of myth was central to a specifically Christian worldview developed by Lewis and Tolkien, but these accounts have typically failed to notice how myth was central to their long-running critique of the British literary establishment and their response to changes in how literature was read and used. Both resisted the idea of literature as a substitute for religion and the notion that literature's chief role was to provide relevant social commentary on contemporary problems. In short, they reacted against the belief that the modern world required a particular kind of "serious" literature, and they made their argument against this position in part by drawing attention to the literary function of myth. Their defense of myth was part of a revolt against a literary establishment that elevated serious literature while denigrating popular literature.

Lewis and Tolkien also had little sympathy for modernist writers and their use of myth. For many modernists the "mythical method" described by Eliot was just that, a method. Myth was one technique, albeit a powerful one, among many in a range of aesthetic techniques available to the modernist writer. But Tolkien and Lewis could not accept an understanding of myth that relegated it to the status of a mere literary gambit. Moreover, both objected to what they saw as the needless obscurity of much modernist writing. Lewis's feelings about modernism manifested most clearly in his intense dislike of T.S. Eliot. Lewis peppered his work with criticisms of Eliot's literary criticism and was highly critical of Eliot's poetry as well. He regarded Eliot as an enemy and only softened his attitude late in his career, when he came to realize that they had much in common.[89] It must be noted, however, that Lewis and Tolkien were not hostile toward all modernists, as evidenced by their friendship and collaboration with Charles Williams.

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[89] On Eliot as an enemy see Lewis, *Letters*, iii, 163-64.

After the Second World War, the view of literature represented by F.R. Leavis and his disciples came to seem like a greater threat than the modernists. Again, Lewis was more outspoken about such matters than Tolkien, but both were united in the view that the Leavisite attempt to substitute literature for religion was pernicious. Throughout his career Lewis made frequent forays into debates about the cultural role of literature. From early on he staked out a position as an opponent of evaluative criticism that aimed to separate "good" from "bad" literature and of the idea that literature must be "serious." Lewis's opposition to such notions came into sharper focus once he moved from Oxford to Cambridge in 1954 and became a member of the same English faculty as Leavis. At Cambridge, Leavis's influence was palpable and inescapable, and the dominance of evaluative literary criticism among the humanities was unquestioned. This dominance led Lewis to remark that, "You were never safe from the philosopher at Oxford; here, never from the Critic."[90] Such an intellectual atmosphere would lead Lewis to produce one of his final books, *An Experiment in Criticism*, which synthesized ideas about judging literature that Lewis had been developing for years.

Almost everything about Lewis's experience with literature had formed him into a person who could not but be hostile to the Leavisite approach to literature. As a boy he had read for sheer pleasure and imaginative enjoyment, and he still maintained that these were among the chief reasons to read. Yet this was an attitude that the Leavisites dismissed as frivolous and juvenile. As a scholar he both studied and defended the value of "old books," most of which were deemed irrelevant by Leavis and his epigones. Finally, Lewis's Christianity kept him from having any sympathy for a program premised on the idea that literature was needed to replace Christianity as a moral guide to life. As one of Lewis's biographers has put it, "Lewis

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[90] Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C.S. Lewis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 293.

was never interested in literature as a substitute for Christian faith," an idea he attacked in

print as early as 1940.[91] And beyond this, for all of Leavis's high-minded notions about the

moral importance of literature, in actuality his brand of criticism tended to produce narrow-

minded readers and critics. In Lewis's view, this worked against the very benefits that literature

could best provide. As he lamented in a letter to J.B. Priestly:

> The actual history of Eng. Lit. as a "Subject" has been a great disappointment to me. My hope was that it would be primarily a historical study that wd. lift people out of (so to speak) their chronological provincialism by plunging them into the thought and feeling of ages other than their own: for the arts are the best Time Machine we have.
>   But all that side of it has been destroyed at Cambridge and is now being destroyed at Oxford too. This is done by a compact, well-organised group of whom Leavis is the head. It has now a stranglehold on the schools as well as the universities (and the High Brow press).[92]

Or, as he argued elsewhere: "This, so far as I can see, is the specific value or good of

literature…it admits us to experiences other than our own."[93] Tolkien never expressed a view on

Leavis, but given the extent to which he shared Lewis's views of literature it is no stretch to

conclude he must have felt similarly to Lewis.

Lewis and Tolkien's attempt to distinguish themselves from the modernists on the one

hand and the Leavisites on the other can be seen as an intervention in a struggle over what might

be called the politics of literary significance. By choosing to write the sort of fiction they did

and by linking that fiction to a particular theory of myth, Lewis and Tolkien were involving

themselves in an ongoing debate of the cultural role of literature in twentieth-century Britain.

Both writers were aware, not least because of their success as authors of popular fiction, of the

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[91] Jacobs, 294. See also C.S. Lewis, "Christianity and Culture," *Theology* 40 (March 1940), 166-79.

[92] Lewis, *Letters*, iii, 1371.

[93] C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* [1961] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 139.

ever-growing size and significance of an educated, mass-reading public. Moreover, they were unusually well-informed about the tastes, ideas, and opinions of this reading public, in large part because they both corresponded habitually with their many "fans." They clearly recognized that any attempt to shape the culture would require reaching many of the common readers who comprised this vast readership. Tolkien and Lewis were convinced that neither the view of literature advanced by the modernists nor that advocated by the Leavisites could satisfy the modern reading public. Modernist literature was simply too obscure, and Leavisite strictures about literature threatened to transform reading into a joyless morality lesson. Thus, when Lewis remarked to Tolkien that there should be more of the stories they liked to read, he did not only mean more mythic fantasy literature, he also meant there should be more fiction of broad appeal that did not pose as "serious" literature. And when Lewis and Tolkien defended reading for pleasure, it did not reflect merely a sentimental attachment to the stories they had read during childhood, it was part of a broader effort to defend the tastes of a public that was embracing their work.

It was not only the market that responded to the fiction produced by Tolkien and Lewis; a number of prominent writers and critics welcomed their mythic fiction as an affront to prevailing critical strictures. When the novels of Tolkien and Lewis began to appear, they seemed to many to exemplify a form of literature that was significant in a way that prevailing critical norms could not accommodate. The dominant view among the literary establishment, due in large part to the influence of the Leavisites, was a sense that culturally relevant fiction must be "realistic" in the sense of taking its subject matter from everyday life in the real word rather than from an invented world.

As writers of fantastic fiction who were anxious that their work be taken seriously,

this clearly was not a view that Tolkien and Lewis could accept. In his last major critical work,

Lewis argued that the critical demand that serious fiction must be realistic or "true to life," was

unreasonable when examined closely. Lewis acknowledged that, "The dominant taste at present

demands realism of content,"[94] but he urged that this standard both relied on a highly selective

understanding of "realism" and excluded much unquestionably important literature. He made a

distinction between two independent types of realism: presentational realism, "the art of bringing

something close to us, making it palpable and vivid, by sharply observed or sharply imagined

detail," and "realism of content," which demands that fiction be "probable or 'true to life.'"[95]

The second sense of realism was, in Lewis's opinion, unduly influential in contemporary

criticism:

> No one that I know of has indeed laid down in so many words that a fiction
> cannot be fit for adult an civilized reading unless it represents life as we have all
> found it to be, or probably shall find it to be, in experience. But some such
> assumption seems to lurk tacitly in the background of much criticism and literary
> discussion. We feel it in the widespread neglect or disparagement of the romantic,
> the idyllic, and the fantastic, and the readiness to stigmatise instances of these as
> escapism….We notice also that "truth to life" is held to have a claim on
> literature that overrides all other considerations.[96]

The demand for realism was thus rigged against the fantastic or mythical. Such a view failed to

acknowledge that fantastic stories could also be "true to life" in their own way while simply

excluding from the realm of serious literature most of what was written prior to the nineteenth

century. As Lewis put it elsewhere, "most 'popular' fiction, if only it embodies a real myth, is so

very much more serious than what is generally called 'serious' literature. For it deals with the

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[94] Lewis, *Experiment*, 60.

[95] Ibid. 57; 59.

[96] Ibid., 60.

permanent and inevitable…."[97] The demand for realism of content could simply not

accommodate an entire range of fictions, from the story of Oedipus to science fiction to *The

Canterbury Tales*, not to mention the stories produced by Lewis and Tolkien themselves. In

making his argument, Lewis was drawing on the ideas Tolkien had formulated in his Lang

lecture; he was addressing from a different angle the charge of escapism that Tolkien had then

attempted to rebut.[98] Their attack on prevailing critical assumptions was not simply an

intervention in a debate about literary taste in which the stakes had to do with critical authority.

Rather, their arguments were an intellectual move necessitated by the need to claim the status of

"serious literature" for the kind of fiction they produced. Tolkien and Lewis's challenge to

critical standards was in aid of their larger attempt to establish mythic fiction as a genre that did

unique epistemic work.

Significantly, however, Lewis and Tolkien were not alone in chaffing against the

constraints imposed by the dogma of "realism": numerous postwar writers and critics shared

their resentment of contemporary criticism for similar reasons. These literary figures, who often

had little sympathy with other aspects of Lewis and Tolkien's cultural politics, nonetheless

welcomed novels that seemed to flout prevailing critical constraints successfully. This explains

the diverse range of often unlikely figures who admired Lewis and Tolkien's work: writers who

wanted to produce or endorse work that did not conform to the dominant critical standards saw

Lewis and Tolkien as champions of their cause. Tolkien's unlikely admirers included W.H.

Auden and the activist and author Naomi Mitchison, whose political views could not have been

more at odds with Tolkien's. As for Lewis, his fiction was admired by figures ranging from

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[97] C.S. Lewis, "The Mythopoeic Gift of Rider Haggard," 100.

[98] See Lewis, *Experiment*, 70.

William S. Burroughs to Kenneth Tynan. In each case, a key factor behind the admiration was a conviction that fantastic fiction could deal with contemporary concerns and therefore merited respect as a form of literature. Consequently, the status achieved by Lewis and Tolkien's fiction was in part due to the fact that their work and the motivations that drove it intersected with a growing reaction against prevailing definitions of what constituted serious literature. Lewis and Tolkien thus helped initiate a shift in literary opinion that would culminate in the 1960s in a widespread revolt by many leading writers against the so-called "social" novel.

Conclusion: Mythic Fiction for the Masses

Lewis and Tolkien's views on the nature and importance of myth might well have remained a footnote in cultural and intellectual history were it not for the tremendous popularity achieved by the mythic fiction they produced. They produced such fiction in order to both entertain themselves and to convey their moral vision in popular form that could resonate with a wide audience. And their fiction did resonate with a wide audience as measured not only by sales figures but by diversity of audience. Few writers have ever appealed to both the establishment and the counterculture as Tolkien did: in the late 1960s his admirers included virtually all of Harold Wilson's cabinet at the same time that *The Lord of the Rings* was inspiring rock groups like Led Zeppelin.[99] Though it was not the cultural phenomenon that Tolkien's fiction was, Lewis's work still met with an enthusiastic readership that included figures ranging from avant garde science fiction writers like Brian Aldiss to fellow fantasists like the artist and author Mervyn Peake. In part this is because perhaps the shared central theme of their fiction—a

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[99] For a fascinating study of Tolkien's influence on Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the environmental movement in Britain see Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

critique of the modern desire to exercise control through science and technology, which was

often linked in their work with anti-imperialist, anti-establishment, and environmentalist

themes—resonated with many postwar Britons, and increasingly so during the 1960s.

Sales figures and poll results both attest to the cultural influence of Tolkien and Lewis's

fiction. In 1964 Tolkien's publisher reported that sales of *The Lord of the Rings* had topped

186,850 volumes.[100] In 1996 the British bookseller Waterstone's, in cooperation with the BBC

Channel 4 program *Book Choice*, conducted a poll to identify the 100 greatest books of the

century. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* topped the list, with *The Hobbit* finishing in 19th place.

Subsequent polls by the *Daily Telegraph*, the Folio Society, the television program *Bookworm*,

and Mori confirmed the popularity of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: the book came first in all of

them but the Mori poll, in which it came second. [101]   In the Waterstone's-BBC poll, Lewis's

novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* came in 21st.[102] Though such polls may be far

from testaments to the impeccable literary taste of the British public, they do point to how

popular the fiction of Tolkien and Lewis remains decades after it first appeared. Not for nothing

are all of their novels are still in print.

Despite their tremendous commercial success, however, ultimately Tolkien and Lewis's

attempt to establish myth's privileged epistemic status must be judged a mixed success. As

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[100] *Fifty Years of Publishing Books That Matter* [author unknown] (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), 5. See also the exhaustive investigation of *The Lord of the Ring's* publishing history compiled by the online reference *An Illustrated Tolkien Bibliography*: http://www.tolkienbooks.net/html/lotr-print-runs.html.

[101] The poll results are reported in Shippey, *Author*, xx-xxi. Tolkien's place at the top of the poll left many critics in Britain aghast, a reaction analyzed in idem xxi-xxiv and 305-328. See also Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 1-12.

[102] Given the multiplicity of editions and publishers, exact sales figures for Lewis's novels are probably impossible to determine. Two of his biographers comment in passing on the strong sales of Lewis's fiction, though without providing citations. See Jacobs, x; and Michael White, *C.S. Lewis: Creator of Narnia* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2005), 122.

noted above, the cultural impact of their work is undeniable, as indicated by sales figures and opinion polls. Tolkien and Lewis had begun their endeavor to produce a body of mythic fiction when Lewis observed that there were not enough stories of the sort they wanted to read. As it turned out, many others wanted to read the same sort stories as well. But even though Tolkien and Lewis's fiction enjoyed a wide readership, this does not of course mean that readers were embracing the notion of myth that the authors advocated.

Though it is difficult to conclude whether or not they succeeded in clearing a cultural space for myth, it can be concluded that they succeeded in clearing a space for fictions of fantasy and enchantment. The fiction of Lewis and Tolkien did not succeed in establishing myth an epistemologically privileged category, but it did establish a set of literary conventions that have proved remarkably influential and popular. Lewis's Narnia novels revived and reworked an older British genre of adventure novels centered on schoolchildren. The success these books enjoyed has inspired a host of often highly successful imitators, the most recent of which is Harry Potter series. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* essentially invented the genre of fantasy fiction, one of the most commercially successful genres in the modern publishing industry. More directly relevant for this study, Lewis's "space trilogy' of science fiction novels served as examples for the "new wave" science fiction writers who attempted to transform science fiction into a serious genre of literature in the 1960s.[103]

Lewis and Tolkien's failure to restore mythic truth-value to literature and establish mythic fiction as a counterweight to other cultural forces was in part a function of a deep tension in their thinking about the cultural role of the type of fiction they created. On the one hand, they took a very elevated view of their genre by arguing that the myths they produced communicated

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[103] See Chapter Four below.

deeply important truths, and on the other repeatedly emphasized that literature should be

consumed for pleasure rather than for improvement.[104] There were thus two poles to their

intervention in the politics of literary significance: a serious pole built around the notion that the

kind of fiction they produced had a key cultural role to play in mediating perennial truths through

a contemporary mythic format, and a more frivolous pole centered on the idea that literature

should not be read for enjoyment and not as a substitute for religion. Like the oppositely charged

poles of two magnets, these naturally repelled each other and could be held together only with

difficulty. In the end, it was arguably the more frivolous pole that had the greater impact on the

culture. Tolkien and Lewis's contribution to the struggle over modernity in twentieth-century-

Britain was not to convince people that the truths mediated by myth were a necessary

complement to those produced by science, but rather to give rise to a genre of "fantastic" fiction

to which readers could turn for a dose of enchantment and imaginative escape.

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[104] For a criticism of some implications of this latter pole of Tolkien and Lewis's thought by a contemporary see Donald Davie, *These Companions: Recollections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 170.

CHAPTER 5

COPING WITH THE CATASTROPHE:

J.G. BALLARD, THE BRITISH NEW WAVE, AND MYTHIC SCIENCE FICTION

One can almost make the case that science fiction…in fact constitutes the strongest literary tradition of the twentieth century, and may well be its authentic literature. Within its pages, as in our lives, archaic myth and scientific apocalypse collide and fuse….[I]t has tried to respond to the most significant events of our time—the threat of nuclear war, over-population, the computer revolution, the possibilities and abuses of medical science, the ecological dangers to our planet, the consumer society as benign tyranny—topics that haunt our minds but are scarcely considered by the mainstream novel.

J.G. Ballard

Introduction

In 1973 a manuscript reviewer for a major British publisher sat horrified by what she was reading. As she turned the pages she grew increasingly disturbed by the tale of a group of Londoners who are sexually fascinated by car crashes. The wife of a prominent psychiatrist, she was certain the manuscript was the product of a mind that was utterly deranged. What she was reading was not a novel at all; it was evidence of hopeless psychopathology. She returned the manuscript with the recommendation: "This author is beyond psychiatric help. DO NOT PUBLISH."[1]

The author of the work was a young author with a devoted cult following named James Graham Ballard, who had made his name as a writer of short stories and novels that straddled the boundary between science fiction and serious literature. When he learned about the reader's report he was elated, because to him the diagnosis of insanity was proof of a total artistic success. He had intended the book to be profoundly disturbing so that its readers would be forced to

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[1] See Graeme Revell, "Essay on J.G. Ballard," *RE/Search* no. 8/9 (1984): 144. See also Ballard's own account in "J.G. Ballard," interview by Alan Burns, in Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet, eds., *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss Their Working Methods* (London: Allison and Busby, 1981), 22-23.

confront and recognize ominous undercurrents of violence in their own culture. In the event, the publisher, Jonathan Cape, did not suppress the book as the reviewer had recommended. Knowing that a novel by Ballard would sell, and a controversial one even more so, it published the book under the title *Crash*, and its controversial reception quickly transformed Ballard's moderate fame into something more like infamy. But stirring up controversy had not been Ballard's goal. Like his other fictions, he conceived of the book as a contemporary myth, which by exposing worrying cultural trends would enable people to cope with them. It was coping rather than controversy that Ballard aimed to achieve with what he called his "myths of the near future."

Why J.G. Ballard believed that his fiction functioned as myth in this way is the question that drives this chapter, which will place Ballard's work in a new context by examining his use of the concept of myth as means of appraising and critiquing modernity. Ballard rose to prominence in the 1960s as writer associated with the British "New Wave" of science fiction writers, a group that included Michael Moorcock and Brian Aldiss. These writers sought to reorient science fiction as a genre, turning it away from clichéd conventions and toward relevant social critique. Because of Ballard and the New Wave's uneasy relationship to established literary genres, scholars have struggled to contextualize their work. Approaching them from the perspective of cultural and intellectual history, rather than literary criticism, I argue that they are helpfully understood as part of a diverse group of twentieth-century writers and intellectuals who employed the category of myth as means of social and cultural criticism. In the case of the New Wave, this critique targeted natural science's epistemic pretensions, the alienating effect of modern urban life, the emotional estrangement produced by modern mass media and communications, and the advance of modern technocratic society. This chapter will examine these themes by focusing in particular on Ballard's thought from the early 1960s to the early 1980s, because he proved to be the most prominent and influential writer to emerge from the New Wave.

By exposing Ballard's use of myth as a response to modernity, one can see his project as part of a key cultural struggle that defined twentieth-century Britain: the struggle between advocates and opponents of modernity. In scholarship on post-war Britain, this struggle is typically understood as a contest between opposing camps in the "two cultures" controversy. The most notable critics of modernity in this controversy were F.R. Leavis and his disciples. Allegiance to the humanities was the basis of their opposition to the scientific and technological advancement advocated by C.P. Snow and his allies, who shared a liberal confidence that such advancement translated into social progress. Appreciating the work of Ballard and other mythic thinkers significantly alters our understanding of the cultural struggle over modernity in post-war Britain by allowing us to see that it extended well beyond the parameters and categories of the two cultures controversy. In particular, an examination of Ballard's work reveals how, in the search for an alternative critique of modernity, many thinkers and writers turned to the discourse of mythic thinking. This turn to myth was justified by claims that myth gave access to deeper truths than historical or scientific explanation, and that it offered a unique means of coping with the psychological pressures that modernity brought to bear on the individual.

This psychological concern was one of the central themes of Ballard's work and one that linked him to other twentieth-century British mythic thinkers: Ballard saw the modern world, dominated by science and technology, as profoundly threatening to the individual psyche. He argued that living in the environment he called "the modern technological landscape"—an environment he thought that Britain represented more than anywhere else—produced deep psychological turmoil and alienation in the individual. But mediating between the outer world of the modern technological landscape and the inner world of the psyche, myth could help individuals cope with modernity. Precisely what Ballard meant by this and how he came to believe it becomes clearer when his work is understood as part of a unique literary movement that emerged in Britain during the 1960s.

Which Way to Inner Space?: The Rise of the New Wave

A key context for understanding Ballard's views on the mythic nature of fiction is his association with the group of writers known as the British New Wave. This was a group of writers who saw science fiction as the literary genre best suited to analyzing the contemporary world. Yet at the same time, the New wave writers sought redirect the genre by abandoning trite, pulp-science fiction conventions and developing science fiction's potential as an experimental form of writing. In Britain, the New Wave's most prominent members were Ballard, Michael Moorcock and Brian Aldiss, all of whom have since built reputations as leading contemporary novelists. These three did not share all of the same literary inclinations, and they had varying degrees of enthusiasm for the tradition of science fiction. Yet each of them believed science fiction was the only form of literature capable of addressing the problems of life in a society increasingly shaped by modern science, technology, and media.

The New Wave in Britain initially coalesced in 1964 when Michael Moorcock took over editorship of the magazine *New Worlds*. In an attempt to cultivate a highbrow, avante garde sensibility, he immediately began a concerted effort to improve the quality of writing in *New Worlds* and to this end solicited ambitious, experimental contributions. The tone of the magazine was set by aggressive editorials and articles, mainly written by Moorcock and Ballard, that took aim at the literary establishment, obsolete traditions and social institutions, and scientific orthodoxy while touting a self-proclaimed *New Worlds*-led popular literary renaissance. As Moorcock proclaimed in the first issue of *New Worlds* that he edited, "A *popular* literary renaissance is around the corner. Together, we can accelerate that renaissance."[2] According to Moorcock and Ballard, this renaissance would be produced by grafting experimental literary

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[2] Michael Moorcock, "A New Literature for the Space Age," *New Worlds* 142 (May-June 1964): 2. Italics in original.

techniques onto a form of science fiction that had cultural relevance and mass appeal. This

amalgam, a new breed of science fiction, was summed up in their frequent use of the terms

"speculative fiction" or "speculative fantasy" as substitutes for science fiction. The New Wave

was characterized by a distinct air of rebellion against American cultural hegemony, because the

popular literary renaissance proclaimed in the pages of *New Worlds* could only be achieved by

overthrowing the genre conventions that defined traditional science fiction, and these were

largely American conventions. Part of *New Worlds*'s appeal, though, was that it tempered its

revolutionary zeal with a sense of humor. For instance, the artist Eduardo Paolozzi, a friend of

several of the New Wave writers, was listed on the *New Worlds* masthead as "Aeronautics

Advisor."[3]

The New Wave was a literary movement that positioned itself as an outsider, populist

movement in opposition to a complacent literary establishment that did not engage with

contemporary life and was content reproducing versions of the nineteenth-century "social novel."

Driven by a concern that contemporary British literature was too elitist and was not adequately

addressing contemporary concerns, *New Worlds*, and by extension the New Wave, sought to

combine literary experimentalism with literary populism. Thus, there was a tension, if not a

contradiction, at the heart of the New Wave movement. New Wave writers claimed that a

strength of science fiction was its status as popular genre. Yet at the same time there was an

element of cultural uplift in their project because they sought to replace certain science fiction

conventions with experimental, avante garde literary methods.[4] There are good reasons to take

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[3] Though not everyone got the joke. When Lord Goodman, then chairman of the Arts Council, was considering withdrawing the Council's support of *New Worlds*, he was reassured when he saw Paolozzi's name on the masthead. See Michael Moorcock, "Introduction," in idem, ed., *New Worlds: An Anthology* (London: Fontana, 1983), 23.

[4] This was a tension the New Wave writers themselves were aware of. See for example J.G. Ballard's editorial "Which Way to Inner Space?," *New Worlds* 118 (May 1962): 2-3, 116-18, in which he acknowledges that if the

the New Wave writers' revolutionary rhetoric with a grain of salt, for it contained more than

a little savvy self-promotion. It is ironic that, after *New Worlds*'s distributor went bankrupt

(because of reasons unrelated to the popularity of the magazine), the magazine was kept afloat in

the late 1960s by a grant from the Arts Council arranged largely by Aldiss and a sympathetic

Angus Wilson.[5] The grant helped bridge the period until a new distributor was found. The

movement that positioned itself against the mainstream literary was helped along by its

patronage.

In the end, the initial success and popularity of *New Worlds* under Moorcock was

mitigated by publishing and distribution difficulties. Moorcock did improve the sales of *New*

Worlds after he became editor, and was able to keep many of the old subscribers while attracting

new ones. And his talent for publicity attracted some media attention that increased newsstand

sales. But not all of the attention that *New Worlds* attracted was beneficial or welcome. In 1968

the magazine serialized Norman Spinrad's novella *Bug Jack Barron*, which contained its share of

obscenities and graphic sexual content. This prompted questions in Parliament, with the

Minister of Arts being asked to explain why taxpayers' money was being spent on such a

publication. After the *Bug Jack Barron* episode, W.H. Smith and John Menzies quit stocking the

magazine on grounds of "obscenity and libel," even though all the characters in the Spinrad

serial were fictitious.   This was a fatal blow to *New Worlds*'s circulation, which was not meant

New Wave project is to succeed, "most of the hard work will fall…on the readers. The onus is on them to accept a more oblique narrative style, understated themes, private symbols and vocabularies." The editorial is reprinted in J.G. Ballard, *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (New York: Picador, 1996); see p. 198.

[5] See Michael Moorcock, "Introduction," *New Worlds: An Anthology*, 19. The story of *New Worlds*'s eventful history is also told in Colin Greenland, *The Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British "New Wave" in Science Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), chapter 2, "The 'Field' and the 'Wave': The History of *New Worlds*."

to be "another Arts Council-supported little magazine" and hence depended on newsstand

sales.[6] Though W.H. Smith eventually relented after a few months and took the magazine back

in the face of critical publicity (which pointed out Smith's evident hypocrisy in pulling *New

Worlds* while continuing to stock several magazines that were plainly pornographic), its

circulation never recovered. Unfortunately, this was just when *New Worlds* was beginning to hit

its stride in terms of issues that fulfilled Moorcock's original editorial vision from cover to cover

and in terms of the consistency, quality and originality of the writing. Moorcock and friends

continued to publish *New Worlds* as a monthly for subscribers until April 1970, and then as an

irregular publication throughout the 1970s.

Nevertheless, the fate of the New Wave was not tied to the fate of *New Worlds*. Though

New Worlds faltered, the careers of the core New Wave writers did not. Aldiss, Moorcock, and

Ballard only gained in popularity as novelists from the 1960s, and most of their works are still in

print. In addition, by the late 1970s they were sought after as columnists and reviewers a wide

range of widely circulated publications, including *Time Out*, the *TLS*, the *New Statesman*, *New

Society*, *Books and Bookmen*, *Vogue*, *The Guardian*, and later *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The

Observer* and *The Independent*.

The New Wave writers had several reasons for seeing science fiction as a promising

vehicle for their literary movement. To begin with, it was an undeniably popular genre with a

ready-made readership. But beyond that, it was a genre that operated below the radar of the

influential literary critics, who, with a few exceptions, deemed it unworthy of their attention. As

such, it was a genre that allowed for more freedom of experimentation. As Moorcock put it, "Sf

was attractive because it was overlooked by the critics and it could be written

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[6] Moorcock, "Introduction," *New Worlds: An Anthology*, 22.

unselfconsciously….There was no sense of having someone looking over your shoulder."[7]

This conviction went hand in hand with their belief that the nineteenth-century style social novel had become obsolete and detached from everyday life. It simply was not up to the task of analyzing mid-twentieth-century life, whereas science fiction was uniquely equipped to do so. As Ballard said, "[O]nly science fiction is fully equipped to become the literature of tomorrow, and it is the only medium with an adequate vocabulary of ideas and situations."[8] As these words suggest, the New Wave writers shared a conviction that the most important forces shaping twentieth-century Britain were not politics or economics but science, technology and the media. This was the main reason the New Wave writers turned to science fiction. Their belief that the mainstream novel was not adequately addressing these forces led them to seek an alternative literary vehicle for their concerns, and science fiction was their solution.

But if science fiction was the only genre properly suited to describing and analyzing contemporary life, it also needed to be modified in order to serve this purpose in a relevant way. New Wave writers thought that certain science fiction conventions and tropes made the genre an effective medium of cultural critique, but only if these were appropriately modified to fit contemporary conditions. For instance, science fiction's traditional interest in the future could be adapted and put to good use by New Wave writers. Whereas science fiction usually exhibited a fascination with the predicting the achievements of science in the distant future, New Wave writers often projected current trends merely into the *near* future. This allowed for analysis of contemporary trends through a focus on their latent content. In other words, New Wave writers used the future not as prophecy but as a metaphor for the present; the future was used to

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[7] Ibid., 16.

[8] Ballard, "Which Way to Inner Space?," *A User's Guide to the Millennium*, 198.

interrogate contemporary reality. In addition, science fiction's traditional fascination with

science and technology could be modified by New Wave writers, who were deeply concerned

about the dramatic changes being caused in Britain by science and technology. But whereas

science fiction writers were typically optimistic and celebratory about scientific and

technological advances, the New Wave writers viewed the changes being brought about by

science and technology with a critical and ironic eye. This perspective was evident, for example,

in their fascination with the concept of entropy as a metaphor for social and psychic

disintegration. Finally, in New Wave writing gone was science fiction's customary interest in

alien planets and outer space, replaced by a interest in the "alien" suburban landscapes of

contemporary Britain and in what Ballard termed "inner space," or the psychological tensions

produced by modernity. But Ballard urged that if writers wanted to explore this territory it was

not more stories about outer space but rather an "*inner* space-suit which is needed, and it is up to

science fiction to build it!"[9]

The Nature of the Catastrophe: the New Wave in Historical Context

This concern with psychological well-being in the contemporary world was a hallmark of

how the New Wave movement responded to changes in British society and culture that were

becoming apparent in the 1960s. Indeed, a hypersensitivity to these changes and their

psychological implications was a basic feature of New Wave sensibility. Aldiss argued that

because Britain had changed so dramatically—losing an empire in a matter of decades, for

example—British writers tended to be more comfortable with and attuned to change than

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[9] Ibid.

American writers.[10] Changes like the rise of mass media and advertising in a newly affluent

consumer society, psychedelic drug culture, changing sexual mores, the increasingly

technological modern landscape, the Cold War, the dying gasps of British imperialism and the

first stirrings of a new American imperialism all reverberate throughout New Wave fiction.

New Wave writers shared a sense that the 1960s were a time of dramatic and turbulent changes

that could not be ignored or stopped. Their understanding of these changes of the 1960s

reflected their understanding of the twentieth century as a whole, which they saw as a century of

violence, disruption, and apocalypse.

The views of the New Wave writers were both typical and atypical of a generation

shaped by World War II and the rapid social changes of the 1950s and 1960s that followed it.

Politically the new wave writers tended toward an anti-authoritarian libertarianism. Ballard

claimed that his politics were formed largely by his youth in Shanghai and coming of age in a

detention camp, experiences that taught him to "detest barbed wire, whether of the real or

figurative variety," a sentiment the other New Wave writers would have certainly endorsed.[11]

For the most part, they had little interest in party politics and favored a vaguely defined populist

democratic socialism, in some cases, as with Moorcock, tinged with anarchism.[12] Concerns

about racial intolerance, environmental degradation, and overpopulation featured prominently in

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[10] Brian Aldiss, *The Shape of Further Things* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), 91. First published in the U.K. by Faber & Faber in 1970.

[11] J.G. Ballard, interview by Thomas Frick, in *Paris Review* 94 (winter 1984): 158.

[12] Though in the late 1950s Moorcock did work as an editor for *Current Topics*, the policy discussion magazine of the Liberal party and later canvassed for the Labour party. The problems of finding an appropriate political label for Moorcock are manifest, as he himself has acknowledged: "My own politics is a mix. I'm a person of the left who writes mostly, at the moment, for right-wing journals and newspapers like *The Spectator* and *The Telegraph*. I'm an anarcho-syndicalist who believes in keeping the British House of Lords (unelected upper house) unreformed. What label exists for that mix?" See interview with Moorcock at http://www.wotmania.com/fantasymessageboardshowmessage.asp?MessageID=159690.

their work. Such concerns are not unexpected from a group that was very much a part of

London counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet the New Wave project can also be seen as

an implicit critique of the narrowness of politics in post-war Britain, based on the conviction that

existing political categories and values could not address the changes being brought about be

science and technology. As Ballard explained, "the modern communications landscape creates a

different system of needs and obligations."[13] What he meant was that traditional British politics,

driven by class interests, had become obsolete. This critique of politics was also a shrewd bid

for cultural authority. By defining politics as irrelevant while simultaneously arguing that their

brand of science fiction fulfilled an indispensable cultural function as the authentic literature of

the late-twentieth century, the New Wave writers sought to position themselves as uniquely

equipped to confront the changes shaping Britain.

A suspicion of authorities and powerful elites also ran through their work, manifested in

criticism of people across the political spectrum: conservatives who resisted change and

defended elite privilege, proselytizing Marxists who sought to enforce an ideological orthodoxy,

the self-satisfaction of the British middle class, American cultural hegemony and militarism,

government ministers, international corporations, and, above all, scientists. New Wave writers

frequently portrayed scientists as obsessed and voyeuristic, overcome by deviant subconscious

impulses and tending toward insanity. The scientists imagined by the New Wave mask perverse

obsessions with a façade of objective expertise and use the context and apparatus of the

laboratory to gratify those obsessions. Typically, they are in the service of big business or big

government. Whereas in traditional science fiction the scientist was represented as a hero, in

New Wave science fiction the scientist became typically a pitiful, and often a repugnant,

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[13] Ballard, interview by Frick, 158.

character. This debunking of the scientist's authority reflected the New Wave assumption

that science had failed to realize its potential as a liberating, revolutionary social force. Instead it

had been diverted to serve the needs of governments and corporations.

Interestingly, this same theme of liberatory potential giving way to authoritarianism was

evident in the New Wave writers' view of America. Most of them grew up admiring American

ideas and American culture, seeing it as "a bastion of freedom and continued revolution." To

them America seemed a less socially rigid and class-bound society than Britain. Consequently,

"It was a sad thing to see that image crumble after the [Second World] war."[14] The Vietnam

War turned this idealization of America into disillusionment and was one reason they rejected

the benign, optimistic vision of the future offered in much American science fiction.   The writer

American writer Norman Spinrad was in a unique position to observe this process of

disillusionment. Spinrad knew many of the New Wave writers and had some of his work

published in *New Worlds* under Moorcock's editorship. Spinrad noted:

> I was in Europe during a piece of the Viet Nam War…the war had created a lot
> of European anti-Americanism, which of course was to be expected. But the
> tenor of it was peculiar. The real gut-feeling had little to with the plight of the
> Vietnamese. It was a feeling of sorrow, of loss, of betrayal. Europeans felt
> diminished by what America was doing, abandoned by the "Leader of the Free
> World," let down by something they had believed in.[15]

American power had arguably saved the lives of Moorcock, Ballard, and Aldiss in World War II;

certainly all three were thankful for American intervention in the War and had good reason to be.

Moorcock had dodged bombs in Blitz and feared a German invasion, Ballard and his family had

been the verge of execution by the Japanese in China, and Aldiss had been poised to invade

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[14] Brian Aldiss, "Magic and Bare Boards," in idem and Harry Harrison, eds., *Hell's Cartographers: Some Personal Histories of Science Fiction Writers* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), 190.

[15] Norman Spinrad, *The Star Spangled Future* (New York: Ace, 1979), 6.

Japan with his army division. Because American intervention prevented all such possibilities from materializing it was easy for them to take a positive view of American power. Vietnam shattered these feelings and put the New Wave writers on guard against an America whose power seemed to be transforming from benign to imperialistic.

Strangely, commentators on the New Wave writers have for the most part failed to notice the critique of imperialism that is present in their work, a theme that is tied to their views of American power. Ballard and Aldiss in particular had direct experience of imperialism, and the conflict between competing imperialism projects, in their formative years. Ballard's father was directly involved with commercial ventures in China, and Ballard and his family later became victims of Japanese imperialism. Aldiss served with the British army in Burma during World War II, where he saw how British imperialism had oppressed colonized peoples.[16] And during the war he had ample opportunity to observe the brutality of Japanese imperialism. This experience of imperialism translated into a suspicion of American power that was confirmed by the Vietnam War. American invasions of Britain and Europe would become a common trope in New Wave fiction. For instance, Ballard prefaced his 1977 short story "Theatre of War" with the comment that, in the event of a class war in Britain, "I take it for granted that despite its unhappy experience in South East Asia the intervention of the United States to defend its military and economic investments would be even more certain that it was in Viet Nam."[17] New

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[16] An experience Aldiss novelized in *A Soldier Erect* and *A Rude Awakening*. Other fiction by Aldiss that reflects on imperialism, both British and otherwise, includes his novel *The Dark Light Years* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964) and the story "So Far From Prague," in Langdon Jones, ed., *The New S.F.: An Original Anthology of Modern Speculative Fiction* (London: Hutchison & Co Ltd, 1969), 55-70.

[17] J.G. Ballard, "Theatre of War," in *Myths of the Near Future* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), 118. See also Ballard's 1969 short story "The Killing Ground," in *J.G. Ballard: The Complete Short Stories* (London: Flamingo, 2001), 781-87. For further examples of New Wave writings the deal with imperialism see Moorcock's novels *A Cure for Cancer* (London: Allison and Busby, 1971) and *Breakfast in the Ruins* (London: New English Library, 1972); and Aldiss's *The Dark Light Years*.

Wave treatments of imperialism often depicted the entropic dissipation of imperial projects, suggesting that such endeavors were ultimately doomed, the twentieth-century American imperial project no less than the nineteenth-century British one. If entropy was a powerful metaphor for the failure of science, the New Wave writers decided it could be a similarly powerful metaphor for the legacy of imperialism.

Given their iconoclasm and anti-authoritarianism, the New Wave writers might have been expected to take some inspiration from the steady stream of acerbic, belligerent literature poured forth in the 1950s and '60s by the Angry Young Men. However, both Moorcock and Ballard have declared that they had no taste for the literature of the Angry Young Men and felt no sympathy for the social and political concerns that motivated it. This was because the literary approach of the Angry Young Men was too traditional and their social and political concerns too narrow. From the perspective of the New Wave, the ironic truth about the literature of the Angry Young Men was that it was "worn-out, cliché-ridden, laborious, seemingly the tail-end of a literary movement which had begun in the twenties and petered out by the forties."[18] But beyond this, the anti-authoritarianism of the Angry Young Men took aim at targets that were altogether too small and petty. Aldiss explained that, though for generational reasons he could identify with Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and Amis's *Lucky Jim*, their merely "social" concerns were too limited to serve as an agenda for his fiction. The event that dramatized this above all was the dropping of the first atomic bomb, which showed that nuclear power was something greater than the insular social concerns that preoccupied the Angry Young Men.[19]

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[18] Moorcock, "Introduction," *New Worlds: An Anthology*, 13. For Ballard's caustic assessment of the Angry Young Men see idem, "Memories of Greeneland," in *User's Guide to the Millennium*, 138; and Charles Platt, *Who Writes Science Fiction?* (Manchester: Savoy Books, 1980), 250.

[19] Aldiss, "Magic and Bare Boards," 189.

The New Wave writers agreed that the use of atomic weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the beginning of a new historical era, but they refrained from opposing all use of nuclear weapons and technology. Their feelings about the atomic bomb and nuclear power were complex and ambivalent. Both Ballard and Aldiss were convinced that the atom bomb had saved their lives by ending the Second World War. In Ballard's case this meant that the Japanese did not have time to carry out their plan of transferring the inhabitants of his internment camp to the countryside where they could be executed in secrecy. In Aldiss's case this meant his division did not have to invade Japan: "When the Bomb was dropped, my division was in India….So I had good reason to rejoice in the flattening of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. My bacon was saved."[20] But Aldiss's words should not be seen as an indication that the New Wave writers took the dawn of the nuclear age lightly. As anyone could see, it was clearly a portentous development, and the New Wave writers recognized the seriousness of the bomb's implications. The bomb became one more metaphor for the threats posed by modern science. As Patrick Parrinder has explained, the New Wave writers "began to exploit post-nuclear nightmares as a way of questioning the scientific enterprise as a whole."[21] Perhaps the best known example is Ballard's acclaimed short story "The Terminal Beach," in which a former military pilot named Traven is driven by unconscious motives to the island Eniwetok. There, in a "wilderness of weapons, aisles, towers, and blockhouses" desolated by atomic and hydrogen weapons tests—a synthetic, manmade landscape that conjures up associations with "a vast system of derelict

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H.G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), 145.

concrete motorways,"—he begins a quest for psychological fulfillment.[22] This quest is in part an attempt to come to terms with the death of his wife and son in, significantly, an auto accident, as well as an attempt to deal with the "full load of cosmic guilt" he carries due to his involvement as a military pilot with atomic weapons.[23] The "frantic highways" where Traven's wife and son were killed are somehow linked in his mind to the landscape of Eniwetok. As the story progresses it becomes clear that the death-haunted atomic wasteland of Eniwetok is a metaphor for the automobile dominated technological landscape of modernity in which Traven's wife and son met their death. The apocalyptic technological destruction represented by Eniwetok is a symbol for the prosaic technological destruction that takes places daily on highways.

This apocalypticism was behind two words that recurred throughout the writings of Ballard and the New Wave used as labels for the times: "catastrophe" and "disaster." The implication of the words was that modernity, and in particular the twentieth century, is a catastrophe that has *already* happened and *continues* to happen, constantly amplified in new ways. Aldiss once remarked that he really had no faith other than "belief in Catastrophe."[24] And it was no coincidence that Ballard's first four novels, *The Wind from Nowhere* (1962, later disavowed by Ballard as hackwork undertaken out of necessity), *Drowned World* (1962), *The Burning World* (1964; revised and reissued in 1965 as *The Drought*), and *The Crystal World* (1966), were all disaster stories. The modern catastrophe could not be reversed, but it could be confronted, analyzed, and described. The question, "What is the exact nature of the

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[22] J.G. Ballard, "The Terminal Beach," in idem, *Chronopolis and Other Stories* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), 51. First published in *New Worlds* in 1964.

[23] Ibid., 62.

[24] Aldiss, "Magic and Bare Boards," 208.

catastrophe?" echoed throughout New Wave writing as an unofficial slogan, and the attempt

to answer it was central to the New Wave project.[25] Ballard placed the catastrophic disruption

around 1945, since which time "the specters of mass psychosis stride across the communications

landscape (the specters of the atom bomb, of the Nazi death camps, of the misuse of science, and

so forth)…."[26] The 1960s in a sense amplified the catastrophe, because it was then that modern

media began to emerge and saturate the psyche with images of these "specters." Aldiss and

Moorcock echoed this view of a historical rupture in 1945, the real meaning of which only

became apparent in the 1960s.[27] When asked about the nature of the catastrophe in an interview,

Ballard explained with reference to his experimental novel *The Atrocity Exhibition*:

> Well, it is happening. Even the stories in *The Atrocity Exhibition* are disaster
> stories of a kind. The book is about the communications explosion of the '60's.
> From my point of view, the '60's started in 1963 with the assassination of
> President Kennedy—his death and Vietnam presided over the whole of the '60's.
> Those two events, transmitted through television and mass communications,
> overshadowed the whole decade—a sort of institutionalized disaster area."[28]

The New Wave writers thought that a unique feature of the twentieth century was that its

traumatic, violent, man-made catastrophes were rapidly absorbed into the "mass communications

landscape" where they fed society's latent desire for images of destruction and brutality. This

was not a sinister attempt to warp the personality so much as it was an effort by advertisers,

mass-merchandisers, and media programmers to feed society's largely subconscious desires for

such images. Nevertheless, this state of affairs had troubling psychological implications.

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[25] The question appeared on the cover of *New Worlds* 182 (July 1961) and it was particularly common in Moorcock's fiction of the 1960s and 1970s.

[26] J.G. Ballard, interview by Graeme Revell, in *RE/Search* no. 8/9 (1984): 44.

[27] See for example Brian Aldiss, *Shape of Further Things*, 38; 51-52.

[28] J.G. Ballard, interview by James Goddard and David Pringle, in Goddard and Pringle, eds., *J.G. Ballard: The First Twenty Years* (Hayes, U.K.: Bran's Head, 1976), 26.

New Wave anxiety about "the catastrophe" and its representation in the media was thus linked with an anxiety about the erosion of personal identity by numerous impersonal forces. In this concern with the integrity of personal identity and psychological stability the New Wave writers reflected the increased interest in psychology that characterized the 1960s. New Wave writers admired Freud for his analysis of how the psyche could be destabilized from within by unconscious mental processes and for the way he exposed the limits of human rationality; Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* was a key text for the New Wave writers.[29] They also admired Jung for his warnings about how the modern psyche had become unbalanced through reliance on science and for his emphasis on the psychological importance of literature and mythology; his *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* was another influential text in the New Wave movement.[30] In addition, they followed contemporary developments in psychology such as the work of R.D. Laing, who studied the impact of modernity on the psyche and argued that mental illness was a psychological coping mechanism that could ultimately be therapeutic. Both Aldiss and Ballard were friends of Christopher Evans, a psychologist and computer scientist at the National Physical Laboratory whose research on dreaming had an obvious appeal for writers who were interested in the role of the unconscious. Their interest in psychology, combined with their analysis of the social and cultural changes occurring around them, resulted in a conviction that the self was threatened with erosion as never before. This "consciousness of [personal] mutability" was described in a 1967 *New Worlds* editorial which, after describing the forces of change that the modern world brought to bear on the individual, concluded: "The social sciences,

[29] See for example J.G. Ballard, "Introduction to Crash," *RE/Search* 8/9 (1984): 96. This oft-reprinted piece was originally written for the French edition of *Crash* in 1974 and first appeared in English as "Some Words about *Crash!*," *Foundation* 9 (November 1975): 45-54.

[30] See for example Moorcock, "Aspects of Fantasy," in Darrell Schweitzer, ed., *Exploring Fantasy Worlds: Essays on Fantastic Literature* (San Bernardino, CA: the Borgo Press, 1985), 12-13.

imperfect as the still are, indicate this much at least: that a man's character (and soon,

perhaps, his physical person) is as artificial and arbitrary as any artifact of his culture." But

instead of turning away from this threatening present, the New Wave writers decided to confront

it and deal with it on its own terms, which they saw as a departure in philosophy from earlier

writers—especially the modernists—who were troubled by modernity:

> [L]iterary art has characteristically lagged behind in dealing with these elements
> of modern life, even sometimes in recognizing them. When our best writers have
> recognized them, it has too often been to renounce them to a past that is viewed as
> somehow more congenial and 'humanistic'. Lawrence's primitivism and Eliot's
> orthodoxy represent two popular alternatives to an acceptance of the present
> world.

After citing Kafka as an exemplar of the writer who deals with the present on its own terms, the

editorial then explained how *New Worlds* would do the same in its own way. The passage, with

its references to the importance of imagination, is indicative surrealism's influence on the New

Wave movement:

> We all stand in need of the 'new sensibility' that can enable us to handle
> experiences and ideas for which nothing in our past lives has prepared us, and this
> sensibility can be won only by an act of sustained and informed imagination. It is
> to be hoped that this magazine can provide, in some degree, imaginative works
> that will fulfill this need.[31]

New Wave writers thus framed their speculative fiction as literature of coping that would help

readers deal with their experience of modernity. And the key to speculative fiction's efficacy in

this role was its mythic component.

The New Wave writers viewed science fiction as a contemporary form of myth which,

when crafted well, mediated between the threatening outer world and the inner world of the

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[31] Thomas M. Disch, *et al*., "The Lessons of the Future," *New Worlds* 173 (July 1967): 2-3. Italics in original. A
similar dismissal of the modernist literary tradition is offered by Ballard in an essay on Salvador Dali that originally
appeared in *New Worlds* in 1969. See "The Innocent as Paranoid," *A User's Guide to the Millennium*, 92-93.

psyche. By doing this it helped its readers cope with the "catastrophe" of modernity. The

New Wave writer Thomas Disch declared, "As mythmakers, science-fiction writers have a

double task, the first aspect of which is to make humanly relevant—literally, to humanize—the

formidable landscapers of the atomic era."[32] In taking this view, the New Wave writers were in

part building on an existing British tradition of viewing science fiction as myth that went back at

least to the 1930s. This understanding had been articulated first by science fiction novelist, critic,

and erstwhile academic Olaf Stapledon, and later by C.S. Lewis, J.B. Priestley, and Raymond

Williams.[33] The best science fiction possessed what Aldiss called "a myth-making quality" in

the service of a serious literary purpose rather than escapist entertainment.[34] It allowed writers

to draw on "both ancient and modern myth-ingredients," thereby creating a powerful form of

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[32] Thomas M. Disch, "Introduction: Mythology and Science Fiction," in idem and Charles Naylor, eds., *New Constellations: An Anthology of Tomorrow's Mythologies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), x. Though Disch is American, he lived in London during the 1960s and was very much a part of the New Wave intellectually. He made his name by publishing in *New Worlds* when it was under Moorcock's editorship. Disch's novel *Camp Concentration*, serialized in *New Worlds* in 1967, was one of the most noteworthy pieces to appear in the magazine during Moorcock's tenure.

[33] See Olaf Stapledon, "Preface to English Edition," *Last and First Men* (New York: Dover, 1968; London: Methuen, 1930), 9-11; C.S. Lewis, "On Science Fiction," in idem, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), 59-73; J.B. Priestley, "They Came From Inner Space," in idem, *Thoughts in the Wilderness* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1957), 20-26; Raymond Williams, "Science Fiction," *The Highway* 48 (Dec. 1956): 41-45.

[34] Brian Aldiss, "British Science Fiction Now: Studies of Three Writers," *SF Horizons* no. 2 (winter 1965), 26. Aldiss started *SF Horizons* in 1964 on the grounds that, as serious literature, contemporary science fiction was worthy of serious literary criticism. The magazine was short-lived, but other magazines soon appeared to fill the void. Descriptions of science fiction as a form of contemporary myth began to proliferate in the 1970s as critics began to ask whether science fiction was indeed the literary genre that most authentically expressed contemporary concerns. For examples see John Radford, "Science Fiction as Myth," *Foundation* 10 (June 1976): 28-34; K.V. Bailey, "A Prized Harmony: Myth, Symbol and Dialectic in the Novels of Olaf Stapledon," *Foundation* 15 (January 1979): 53-66; Peter Nicholls, "Mythology," in idem, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* (St Albans, U.K.: Granada, 1979), 416-18; Russell Blackford, "Myth and the Art of Science Fiction Commentary," *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature* 3, no. 2 (May 1981): 52-6; Alexei Panshin and Cory Panshin, "Science Fiction and the Dimension of Myth," *Extrapolation* 22, no. 2 (summer 1981): 127-39; Gary K. Wolfe, "Mythic Structures in Cordwainer Smith's 'The Game of Rat and Dragon,'" *Science Fiction Studies* 4, no. 2 (July 1977): 144-50; Elizabeth Cummins Cogell, "The Middle-Landscape Myth in Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 1978): 134-42.

contemporary fiction.[35] When they spoke of the writing process and their working methods,

they often mentioned their attempts to make "direct use of mythic material" or build a

"mythological stratum" into their works, often by drawing on Jung's theory of archetypes.[36]

Disch called this "the second task of sf writers as mythmakers…the custodial work of keeping

the inherited body of myths alive."[37] The New Wave writers constructed a literary genealogy for

themselves that reflected this emphasis on the mythic dimension of science fiction. They

claimed that they stood in a long tradition of serious writers who exemplified science fiction at

its mythic best. This tradition ran from Mary Shelley and H.G. Wells, through Olaf Stapledon

and Aldous Huxley, down to ground-breaking recent practitioners like William S. Burroughs.

Their view of science fiction as contemporary myth also drew inspiration from influential critics

of the 1950s who spoke of science fiction as a form of myth, such as Priestly, Lewis, and

Williams. New Wave writers described both themselves and the writers who stood in this

tradition as myth makers and mythographers.[38] Moreover, the leading New Wave writers wrote

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[35] Brian Aldiss, *Shape of Further Things*, 39.

[36] The phrases are from Moorcock, "Aspects of Fantasy," 10; and Ballard, interview by Burns, 26. The Moorcock essay was originally serialized in the magazine *Science Fantasy* in 1963-64. For further examples of Moorcock speaking in similar terms see his essays, "The Secret Life of Elric of Melniboné: The Creation of an Archetype," and "New Worlds—Jerry Cornelius: The History of a Magazine, The Nature of a Character," in idem, *Sojan* (Manchester: Savoy Books Ltd., 1977), 127; 150-51. In fact, nearly all of Moorcock's fiction deals with a core "mythology" that he developed early in his career. For examples of New Wave fiction that explicitly acknowledges Jung's influence see Brian Aldiss, "The Source," *New Worlds* 153 (August 1965): 61-77; and William Barclay [Moorcock], "The Golden Barge," *New Worlds* 155 (October 1965): 36-51; and idem, *Behold The Man*, in which the central character is a devotee of Jung. Ballard has also acknowledged Jung's influence; see interview by Graeme Revell, 45.

[37] Disch, "Introduction," xi.

[38] See for example Ballard's homage to William Burroughs, "Mythmaker of the Twentieth Century," in *RE/Search* 8/9 (1984): 105-07. The piece originally appeared in *New Worlds* 142 (May-June 1964).

stories or novels that were titled or subtitled as myths, that retold well-known myths, or that made heavy use of mythic allusions.[39]

Chronicling the Death of Affect: The Life and Work of J.G. Ballard

The New Wave writer who developed the most nuanced and comprehensive view of myth was J.G. Ballard, the most important and influential writer to emerge from that movement. Ballard spoke of his short stories and novels as "myths of the near future" and saw myth as a necessary means of comprehending and coping with the changes that were shaping postwar Britain.[40] Central to his concerns was using his myths of the near future to chronicle what he termed "the death of affect," or the deadening of normal emotional response that followed in modernity's wake. Because of its concern with such troubling aspects of modernity, Ballard acknowledged that his work was driven by "a great sense of urgency" and had a strong "cautionary element."[41] But despite this cautionary tone, as I will explain below, it is a mistake to characterize Ballard's complex fiction as romantic or reactionary anti-modern protest literature. He accepted the modern world, dominated by science and technology, as a given, but he set himself the task of examining how that world generated unprecedented pressures on the individual psyche. Instead his work is best seen as an effort to analyze modernity in a way that allowed people to cope with these pressures. Ballard has been able to do this with considerable success, if his reputation is any indication. Still active, he enjoys a large popular following as

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[39] New Wave writers Thomas M. Disch and Charles Naylor edited a collection entitled *New Constellations: An Anthology of Tomorrow's Mythologies* (see above n. 32), with an introduction by Disch on "Mythology and Science Fiction." Some notable examples of reworked myths include Moorcock's *Behold the Man*, a retelling of the story of Jesus; and Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound*, a retelling of the Frankenstein story.

[40] The title Ballard gave to one of his short story collections was *Myths of the Near Future*.

[41] Ballard, interview by Alan Burns, 20; 21.

well as substantial critical acclaim. His often prophetic fictional analyses of twentieth-

century life have earned him a reputation as "the Sage of Shepperton," and he is immortalized in

the Collins English Dictionary with the entry "Ballardian."[42]

Ballard's background gave him an outsider's perspective on British culture, along with a

fund of experience and a conceptual vocabulary that were ideally suited to articulating his

concerns in fiction. Born in 1930, he spent his childhood in Shanghai. His father worked for a

Manchester-based textile firm and had been posted to Shanghai to serve as managing director of

the subsidiary there. Ballard was fascinated by Shanghai, which he later called the first "media

city," "purpose-built by the west as a test-metropolis of the future. London in the 1960s had

been the second, with the same confusions of image and reality, the same overheating."[43] As

these words suggest, the years spent in Shanghai echo throughout Ballard's fiction, in part

because it was there that he came face-to-face with the apocalyptic nature of the twentieth

century. He and his family were interned by the occupying Japanese forces during the Second

World War, and they spent a total of three years in an internment camp, an experience he has

fictionalized in his novels *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women*. Ballard has explained

that despite the difficulties of life in the camp, because he was too young to realize the

seriousness of the situation, his experience there was not unpleasant.[44]

Ballard first came to live in the U.K. in 1946. He found British society rigid and

repressed and later realized this made it an ideal subject for analysis in fiction. He went to

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[42] The entry reads: "BALLARDIAN: (adj) 1. of James Graham Ballard (J.G. Ballard; born 1930), the British novelist, or his works (2) resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in JG Ballard's novels and stories, esp. dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments."

[43] J.G. Ballard, *The Kindness of Women* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 197.

[44] J.G. Ballard, "From Shanghai to Shepperton," *RE/Search* 8/9 (1984): 113.

university at Cambridge, where he studied medicine. At Cambridge he already had thoughts

of becoming a writer and gave up the study of medicine when he realized such a career would

leave him insufficient time to write. He then spent a year studying English literature at King's

College, followed by brief jobs in advertising and encyclopedia sales. Fascinated by flying and

by the new supersonic jets that were being developed, he next spent a few years training to be a

pilot in the RAF. This also turned out to be a dead end, though it was during RAF training in

Canada that he first encountered and became intrigued with science fiction. By the late 1950s

Ballard found himself editing the journal *Chemistry and Industry* while trying his hand at writing

science fiction of his own. The stint at *Chemistry and Industry* immersed Ballard in the world of

scientific publications, which came to his office by the dozens. Reading these gave him an

understanding of science's influence in the modern world and helped him develop the unique

pseudo-scientific style and vocabulary for which he became known. He was subsequently able

to keep this scientific knowledge current through his friendship with the psychologist and

computer scientist Christopher Evans, who weekly sent Ballard the contents of his wastepaper

basket, the detritus of the world of ephemeral scientific publications. By the late 1950s he began

to envision the possibility of someday actually making a living as a writer, and he had clear ideas

about his subject matter and preferred style of writing. He explained his motivations in a BBC

interview:

> I began writing in the mid-Fifties. Enormous changes were going on in England
> at that time, largely brought about by science and technology—the beginnings of
> television, package holidays, mass merchandising, the first supermarkets. A new
> landscape was being created. The so-called mainstream novel wasn't really
> looking at the present day. The only form of fiction which was trying to make
> head or tail of what was going on in our world was science fiction.[45]

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[45] J.G. Ballard, "Disasters," interview by Rodney Smith, in *The Listener*, 14 February 1980, 208.

Or, as he said elsewhere, "science fiction is a response to science and technology as perceived by the inhabitants of the consumer goods society."[46]

Clearly then, the social effects of new technologies and the increasing cultural authority of science in Britain provided the backdrop for Ballard's fictional project. The post-war culture of affluence and ongoing debates about science's cultural authority from the 1950s on are the broad context in which Ballard's work should be understood. In Ballard's view, the increasing influence of science and technology was at best an ambiguous development. His fiction was a dissent from the view that technological innovation was the solution to many of Britain's social and economic ills. Explaining the motivations of the New Wave writers in an interview, Ballard pointed out that his speculative fiction was not motivated by a confidence that "science and technology can solve all problems." He elaborated:

> This is certainly not the dominant form of science fiction now. I think science fiction is becoming something much more speculative, much less convinced about the magic of science and the moral authority of science. There's far more caution on the part of the new writers than there was.[47]

By his own admission, Ballard was far from being a Luddite.[48] In fact, he was fascinated with new technological and scientific developments, as his brief RAF career shows. But his concern was how the technological and scientific landscape of modernity changed the individual. Indeed, his fiction can be seen as a sustained attempt to catalogue and analyze the intense pressures that the contemporary world brings to bear on the individual psyche.

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[46] J.G. Ballard, "Fictions of Every Kind," *RE/Search* 8/9 (1984): 99. The piece originally appeared in *Books and Bookmen* in 1971.

[47] J.G. Ballard, "The New Science Fiction: A Conversation Between J.G. Ballard and George MacBeth," interview by George Macbeth, in Langdon Jones, ed., *The New S.F.: An Original Anthology of Modern Speculative Fiction* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), 53; 54.

[48] Ballard, interview by Thomas Frick, 158.

This is one reason why so many of Ballard's stories and novels are set in the suburbs

of London around Heathrow Airport, near Shepperton where Ballard lived. This was a landscape

of motorways, billboards, highway interchanges, reservoirs, airports, large retail outlets, all night

cafes, multi-story car parks, and high rise tenements. It was an environment that epitomized

what modernity meant to Ballard. In the words of one of his characters, it was terrain "bounded

by a continuous artificial horizon."[49] Using the genre of science fiction, Ballard set himself the

task of revealing the unobserved ways in which this urban space threatened the stability of

individuals and the relationships they formed. As one critic has written of Ballard's technique,

"The ordinary, normally unexamined world of the everyday is defamiliarised and shown to be

the source of threats to personal and social existence."[50] One of Ballard's shorthand phrases for

this threatening world was "the modern technological landscape," by which he meant the dominance

of a scientific outlook, the modern urban environment, the mass media, and the constant proliferation

of new technologies.

In Ballard's view, the artificial landscape of modernity contained hidden "logics"; it

embodied sets of assumptions that both reflected and altered the psyches of individuals who

lived within it. These logics could be decoded to reveal the inner nature of modern society. His

fiction from the 1960s on was in part driven by the anxiety that the technological landscape of

modernity might uncover and stimulate violent impulses submerged deep in the psyche. One of

the primary themes of Ballard's work is what he has called the "irrational violence of modern

society, the side of our culture that could be described as an atrocity exhibition," the significance

of which went largely unnoticed. This was in part an effect of modern communications and

media: "We're all spectators (often bored ones) at tragedies like Vietnam. Real violence,

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[49] J.G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Cape, 1973), 53.

[50] Andrzej Gasiorek, *J.G. Ballard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 112.

frequently life, as it occurs, becomes a part of a huge entertainments industry."[51]

Consequently, disturbing varieties of violence, made possible by science and technology and made palatable by the modern media landscape, have figured prominently in his work. One of his most controversial works, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, suggests that iconic personalities like Marilyn Monroe, the Kennedys, and Ronald Reagan function as mythic figures in contemporary culture. Their deaths, whether real or imagined, may have a purgative function "just as there used to be in ancient ritual murders, and always has been in the death of charismatic figures like Christ."[52] This possibility is an example of what Ballard meant when he argued that the modern technological landscape embodied hidden logics. This situation was compounded by the fact that, at the same time that the media fed atavistic impulses by trivializing and normalizing violence, modern technology increasingly offered people the possibility of freely pursuing these impulses.

Ballard summed up the breakdown of the modern psyche under the heading "the death of affect." By this he meant the deadening of natural emotional responses and sympathy for others, which resulted from a modern environment that undermined human relationships and from the media's monotonous, insistent repetition of images of violence. Because of the way it distorted human relationships and liberated suppressed violent impulses he saw the death of affect as "the most terrifying casualty of the century."[53] Given these views, it makes sense that Ballard was intensely interested in psychology and particularly in Freud's ideas. He was heavily influenced by Freud and while at Cambridge he read as much Freud as possible. It was this interest in Freud

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[51] J.G. Ballard, "Quotations by Ballard," *RE/Search* 8/9 (1984): 154.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ballard, "Introduction to Crash," 96.

that led him to study medicine, with the intention of becoming a psychiatrist. Ballard

believed that some of Freud's key insights could be adapted to help explain the pressures that the

individual psyche was subjected to in world dominated by technology. In fact, it is tempting to

see Ballard's project as a translation of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* into a fiction for

the late-twentieth-century. His understanding of psychology shares Freud's pessimism about

healthy psychological development. Just as Freud saw the psyche as constantly threatened with

the possibility of regression, so Ballard worried about how the individual psyche was forced to

continually confront pressures toward atavistic degeneration. He was convinced that the modern

technological and scientific landscape only multiplied these pressures and he therefore thought

that contemporary fiction should be concerned with examining "*inner space*, that psychological

domain…where the inner world of the mind and the outer world of reality meet and fuse."[54] It

was this inner space, rather than outer space, that Ballard urged his fellow writers to explore. A

consequence of this interest in the psychological effects of modernity, summed up in Ballard's

call to explore inner space, was that New Wave writers used the psychiatrist as a stock character.

They represented the psychiatrist as the natural explorer of inner space, the analogue of

traditional science fiction's astronaut.

Ballard's notion of "inner space" and his interest in Freud help explain why he and other

New Wave writers rejected the mainstream novel. Ballard and other New Wave writers saw the

mainstream novel as obsolete in part because its conception of how individual identity is formed

was obsolete. According to New Wave writers, the mainstream "social" novel assumed that

identity was shaped primarily in and through social conventions and interpersonal relationships.

But in a modern technological landscape this was no longer true: individual identity was

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[54] Ibid., 97. Italics in original.

primarily shaped through immersion in a sea of information and images delivered by the

mass media, and by being part of an urban, technological landscape that radically reconfigured

traditional social relationships. This explained why the mainstream novel, so influential in the

nineteenth century, had declined precipitously in influence. As Ballard put it, "The social novel

is reaching fewer and fewer readers, for the clear reason that social relationships are no longer as

important as the individual's relationship with the technological landscape of the late twentieth

century.[55] In this new context Freud's insights were more relevant than ever, because modernity

uncovered and stimulated a variety of disturbing, submerged psychological drives. Anti-social

impulses that had been suppressed reemerged. Modernity made investigation of the unconscious

imperative, and Freud served that purpose.

Institutionalized Disaster: The Hidden Logic of the Car Crash

Ballard's views on the relationship between the psyche and the modern technological

landscape can be clarified by examining his analysis of the meaning of automobiles and

automobile accidents. The car crash figured prominently in three of his novels from the early- to

mid-1970s, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Crash*, and *Concrete Island*, and has continued to be a

recurring image in his subsequent fiction. For Ballard the automobile and the automobile crash

were keys to decoding the dark subconscious impulses that were unmasked and stimulated by the

modern technological landscape. He felt that the twentieth century was summed up by the image

of a man in a car, driving on a concrete highway to an unknown destination. This image was "a

focal point for an immense range of social, economic, and psychological pressures" because:

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[55] Ballard, "Fictions of Every Kind," 205.

> Almost every aspect of modern life is there, both for good and for ill—our sense of speed. Drama, and aggression, the worlds of advertising and consumer goods, engineering and mass manufacture, and the shared experience of moving together through an elaborately signaled landscape….Here we see, all too clearly, the speed and violence of our age, its strange love affair with the machine and, conceivably, with its own death and destruction.[56]

Accepting the freedom offered by the automobile also entailed accepting widespread death and violence in form of the car crash. At the very least, then, the annual toll of crash casualties amounted to "a huge institutionalised disaster," a "pandemic cataclysm institutionalized in all industrial societies that kills hundreds of thousands of people each year and injures millions."[57] Ballard wondered if unconcerned acceptance of this death and violence concealed deeper psychological impulses.

These opinions about the cultural meaning of the automobile were in fact hypotheses that Ballard had already put to the test. In April 1970 Ballard conceived and arranged an exhibition entitled "Crashed Cars" at the New Arts Laboratory Gallery in April 1970. Through friends like Eduardo Paolozzi, Ballard had connections to the avant garde art scene and was well-acquainted with the artistic "happenings" that had become common in 1960s London. The exhibition, which consisted entirely of three crashed cars carefully selected from a London scrapyard, was very much a part of this London art scene. Ballard arranged an opening party to which he invited art critics and members of London's cultural elite "as an experiment" to test some of his hypotheses. What ensued made it clear that Ballard had hit on something. Within half an hour he was the only sober person at the party. Then the guests—who were able to watch themselves on closed-circuit television monitors—began brawling, breaking the intact windows of the cars,

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[56] Ballard, "The Car, The Future," *User's Guide to the Millennium*, 262. First published in *Drive* magazine in 1971.

[57] Ballard, interview by Rodney Smith, 209; Ballard, "Introduction to Crash," 98.

smashing bottles of wine on them, and even attempting sexual assault in one of them.

Ballard concluded:

> There was something about those smashed cars that tripped off all kinds of latent hostility. Plus people's crazy sexuality was beginning to come out….The show was on for a month. During that time, the cars were regularly attacked by people coming to the gallery….I think there's something about the automobile crash that taps all kinds of barely recognized impulses in people's minds and imaginations.[58]

The exhibition confirmed all of Ballard's suspicions about the automobile's status as an object that brought to the surface psychic drives that were normally suppressed.

The reaction provoked by his "Crashed Cars" exhibition inspired him to write the novel *Crash*, which posited a connection between sex and automobile accidents—"a nightmare marriage between sex and technology"—in order to explore the currents of death and violence that characterize the late twentieth century.[59] In typical Ballard fashion the novel attempted to apply the insights of psychoanalysis to the violence and death of automobile culture in order to show that, as Colin Greenland puts it, "destruction was what man wanted, unconsciously, all along."[60] As Ballard explained:

> I'm trying to look at the sort of logic that allows—I think the latest figures published by the World Health Organization on automobile fatalities show that probably 250,000 people are killed, and that's probably an underestimate. Millions are injured, and seriously too. What logic is at work that allows this to happen?[61]

Crash was an attempt to answer this question and it turned out to be easily Ballard's most controversial novel, controversy that was renewed when the novel was made into a film in 1996.

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[58] Qtd. in Jerome Tarshis, "Krafft-Ebing Visits Dealey Plaza: The Recent Fiction of J.G. Ballard," *Evergreen Review* no. 96 (Spring 1973), 144; 144-45. The episode is also fictionalized in Ballard's semi-autobiographical novel *The Kindness of Women*. See chapter 11, "The Exhibition."

[59] Ballard, "Introduction to *Crash*," 98.

[60] Greenland, 111.

[61] Ibid., 23.

It was the first in what became a loose trilogy of novels that examined the death of affect in

in a Britain shaped by postwar urban planning, the others being *Concrete Island* (1974) and

High-Rise (1975). Ballard intended the novel to be graphic and disturbing, effects he was able to

achieve by drawing heavily on the medical text *Crash Injuries* by Jacob Kulowski. The impact

of Ballard's treatment of the subject matter was not lost on *Crash*'s readers, as the controversy

that welcomed the novel indicated.

Critics have offered conflicting readings of the novel since it was published, in part

encouraged by a provocative interpretation of the novel by Jean Baudrillard, and by the fact that

Ballard's own view of the novel seems to have shifted over time. Soon after it was published he

described it as a warning and cautionary tale, a few years later as evil and corrupting, and more

recently still as what it appears to be: "It is a psychopathic hymn."[62] *Crash* is undoubtedly a

baffling book, but given Ballard's thinking and comments at the time it was written there is good

reason to agree with Nicholas Ruddick that the "death-oriented sexuality in *Crash* is an extended

metaphor for…insatiable cultural death-lust."[63]

The novel is narrated by one James Ballard, a producer of television commercials, who

recounts how his involvement in a car crash triggers a range of obsessions all centered on "the

perverse eroticism of the car-crash."[64] Thus, the "inner space" explored in *Crash* is the nexus

between the unconscious and the automobile. In the novel, Ballard's crash is a transformative

experience and an almost welcome break in the monotony of suburban existence. He is a classic

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[62] Qtd. in Will Self, *Junk Mail* (London: Penguin, 1996), 369. For examples of the other justifications see *RE/Search*, 98; and Ballard, interview by Burns, 23. For Baudrillard's reading see Jean Baudrillard, "Two Essays," *Science Fiction Studies* 55 no. 18 (November 1991): 309-19.

[63] Nicholas Ruddick, "Ballard/Crash/Baudrillard," *Science Fiction Studies* 58, no.19 (November 1992): 357.

[64] Ballard, *Crash*, 17.

Ballardian character who has experienced the death of affect: his life has become emotionally

flattened and his relationships with others, especially his wife, have become abstract, perfunctory,

and depersonalized. The monotony of Ballard's existence is so complete, and his affectless

condition so total, that only an extreme event could trigger a change. This is why he claims,

"The crash was the only experience I had been through for years." After the crash, Ballard meets

Vaughan, a scientist obsessed with car crashes who pulls Ballard into his world and teaches him

"true significance of the automobile crash."[65]

Ballard the character's occupation as a television producer allows Ballard the author to

make significant points about the media's role in saturating the psyche with images of violence.

With the sensibility of a maker of television images, Ballard is able to gratify his new obsessions

by imagining endless permutations of car crash death. But beyond this, his occupation equips

him to decode the logic of violence that underlies contemporary culture. As a television

producer Ballard is able to recognize that his crash-mangled body is somehow an extension of

the real violence displayed on television and in magazines. Reflecting in his hospital bed, he

realizes that his crash experience was part of a larger logic of violence that he had acted out,

albeit only semi-consciously. By damaging himself in the crash, he had taken his place "with all

those scenes of pain and violence that illuminated the margins of our lives—television newsreels

of wars and student riots, natural disasters and police brutality…."[66] The media's power in

shaping the modern psyche is also reinforced by Vaughan's driving obsession of dying in a crash

with Elizabeth Taylor, an ambition he nearly realizes. Elizabeth Taylor is but another icon, a

decontextualized celebrity presented endlessly by the media, and as such she is of a kind with the

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[65] Ibid., 39; ibid., 10.

[66] Ibid., 37.

succession of deontextualized violent images also presented by the media. It is left to

Vaughan, as the consumer, to make sense of these disconnected images by stitching them into a

coherent whole: in his mind Elizabeth Taylor becomes part of the same logic that killed Jayne

Mansfield, James Dean, and Albert Camus—all victims of car crashes. Recruiting her into his

violent obsessions is simply part of his attempt to make sense of what Ballard the author called

the mass communications landscape. Similarly, it becomes clear in the novel that the character

Ballard is attempting to mythologize the violence that has become central to his life. He dreams

of a new culture in which the car crash is ritualized as a rite of passage into a world where pain is

merged with desire.[67] This is Ballard's own attempt to make sense of his experience by building

a myth around it. Thus, as will become clear below, the character Ballard embodies the author

Ballard's own understanding of myth as a psychological coping device. Ballard's growing

obsession with car crashes is thus revealed to be part of a quest for psychological fulfillment, an

attempt to deal with the threatening possibilities of modern technology by finding a way to

embrace them.[68]

Ballard defended the disturbing and graphic elements of *Crash* by arguing that the novel

was intended to serve a "cautionary" purpose. In an introduction written for the French edition

of *Crash*, he opined that Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* was a more relevant text for the

times than the theories of Marshal McLuhan, because the diseases of the psyche described by

Freud had culminated in the contemporary death affect. *Crash* was thus "a cataclysmic novel of

the present day," an exploration of a world in which the death of affect made it possible to

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[67] Ibid., 153-54.

[68] As the critic Michel Delville notes, there is a "deep religious intensity" to the character Ballard's reflections on the meaning of car crashes, which is underscored by the author Ballard's repeated merging of the vocabularies of religion and science in the novel. See idem, *J.G. Ballard* (Plymouth, U.K.: Northcote House, 1998), 39-41.

"pursue our own psychopathology as a game."[69] He explained that in the novel the car was

used "as a total metaphor for man's life in today's society" in order to issue "a warning against

that brutal, erotic, and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the

margins of the technological landscape."[70] *Crash* was a warning, but not of the moralizing

variety. It warned by exposing the latent meaning of automobile culture. It was certainly not the

sort of warning issued by Ralph Nader, whom Ballard dismissed as consumer society's first

populist demagogue.[71] According to Ballard, like many critics of modernity, Nader offered a

simplistic, obsessive mix of anxiety and guilt in response to modern technology. But in

Ballard's view this did not help people cope with technological modernity at all. Instead people

needed contemporary myths, like *Crash*, that helped them deal with the psychological pressures

of contemporary experience. Ballard felt that in attempting to uncover the meaning of the car

crash, one came up against the limits of rationality: "It's a mistake to adopt a purely rational

attitude towards events like the car crash…."[72] Myth could break through these limits and reveal

the latent meaning behind them, thereby serving an indispensable role for those seeking to cope

with the catastrophe.

Myths of the Near Future: Ballard as Mythographer of Modernity

Throughout his career as a writer Ballard viewed his fiction as a form of contemporary

myth. Myth is the concept that holds together his key ideas like "inner space" and "speculative

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[69] Ballard, "Introduction to Crash," 98, 96.

[70] Ibid., 98.

[71] See Ballard, "The Consumer Consumed," *User's Guide to the Millennium*, 259-61. First published in 1971.

[72] Qtd. in Tarshis, 145-46.

fiction," as well as his varied obsessions about and analyses of the twentieth century.

Ballard's views on the mythic function of his fiction have remained remarkably consistent

throughout his career. This is perhaps because many of the trends to which his fiction has

responded have only intensified since the early 1960s. His theory of myth was unique and drew

from eclectic influences including, as already noted, both Freud and Jung. Freud impressed upon

Ballard how myths manifested psychological tensions and conflicts. Furthermore, Ballard's

conception of how his myths functioned bears some resemblance to Freud's talking cure. Both

enable psychological coping by bringing the hidden or suppressed to light so that it can be

confronted. Though Ballard was more drawn to Freudian than to Jungian psychoanalysis, he was

influenced by Jung's account of how myth can reveal otherwise inaccessible dimensions of the

psyche.[73] But Ballard's understanding of myth drew on more than his reading in psychoanalysis.

One of the books that deeply impressed Ballard when he was just beginning to write was Robert

Graves's idiosyncratic theory of myth-making, *The White Goddess*.[74] From Graves Ballard

seems to have gained an appreciation of the persistence of a myth-making impulse in European

culture. Despite the distinctiveness of Ballard's understanding of myth, he shared with other

British mythic thinkers several assumptions about the cultural importance of myth. These

included the belief that all cultures produce myths regardless of how advanced they were, a

belief that ideally myth had beneficial cultural role, a sense that a turn to myth was the natural

antidote to the dominance of scientific discourse, and a conviction that modernity made reliance

on myth more vital than ever before.

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[73] See J.G Ballard, "Ballard at Home," interview by Catherine Bresson, *Metaphores* 7 (March 1982): 16.

[74] Ballard, "The Pleasures of Reading," *A User's Guide to the Millennium*, 181. For examples of similar comments by Ballard see idem, interview by MacBeth, 50; and idem, interview by Brendan Hennessy, *The Transatlantic Review* no. 39 (spring 1971): 62.

The problem Ballard faced was how to construct a form of contemporary myth that was relevant and effective. Neither the past, nor political programs, nor the mainstream novel were really up to the task of helping people cope with the twentieth century; the pace of change had made these irrelevant. But change was precisely what science fiction was adept at handling, therefore it was the leading candidate to serve as a modern mythology in Ballard's view: "S-f has been one of the few forms of modern fiction explicitly concerned with change—social, technological, and environmental—and certainly the only fiction to invent society's myths…."[75] Science fiction's concern with change was therefore important in two ways. On the one hand, by confronting change head on science fiction engaged subject matter that was by definition highly significant and relevant. On the other hand, science fiction dealt with this change by mythologizing it, by using it as the basis for new myths that made sense of the change for those who were threatened by it. Science fiction produced myths that mediated between the inner world of the psyche and a rapidly changing external reality. Ballard thought that the pace of change driven by science and technology had actually altered the cultural function of myth. Myth no longer looked backward out of a concern to explain where a culture had come from, as with the classical Greek myths. Instead it looked forward out of a concern to discover where the culture was going. Ballard argued that the first writer to demonstrate how science fiction could be fashioned into a twentieth-century mythology was William S. Burroughs. He acclaimed Burroughs as the "first mythographer of the twentieth century," because by adapting certain science fiction conventions he had been able to create "the first authentic mythology" of the

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[75] Ballard, "Hobbits in Space?" *User's Guide to the Millennium*, 14. First published in *Time Out* 1977.

present era of catastrophe.[76] But all too few writers showed a similar ability or willingness to take inspiration from Burroughs.

Building on his understanding of psychoanalysis, Ballard argued that myth-making was a fundamental human activity and a central purpose of effective and relevant contemporary literature. He held that individuals naturally construct their own mythologies as coping mechanisms that allow the inner self to deal with a threatening external world. He explained that, "Each of us builds the mythology of our own lives out of the materials that surround us in our everyday streets."[77] This view also characterized his own work, which he spoke of as an attempt to mythologize his experience through writing.[78] Furthermore, he often described his characters as "mythologizing" their experience in order to cope with and make sense of it.[79] This emphasis on psychological coping in response to external threats is why he described his fiction as a series of "stories of psychic fulfillment." [80] In Ballard's view, the most significant threats to psychic stability were the "threatening possibilities offered by modern science and technology."[81] In this context, the imaginative writer's role is to perform the normal process of private mythologizing more extensively, analytically and publicly, in an effort to help others make sense of the landscape of modernity. Thus, the best contemporary writers functioned as mythographers. Consequently, Ballard described his stories and novels as "myths of the near future" and as "predictive mythologies" that used the near future to interpret the present. Doing so revealed the

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[76] Ballard, "Mythmaker of the Twentieth Century," 105, 107.

[77] Ballard, interview by Rodney Smith, 209.

[78] See Ballard, interview by Thomas Frick, 136; and idem, "Waiting for Silver Coconuts," interview by Charles Shaar Murray, *New Musical Express*, 22 October 1983: 28.

[79] See for example Ballard, *Concrete Island*, (London: Cape, 1973), 22; and idem, "The Terminal Beach," 62.

[80] Ballard, interview by Pringle and Goddard, 40.

[81] Ballard, interview by Frick, 158.

threats to the individual psyche that were latent or unobserved in the contemporary world and

equipped readers to cope with them:

> The title *Myths of the Near Future* exactly sums up what I think a lot of present writers, musicians…filmmakers, painters…are concerned with: the mythologies of the future. Not myths which will one day *replace* the classical legends of ancient Greece, but *predictive mythologies*; those which in a sense provide an operating formula by which we can deal with our passage through consciousness—our movements through time and space. These are mythologies that you can actually live by: how to cope with the modern urban landscape….I'm interested in what I think of as a radically new set of mythologies that *aren't* concerned with the past….[82]

He elaborated on how his mythologies were intended to function: "…I construct my emergency

kit—the latest short story or the novel I'm working on at the present—an emergency assemblage

with which I try to cope with the situation in which I find myself. I offer it to anybody else I feel

is in the same boat."[83] Thus, Ballard's description of his writings as "stories of psychic

fulfillment" was true in two senses: not only did his characters seek psychic fulfillment, but, if

the stories did their work as myths of the near future, his readers would find it as well.

Underlying Ballard's conception of myth was a belief that myth offered unique access to

reality at a time when "reality" had become almost entirely fictionalized due to the metastasis of

the mass media landscape. This was particularly the case in Britain. Ballard thought that,

because of the size of the country, the network of national newspapers and television stations,

and the sheer volume of advertising and media images, the British were "the people most

dominated by the media landscape; the most dominated the world has ever known."[84] He

concluded that by the mid-1960s reality had become dominated by fictions, by which he meant

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[82] Ballard, interview by Revell, 42.

[83] Ibid., 45.

[84] J.G. Ballard, interview by Andrea Juno and V. Vale, *RE/Search* 8/9 (1984): 31.

"anything invented to serve someone's imaginative ends, or aims." The media landscape overflowed with "movies, television, and constant advertising. Politics is a branch of advertising, the whole things is a hothouse of fictions." In a Britain in which reality itself had become an enormous fiction, the fiction writer's role was virtually superfluous. Consequently, the writer's vocation needed to be radically reconceptualized: the writer's job was in fact to inject a dose of reality into experience. In Ballard's words, "the writer's job is no longer to put the fiction in, the fiction's already *there*; the writer's job is to put the reality in."[85]

Ballard's understanding of myth was also linked to his belief that history was deficient as a guide to life in the contemporary world. His views on the mythic function of science fiction were closely linked to his understanding of time and history. Ballard argued that history had become irrelevant because it did not really explain the present and therefore could provide no real guidance about how to cope with it. In actuality, he argued, "the future provides a better key to the present than does the past…."[86] This was because what he called the "latent content" of contemporary reality could only be revealed by projecting current trends and conditions into the near future in order to comprehend their meaning. Hence his myths of the near future, which were "concerned with seeing the present in terms of the immediate future rather than the past."[87] This distinguished Ballard's mythmaking from myths of the past. He pointed out that, "classical mythologies…tended to be concerned with explaining origins…I think the sort of mythologies I'm interested in…are concerned with ends rather than with beginnings."[88] The future had

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[85] Ballard, interview by Burns, 20; ibid.; ibid.

[86] Ballard, "The Innocent as Paranoid," *User's Guide to the Millennium*, 93. First published in *New Worlds* in 1969.

[87] Ballard, interview by MacBeth, 46.

[88] Ballard, interview by Revell, 42.

simply become a better source of guidance than the past, necessitating a new type of myth-making.

According to Ballard, inhabitants of the modern technological landscape experienced time in a fundamentally different way than their nineteenth-century predecessors. The Victorians had experienced time linearly and had explained the world in those terms. This epistemic perspective was exemplified in the Victorian novel, in which a moralizing, omniscient author portrayed characters and their relationships in terms of change over time. But Ballard contended that life in the contemporary world was far different: "We live in quantified non-linear terms….We don't live our lives in linear terms in the sense that the Victorians did."[89] Time in the modern world was experienced as a continuous present, in which individuals struggled to cope with the images offered by the media and in which technology continually offered new ways of changing one's identity or lifestyle. In such a world, the influence of even the recent past on people was radically mitigated, if not eliminated. At the same time, individuals did not see the past as relevant to their experience because they somehow realized that social conditions of their existence were not an artifact of the past, but were provided externally by the nature of modern science and technology.[90] In 1970 he diagnosed a rejection and loss of interest in the past: "Look at most people and you will find that they have declared a moratorium on the past; they are just not interested. One is constantly meeting people who have only a hazy idea of their parents—who have changed their lifestyles since their childhood in every possible way."[91] In these new conditions the Victorian-style novel, with its "retrospective bias," was totally

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[89] Ballard, interview by MacBeth, 51-52.

[90] Ballard, interview by Revell, 46.

[91] Ballard, "Quotations by Ballard," 164.

inadequate.[92] What was needed instead was "a mythology that starts now, this moment in time, and runs forward."[93]

Just as history offered no means of coping with the catastrophe, so also politics was of little avail in Ballard's estimation. The post-human world portrayed in Ballard's fiction is also a post-political world, because politics has become irrelevant. Andrzej Gasiorek has pointed out, "Politics is sidelined in Ballard's texts because it is seen to have little purchase on the economic, technological and social circuits that incessantly decode and recode twentieth-century life."[94] By the early 1960s Ballard had concluded that politics had become little more than a branch of advertising. So rather than ameliorating the pressures of contemporary life, it contributed to them as one more dimension of the mass communication landscape. The difference between politicians and entertainment icons had become negligible, as Ballard had recognized when he predicted Ronald Reagan's rise to the presidency in his collage novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970). Politics is subsumed by the image-driven communications landscape. This led Ballard to suggest in some of his fictions that true psychic fulfillment could only be achieved by an individual who was somehow placed outside of this landscape. This manifested in his work as a recurring theme of primitivism. His stories and novels often depicted characters who, either through isolation in a hostile or desolate environment, exposure to a man-made disaster, or sudden separation from modern urban life, are removed from social, cultural, and political networks. Thus left to confront their own psyches and the possibility of primitive regression, they discover within a more authentic, more psychologically integrated self. Ballard's use of

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[92] Ballard, "Innocent as Paranoid," 93.

[93] Ballard, "Interview by Revell," 42.

[94] Gasiorek, 206.

primitivism to interrogate the dominance of the media landscape was a consequence of his

mythic approach to fiction. Employing the backdrop of a pre-political, primitive environment

was a favorite device of other post-war British writers who conceived of their fiction as

contemporary myth, William Golding being perhaps the prime example. Ballard's novel

Concrete Island, for example, is a contemporary retelling of the "myth" of Robinson Crusoe.

After crashing his car, the protagonist Maitland is marooned on a piece of waste ground between

converging highway embankments. Because he is injured he cannot climb to safety or signal for

help effectively, but being cut off from the continual pressures of London life enables him to

achieve a new kind of psychic fulfillment that prepares him to return to civilization on his own

terms. Myths of primitive existence thus became vehicles for Ballard's critique of the

communications landscape.

Ballard offered his mythologies as antidotes to what he saw as a host of false mythologies

circulated by the mass communications landscape. Recently he has spoken of the notion of

space travel, the dream of a society perfected by science, and the vision of a better life offered by

advertising as false mythologies of the twentieth century.[95] Though there is no evidence that

Ballard was familiar with Barthes's *Mythologies*, there were some points on contact between

their respective conceptions of myth.[96] Both spoke of how the culture was an incessant

propagator of myths. But they had very different conceptions of where these myths originate.

Barthes aimed to expose how myths embedded in popular culture served the interest of the

advertisers or reinforced bourgeois ideology. As such, the myths he identified were false—or at

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[95] See J.G. Ballard, "Grave New World," interview by David Gale. The interview originally aired on BBC Radio 3 in 1998 and can be found at http://www.jgballard.com/gravenewworld.htm.

[96] See Ballard, interview by Graeme Revell, 42. The interviewer explains Barthes's understanding of myth to Ballard, who does not seem to be familiar with it.

least obscured important realities—and served to reinforce the status quo. Ballard could have

agreed that the media propagated numerous false mythologies that served various interests, but

he would not have shared Barthes's understanding of the political implications of this. Where

Barthes's theory of myth had distinct Marxist overtones, Ballard's instead had Freudian

overtones. False mythologies were not part of an ideological apparatus, but were ultimately

products of the subconscious that fed only partially recognized desires. The difference between

these and the mythologies Ballard crafted was that his were helpful because they were true. We

have seen that Ballard conceived of the writer as a truth-teller, as someone whose role it was "to

put the reality back in" to everyday experience. Ballard thus distinguished between the false

myths of the media landscape and the myths he crafted, which in his judgment exposed true

nature of contemporary reality.

Conclusion

One index of the New Wave's cultural influence is the popularity and stature of its core

writers, Aldiss, Moorcock, and Ballard, all of whom have built successful careers. All are

acknowledged as major literary figures in Britain and beyond, but Ballard—a literary

heavyweight by any measure—is certainly the most significant writer to emerge from the New

Wave. By the early 1970s he was widely read, published, and translated, and highly sought after

as a reviewer, columnist, and interview subject. Though he consistently spoke of his work as

science fiction, he gained a reputation that extended well beyond the boundaries of that

publishing category. As explained above, from the beginning there was a strong populist

dimension to the New Wave project, and this was further evidenced in Ballard's concerted

attempts to present his work and views in venues that would reach the widest possible readership.

His primary means of doing this was through interviews, which he agreed to with astonishing frequency; indeed, it is likely that Ballard is one of the most frequently interviewed major writers of the twentieth century.[97] Where these interviews appeared gives us some indication of who was reading Ballard and of the sort of audience he wanted to reach. Alongside interviews in highbrow publications like *Paris Review* or *Books and Bookmen* are interviews in obscure fanzines (*Cypher*, *Vector*), journals of science fiction criticism (*Foundation*, *Thrust*), underground publications (*Friends*, *Search and Destroy*) London weeklies (*Time Out*, *New Musical Express*), and large format glossy magazines (*Vogue*, *Rolling Stone*). The number of magazine and newspaper interviews from the 1960s through the 1980s totals more than eighty, and this does not include his numerous radio, television, and book interviews. Ballard also disseminated his views through numerous book reviews and non-fiction essays, which, as Roger Luckhurst has pointed out, he was able to use "as a surreptitious way of continuing his fiction by other means and gaining a wider audience for his polemics."[98] This outreach to a popular readership underscores the cultural influence of Ballard's fiction and views.

Ballard's fiction, and New Wave fiction more generally, should be seen as a literature of skeptical criticism and analysis of modernity rather than a literature of protest against it. Indeed, it may be best to describe Ballard's fiction as a literature of coping, given his consistent emphasis on the psychological effects of modernity and his repeated insistence that his fiction was intended to help readers deal with these effects. He did not advocate a return to a simpler past, nor did he believe that this was possible. And he was at odds with the response to modernity offered by many of the political groups and countercultural protest movements

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[97] See the partial bibliography of these interviews prepared by Ballard scholar David Pringle at http://www.solaris-books.co.uk/Ballard/Pages/Miscpages/interviewsbib.htm.

[98] Roger Luckhurst, "A Writer and His Quirk," *Science Fiction Studies* 26, no. 2 (July 1999): 333.

prevalent in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s. He had little sympathy for protest movements like CND and he thought that the New Left was "out of touch."[99] His view was that, by vilifying politicians and policy makers, such groups missed the point entirely. Deploying insights drawn from psychoanalysis, Ballard suggested that political elites were not to blame for the troubling aspects of modernity because these aspects were the realization of humanity's unconscious psychopathic impulses, impulses that were both brought to light and abetted by modern science, technology, mass communications, and urban life.

Though critical of many consequences of twentieth-century science and technology, Ballard's fiction was not anti-science and technology. Instead, its underlying concern was the psychological impact of modernity, especially the "death of affect." Thus the ultimate point of Ballard's of fiction was not to protest against the catastrophe of modernity, but rather to analyze it with a view toward developing coping strategies. That is why, as Colin Greenland has noted, the role of Ballard's protagonists "is to accept the disaster and acclimatize to the new environment."[100] Ballard knew he and his readers could not undo the catastrophe, but they could come to terms with it. Thus Ballard's fiction, and New Wave fiction generally, was not a reactionary anti-modern literature. Indeed, New Wave fiction advertised itself as a new literature for the present and future, as the only truly "modern" form of literature. It was modern not only because it used the idiom of science fiction, but also because it explored the meaning and significance of characteristically modern experiences, like the car crash. Moorcock was fond of pointing out that writers like Virginia Woolf did not deserve the title "modern" whereas Ballard did, precisely because he was able "to recognize a genuine modern concern" and frame a fiction

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[99] Ballard, interview by Revell, 45.

[100] Greenland, 111.

that came to grips with it.[101] On these terms then Ballard's myth-making can be seen as a

fundamentally modern project.

Adding the story of the New Wave's mythic science fiction to the narrative of twentieth-

century British history brings some key issues into focus in a new way. In particular,

appreciating the New Wave project reconfigures our understanding of a cultural struggle that

defined twentieth-century Britain: the struggle between advocates and opponents of modernity,

or the "two cultures" controversy. But the science versus humanities model typically used to

explain this struggle does not help us situate and make sense of the New Wave project. The New

Wave writers never identified themselves as advocates of the humanities and made no attempt to

argue that the humanities had a central cultural function. Instead, they argued that mythic

science fiction had a cultural importance that was necessitated by the nature of modernity. The

work of Ballard and the New Wave reveals how, in the search for an potent critique of modernity,

many thinkers and writers turned to the discourse of mythic thinking instead of the humanities. This

turn to myth was justified with claims that myth did cultural work that history, politics and science

could not do, and that it offered a unique means of coping with the psychological pressures that

modernity brought to bear on the individual.

Finally, when the fiction of Ballard and the New Wave is understood as an attempt to craft

myths that spoke to twentieth-century experience, connections to a range of seeming unrelated

figures come into view. Affinities that on the surface seem improbable suddenly become

comprehensible. For example, Lewis and Tolkien understood themselves as using myth to respond

to a modernity disfigured by misuse of science and technology, though they did so with different

motivations and at a different historical moment than the New Wave. Nevertheless, the New Wave

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[101] Michael Moorcock, "Modern Metaphors," in Goddard and Pringle, eds., *J.G. Ballard: The First Twenty Years*, 61. Ballard had the same opinion of the modernists. See Ballard, "Fictions of Every Kind," 98.

writers recognized that they were doing something that resembled what Lewis and Tolkien had done. Thus, though Aldiss did not share Lewis's religious presuppositions, he saw Lewis as a fellow writer of mythic science fiction and was elated when he had the chance to discuss science fiction with Lewis in 1962.[102] Though he had sough and received personal encouragement from Lewis and Tolkien when he first began writing, Moorcock later felt it necessary to distance his work from Tolkien's on the grounds that *The Lord of the Rings* was "Winnie-the-Pooh posing as epic," that is, more escapist rural romance than potent myth.[103] Moorcock recognized Tolkien as a fellow producer of myths, but thought *The Lord of the Rings* was the wrong kind of myth because it refrained from engaging contemporary life in a relevant way. The New Wave writers recognized that they were not the only British writers to produce mythic fiction, but deemed their own form of mythic science fiction the best means of coping with the catastrophe of the late twentieth century.

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[102] The transcript of this conversation, at which Kingsley Amis was also present, was published as "C.S. Lewis Discusses Science Fiction with Kingsley Amis," in *SF Horizons* no. 1 (spring 1964): 5-12.

[103] Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Fantasy* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1987), 125. The chapter in which this assessment appears, "Epic Pooh," was originally published in pamphlet form in 1976.

CHAPTER 6

MINDING THE MYTH-KITTY: MYTH AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL

AUTHORITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERARY CRITICISM

[M]yth is now both a very significant and a very difficult word.

Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (1976)

'[M]yth' has become a kind of intellectual shorthand which has gained acceptance as standing for an elusive, almost unanalysable amalgam of beliefs, attitudes and feelings. The very unapproachability of the content of myth has created the utility of the term and guaranteed its widespread usefulness.

William Righter, *Myth and Literature* (1975)

Introduction

Mythic thinking among post-World War II British literary critics grew from much the same sources as in other areas of British culture. A generation reared on the works of the great late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century anthropologists sought to apply anthropological insights to literature. Anthropological studies of myth had given many literary critics a taste for the primitive and a desire to identify those elements of literature that were somehow pre-logical and expressive of the subconscious. This meant that critics also looked to psychological theories of myth in their search for analytical tools that would allow them to explain the relationship between myth and literature.

Ironically, though their mythic thinking was fueled by "scientific" knowledge produced by anthropology and psychology, British literary critics' interest in myth was motivated by a distinct hostility to what they perceived as the increasing hegemony of science and scientific discourse. This antiscientism is in part explained by the battles between academic disciplines

that characterized the 1960s. Literary critics' hostility to science gave impetus to the attempt by the nascent field of English studies to find a discourse of its own that was authoritative without being scientific. Their response to the intellectual hegemony of science took various forms, including a growing interest in new hermeneutic theories of interpretation and language. Christopher Norris has noted that "the chief result [of the 1960s hermeneutical turn in literary criticism] was to encourage a less defensive, indeed a more self-assertive attitude which rejected any notion of physical science as a paradigm or method or a privileged truth-telling discourse…."[1] This justification of critical discourse as a valid disciplinary method was combined with an effort to defend the discipline's subject matter itself. Many critics contended that literature itself had unique epistemic value as a way of knowing that gave access to deeper truths than science. This effort to justify the critical study of literature had been underway at least since I.A. Richards's *Science and Poetry* appeared in 1926, but it was given new urgency during the university expansion of the 1960s when disciplines struggled to claim places in the new educational institutions that were being formed. In such a context the argument that myth— a concept rich with connotations of transcendence, significance, profound truth, and timeless relevance—was somehow a crucial element of literature was a rhetorical weapon too appealing to ignore. By positioning themselves as the interpreters of the mythic significance of literature, British literary critics could claim access to truths that were somehow more real, and even more relevant, than the deliverances of science. This occurred at moment in the history of literary criticism when the nature of the discipline was being redefined and as critics sought new ways of justifying their field of study.

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[1] Christopher Norris, "Literary Theory, Science and Philosophy of Science," in Christa Knellwolf and Christopher Norris eds., *Twentieth-Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, vol. 9 of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 407.

These factors combined to produce a surge of interest in mythic thinking among British critics, beginning in the 1950s, peaking in the 1960s and continuing into the 1970s. Looking back on the this period of criticism, the novelist and critic A.S. Byatt took for granted the fact that anyone who studied literature then would have been immersed in discussions of how myth offered resources for coping with modern life.[2] The British literary figures who were at the forefront of theorizing about the relationship between literature and myth included some of the most significant critics of the post-World War II period such as Byatt herself, Paul West, John Holloway, David Daiches, Graham Hough, Frank Kermode, and Raymond Williams.

In addition to the effort to define a non-scientific critical discourse, two other related concerns were central to post-war myth-oriented criticism: a wish to delineate the relationship between myth and literature generally and the connections between myth and narrative specifically; and an aspiration to use the concept of myth in a measured, culturally relevant way that would avoid being dismissed as mere willful irrationalism or reactionary antimodernity. Thus, myth-oriented criticism was related both to criticism's increasing focus on the nature and function of narrative and to its attempts to justify itself as a discipline that, because uniquely equipped to respond to modernity, had cultural relevance beyond academia.

Critical interest in myth, which had emerged alongside the first stirrings of theoretical interest among literary critics, began to recede in the 1970s as French theory in particular became more established in Britain. The growth of theory was one of the main causes for the ebb of myth-oriented criticism, for it held out much greater promise as an analytic method that could

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[2] See A.S. Byatt, "'The Omnipotence of Thought': Frazer, Freud and Post-Modernist Fiction" in idem, *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings* (New York: Turtle Bay Books, 1992), 109. The piece originally appeared in Robert Fraser, ed., *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

serve the institutional and cultural needs of literary critics. Thus, in a way critical interest in myth was a halfway house on the road to a broader embrace of theory.

This chapter, then, approaches mythic thinking by British literary critics as an important episode in the evolution of English studies and literary criticism. It does so by examining the thought of a group of British literary critics, several of whom were connected with the journal *Essays in Criticism*, who were loosely linked by their belief that critics needed to abandon the rarefied agenda of modernist criticism in favor of a socially relevant criticism that helped to foster connections between author and reader. This led them to myth. I refer to these as "myth-minded" or "myth-oriented" critics in order to distinguish them from the North American myth critics. I argue that the rise of myth-oriented criticism can be understood as a transitional phase in the evolution of English studies from a discipline that conceived of itself as the transmitter of essential values and cultural heritage to one who purpose was the production of knowledge by means of critical progress and innovation.[3] The work of the myth-oriented critics reflected this shift toward a discipline whose goal was no longer to preserve the cultural heritage, but rather to foster dissent and effect social change. In their case dissent took the form of resisting science's claims to be the sole source of valid knowledge, and their program for social change took the form of mitigating what they saw as modernity's dehumanizing tendencies—hence their repeatedly expressed concern that the relationship between myth and literature be articulated in a socially relevant way.

The Rise of American Myth Criticism

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[3] On this shift as change in literary studies more generally, that is, beyond the British context, see Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), esp. pp. 33-35.

To appreciate fully this concern it is first necessary to understand that in seeking to develop a socially relevant criticism, British myth-oriented critics were consciously setting themselves apart from certain North American critics who had developed a sub-genre of literary study known as myth criticism. This type of criticism enjoyed tremendous popularity in North America during the 1950s and 1960s, but most British critics viewed it with misgivings. In their desire to achieve some form of "transcendence" American critics were simply too willing to see myth everywhere in literature, or so many British critics believed. The result was a criticism that had lost touch with real concerns. Because British myth-oriented criticism was in part formed in reaction to North American myth-criticism, it is necessary here to survey that movement.

Numerous commentators on the history of literary criticism have noted that the interpretation of literature in terms of recurring archetypes and perennial themes became increasingly popular following the Second World War.[4] What had been largely the preserve of psychoanalysts and anthropologists before the War was in the post-war years was brought "to the centre of intellectual discussion" by literary critics.[5] In the 1940s various North American critics began to interpret literary works in terms of the archetypal, perennial patterns they believed were present in all literature. This method, which came to be known as "myth criticism" but was sometimes referred to as the "myth-and-symbol movement," saw primeval myths and archetypal symbols embedded in nearly all great works of literature. It seemed most plausible and revealing when applied to certain novels, but its practitioners went much further. One of the early and

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[4] See Chris Baldick, *Criticism and Literary Theory 1890 to the Present* (London: Longman, 1996), 134-36; also Randall Stevenson, *1960-2000: The Last of England?*, vol. 12 of *The Oxford English Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 90, 94. The same view is implicit in Harry Blamires, *A History of Literary Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1991) who situates his discussion of Northrop Frye's importance within a broader discussion of post-Second World War criticism.

[5] Baldick, 134.

most prominent advocates of this so-called "myth criticism" was Richard Chase, whose 1949

Quest for Myth sought to show how even poems by Donne and Wordsworth were based on a

hero myth. Chase continued to employ a modified version of the myth-and-symbol method in

later works such as *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957).[6] The 1940s saw a

proliferation of this genre of criticism with special issues of journals devoted to the subject and

young critics on the make like Chase, Leslie Fiedler, and Francis Fergusson throwing their

weight behind the movement.[7] The movement was supplemented in the 1950s with

sophisticated texts like William York Tindall's *The Literary Symbol* (1955) and Philip

Wheelwright's *The Burning Fountain* (1954).

By the end of the decade the movement had already produced a backlash, with the

respected critics like Stanley Edgar Hyman and Philip Rahv expressing dissenting opinions.[8]

But the popularity of myth criticism continued unabated, various examples of the genre

appearing in influential journals like *Hudson Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Sewanee Review* in

the 1950s. However, this already dynamic genre of criticism was reinvigorated and transformed

in the 1950s through the influence of the Canadian critic Northrop Frye, without question the

most significant figure in history of myth criticism. Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* seemed to

many of his peers to raise myth criticism to new heights.[9]

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[6] Chase later repudiated myth criticism in his 1957 study of the American novel *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957).

[7] Some of Fiedler's early essays are collected in the volumes *An End to Innocence* (1955) and *No! in Thunder* (1960). Francis Fergusson's best-known foray into myth-criticism was *The Idea of a Theater*. For a typical example of American myth-criticism during its golden age see the special issue of *Chimera* IV (Spring 1946).

[8] See S.E. Hyman, "Myth, Ritual, and Nonsense," *Kenyon Review* 11 (Summer, 1949): 455-75; and Philip Rahv, "The Myth and the Powerhouse," *Partisan Review* 20 (November-December 1953): 635-48.

[9] There is of course an immense literature on Frye's thought and its legacy. Two of the best book-length studies of Frye's criticism are A.C. Hamilton, *Northrop Frye: Anatomy of His Criticism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) and Jonathan Locke Hart, *Northrop Frye: The Theoretical Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1994). Frye's

Frye's bold intention was to provide a taxonomy for the classification of all types of literature and criticism. And the term "taxonomy" is not incidental, for his project was motivated by a desire to reshape the discipline of criticism around a central theory, just as biology was built around the theory of evolution. Frye interpreted the history of literary criticism as a conflict between taste and knowledge. Debates about the greatness of authors and poets and attempts to discern a great literary tradition were matters of subjective taste, but Frye's purpose was develop a means for achieving systematic knowledge about literature. It was thus ironic that Frye's work, written out of a motivation to secure objective, scientific knowledge about literature, was in fact used by many myth critics who were motivated by a hostility toward science.

Frye created a scheme for classifying literature according to such factors as mode, theme, type of symbolism, narrative structure and so forth. It is not necessary here to summarize the scheme in detail. The important point to note in this context is the central place of the concept of myth in the scheme. Following Aristotle, Frye suggested that of the five modes of Western fiction the highest was the mythic mode. In his analysis of literary symbolism he argued that the highest kind of meaning is that found in holy scriptures and mythopoeic works. Of the four basic narrative patterns—comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony/satire—all were at bottom reflections of a larger "quest-myth." The ultimate goal of the critic, then, was to reveal the archetypal form that all literary works imitated. This "anagogic" criticism was the highest form of interpretation. Thus, the overwhelming significance of myth is an inescapable aspect of Frye's system. Chris Baldick concludes:

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criticism is helpfully contextualized in relation to other critical movements in Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (London: Athlone Press, 1980). Frye's cultural politics are discussed in David Cook, *Northrop Frye: A Vision of the New World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985). Frye's influence was by no means short-lived. His theories were shaping influential works of criticism produced decades after his *Anatomy* appeared. One particularly significant example was Paul Fussel's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

> Frye's all-devouring theoretical system has brought us back to the perfect reconciliation of 'science' and 'religion' that is speculative anthropology in the tradition of Sir James Frazer and Jessie Weston. In other words, although Frye is not a card-carrying Jungian like Maud Bodkin, he has subordinated all other critical approaches to the master code of myth criticism.[10]

Frye showed British critics that myth criticism could be taken seriously, indeed that it had to be taken seriously. Any critics who ventured into the realm of myth criticism would have to reckon with Frye's theories.

Nevertheless, Frye's influence, as well as the influence of myth criticism more broadly, was much stronger in North America than in Britain. Some of the reasons for this are discussed more fully below, but the most significant factors concerned the differing literary traditions of America and Britain. As the British critic William Righter noted in the early 1970s, the overtly symbolical or allegorical mode of nineteenth-century American literature virtually invited myth criticism.[11] As several other critics at the time noted, the American canon was readily analyzable in terms of recurrent symbols and mythic archetypes, and American critics looking for a critical alternative to the dominant New Criticism could scarcely pass up the opportunity to adopt such an approach. American fiction, and particularly the great nineteenth-century novels, tended to be heavily symbolic. American novelists structured their works by creating "symbolic landscapes" whereas English novelists worked against the backdrop of "a fully differentiated class-patterned social scene."[12] As Lionel Trilling put it, class-obsessed, socially-grounded English novelists were able to portray human relationships within the context of a stable class structure. Lacking this option, American novelists tended to make their characters into symbolic

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[10] Baldick, 134.

[11] William Righter, "Myth and Interpretation," *New Literary History* 3 (1972-3): 319-44.

[12] David Daiches, *English Literature* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), 126.

figures who acted against a virtually cosmic backdrop. This is partly what the British

novelist-critic Paul West had in mind when he attributed the prevalence of myth criticism in

America to the nation's unique social and historical circumstances. But West, who was a

sympathetic but critical commentator on the movement, did not dismiss it as merely an American

quirk. Rather, he argued that American myth criticism's palpable yearning for values like

"consolation" and "transcendence" exemplified a typical reaction by intellectuals to modernity.

"What the Myth critics appear to seek," observed West, "is a kind of philosopher's stone which

turns all conflict into golden myth."[13] But in taking this approach, they were merely giving more

direct expression to a desire shared by their contemporaries. For in modernity, West suggested,

"all intellectuals long for the 'celestial spell' or myth which helps them to get things straight, to

see life integrated and superb….[T]hey look for something permanent and inspiring…." [14]

British Background

It was some of these same concerns about modernity that motivated British critics of the

1960s to take an active interest in myth. However, critical interest in myth was inflected

differently in the British context. Reflecting on recent critical trends in the early 1970s, David

Daiches observed: "Interest in myth has gone further in America than it has in England, but the

interest has become fairly widespread even on this side of the Atlantic."[15] In Britain, however,

thinking about the relation of myth and literature was dominated by the shadow of Frazer's

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[13] Paul West, "On Myth and Modernity," in idem, *The Wine of Absurdity: Essays on Literature and Consolation* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), 212.

[14] Ibid.

[15] David Daiches, *The Present Age: After 1920*; vol. 5 of Bonamy Dobreé, gen. ed., *Introductions to English Literature* (Folcroft Library Editions, 1972), 135. For more on the developments discussed in this paragraph see above, Chapter One.

Golden Bough. Long before Frye's attempts to interpret literary imagination in terms of

mythic archetypes, there was a well-established tradition of relating myth to literature that

stemmed from Frazer's achievement. Frazer's work was rapidly built upon by the Cambridge

Ritualists such as Jane Harrison, F.M. Cornford, A.B. Cook, and Gilbert Murray. These scholars

mined Greek drama for evidence that it was built on an archaic framework of myth and ritual. A

like-minded scholar was Jessie Weston, who applied similar thinking to Arthurian legends to

argue that they were elaborations upon ancient European pagan fertility rituals. The work of the

Cambridge Ritualists was built on certain assumptions that would remain important to later

writers and critics who would defend the value of myth as mode of thought. Among these was

the idea that myth provided offered more comprehensive access to reality than did modern

knowledge. One observer noted how literary critics made this notion central to their defense of

literature by arguing "that the literature of Western civilization can be understood and evaluated

by establishing its connection with, or similarity to, the religious rituals of an assumed world-

wide primitive society and primitive mind, the last being an important idea, since it is assumed

that the primitive or unspecialized mind has a greater contact with, a more complete view of,

total reality than the modern mind."[16]

　　　The modernists had reinforced and further disseminated these ideas with their interest in

mythic structures. From early in the century, use of myth as a critical term in Britain was

associated with modernism. A number of modernist writers self-consciously built mythic

references and structures into their poetry and fiction, and T.S. Eliot famously proposed a

"mythical method"—in place of the traditional narrative method—as an all-purpose aesthetic

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[16] Wallace W. Douglas, article "The Meanings of 'Myth' in Modern Criticism," *Modern Philology* 50, no. 4 (May 1953): 241.

that would allow modernist writers to give "shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."[17] When critics of the 1960s began to rethink use of the concept, it was partly within the context of a broader reaction to the modernist influence in critical theory. Still, the very fact that the great modernist novelists and poets had been preoccupied with myth meant that the concept would not disappear from the critical lexicon. Peter Nicolls has suggested various reasons why the modernists were so intrigued by myth, two of which in particular remained relevant for later critics: "First, modernity is anarchic and lacking in any sense of direction; secondly, something which is not 'history' and which is alien to modernity may be invoked as an external principle of order…."[18] Both of these aspects, first explored by the modernists, would be developed in new directions by the myth-minded critics of the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

The myth and ritual approach to literature began to seem so fruitful—and so plausible with authorities like Eliot propounding the "mythical method"—that critics began to cast their nets wider, as in Colin Still's *The Timeless Theme*, a Frazerian reading of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Inspired in large part by Frazer, the poet Robert Graves made his own erudite but idiosyncratic forays into myth and ritual criticism with such works as *The White Goddess* (1947), his own Penguin collection of *The Greek Myths* (1955), and even with popular novels that advanced his own myth and ritual theories like *The Golden Fleece* (1944). And it was not just the authority of figures like Eliot and Graves that established the prevalence of myth and ritual criticism: the authority of science helped establish the approach as well. As Brian Coates observes, "The quasi-scientific dictates of the Cambridge Ritualists gave their work an appealing

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[17] T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *The Dial* 75 (November 1923): 483. For a fuller discussion of the modernist use of myth see above, Chapter Two.

[18] Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 255.

appearance of system, then badly needed by the new English Tripos; this is how 'myth'

became an accepted element in the new literary schematic."[19]

Psychology was another fertile source of ideas on myth and literature. Beginning in the

1930s a few critics turned to Jungian psychology for insights that could be used to interpret

recurrent patterns, themes, and imagery in literature. The two most influential figures in this

regard were the psychologist-critic Maud Bodkin and the Shakespearean scholar G. Wilson

Knight. Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* viewed archetypal symbols as a crucial means

for the poet to achieve psychological fulfillment, a process that readers could share vicariously

through their interpretation of the work.[20] Knight's studies of Shakespeare were implicitly rather

than explicitly Jungian. For both Bodkin and Knight archtypes represented pre-cultural truths. In

America Freud was the psychologist who was popular among myth critics. But the work of

Bodkin and Knight was one reason why Jung was more popular than Freud among British critics

interested in myth.

Thus, in addition to North American myth criticism, British critics by the 1950s had a

wealth of scholarship on myth from various fields at their disposal. Moreover, the established

anthropological and psychological approaches to myth were being supplemented by influential

phenomenological and philosophical studies of myth as well. In particular, the works of Mircea

Eliade and the neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer provoked much thought in literary circles. In short, by

the 1950s there was a substantial, multidisciplinary body of theory about myth that literary critics

and intellectuals were able to draw on eclectically for their own purposes. And this was not

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[19] Brian Coates, "Anthropological Criticism," in Knellwolf and Norris, eds., *Twentieth-Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, 266.

[20] See Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of the Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

always seen as beneficial: Frank Kermode, one of the leading myth-minded critics of the 1960s, saw this body of theory as so vast and disparate as to be "unmanageable."[21] Nevertheless, critics could not help but draw on it, and Kermode was no exception, as he cited the work of various myth theorists including Eliade, Joseph Cambell, and even the theologian Rudolf Bultmann.

Thus, critical interest in myth did not remain confined to American critics; by the end of the 1950s British critics seemed increasingly interested as well. In the view of Cambridge's M.J.C. Hodgart, this was not a development to be welcomed. Hodgart was but one of several post-war literary critics who, astonished by the surge of literary interest in myth among writers, critics, and readers, set themselves the task of explaining this development in historical terms. Hodgart wrote several articles tracking the development of mythic thought for journals like *The Twentieth Century*, *New Statesman*, and the *Spectator* in the 1950s and 1960s. It is likely that he became interested in the prevalence of myth-oriented criticism because of his work as Joyce scholar. His views are worth examining briefly not only because they provide a window into the rise of myth criticism, but also because he offered a detailed historical explanation of why mythic thinking had gained such purchase in literary circles. Moreover, the explanation of mythic thinking he advanced was echoed by most other literary critics who grappled with the concept of myth, though not all of these critics were as suspicious of mythic thinking as was Hodgart.

In a 1955 piece in *Twentieth Century*, Hodgart attributed the rise of literary interest in myth to multiple factors. It resulted from causes both ancient and recent, both cultural and intellectual; it revealed interests both perennial and merely fashionable. It was clear to Hodgart

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[21] Frank Kermode, "The Myth-Kitty," *The Spectator*, September 11, 1959: 339.

that the emerging interest in myth combined ideas from various fields of inquiry. But the

way in which the ideas were combined troubled him: he lamented the tendency of literary

intellectuals of the 1950s to borrow ideas about myth cavalierly from other disciplines, and he

was an early critic of what he saw as their self-serving and shallow interest in myth. In the

proliferation of literary talk about myth he detected a desire to fabricate a consoling but

undemanding religion:

> Its main features are familiar enough: there is an inclination to take myth
> seriously as embodying intuitions of truths about the human situation and not
> merely as entertaining fictions; there is general interest in certain kinds of
> anthropology and psychology (Jung is now more the vogue than the materialist
> Freud), and the terms 'archetype', 'ritual', 'fertility rite', and 'poetic myth' have
> wide currency in the literary weeklies, implying a certain modish hostility to
> philosophical materialism and rationalism.[22]

Hodgart interpreted the emerging interest in myth as but the latest reemergence of the occultism

that "is a permanent minority strand in Western culture…."[23] This strand tended to reappear

whenever the authority of the church declined, the difference with the current situation being that

it was "the church of science" that had lost adherents. Yet in Hodgart's view there was

something distinctive about the new occultism in that it was characterized by "less talk about

magic and more about myth. The reason for this lies partly in the immense prestige enjoyed by a

group of Cambridge dons between forty and fifty years ago, the greatest of whom was Sir James

Frazer." But Frazer's influence was curious because "Frazer was a classic Victorian rationalist

and it is ironical that his work should have had so fertilizing an effect on contemporary trends of

irrational thinking."[24] It was clear to Hodgart that Frazer and the later Cambridge ritualists had

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[22] M.J.C. Hodgart, "In the Shade of the Golden Bough," *The Twentieth Century* 157, no. 936 (February 1955): 111.

[23] Ibid., 113.

[24] Ibid.

laid the foundations for literary interest in myth. The fertility of such work as a source of

raw material for writers had been demonstrated by Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, and Lawrence and then

complicated by psychologists such as Freud and Jung and by later anthropologists such as

Malinowski. In the end, Hodgart's main worry was that mythic thinking would encourage either

a widespread anti-modern irrationalism or an empty, pseudo-religious escapism. In his opinion,

the vast body of myth was there for writers to reshape for their own "purely literary" purposes,[25]

not to be reshaped into a fabricated belief system.

The main points of Hodgart's explanation of mythic criticism are outlined here because

they were to be echoed by various critics throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. His views

amounted to a narrative of the emergence of myth criticism that British myth-minded critics

would rely on throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. As but one example among many, all

the main elements of Hodgart's analysis—primitivism, anti-scientism, the formative

contributions of psychology and anthropology—would be repeated by Raymond Williams in his

entry on myth in his *Keywords*.

A New Kind of Criticism

Hodgart was a frequent contributor to *Essays in Criticism*, a journal launched in 1951 that

quickly came to occupy a prominent place among British critical journals. Chris Baldick has

identified the early 1950s as a turning point in British criticism, because it was then that a group

of British critics began to react against the dominance of the New Critics and the *Scrutiny* school

of criticism. Some of these critics coalesced around *Essays in Criticism*, started by Oxford's

F.W. Bateson. It was from this loose group that several of the young myth-minded critics would

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[25] Ibid., 118.

emerge in the late 1950s and 1960s. Bateson was not shy about explaining the broad

principles to which *Essays in Criticism* was dedicated. In an early editorial manifesto of 1953,

"The Function of the Criticism at the Present time," Bateson outlined the journal's mission. Its

very title, like the title of the manifesto itself, were clues: both were borrowed from the work of

Matthew Arnold. Bateson's aim was to reinvigorate an Arnoldian style of criticism updated for

modern purposes—that is, a criticism that aimed at both textual scholarship and socially relevant

criticism, that sought to connect the literary world with the social world, and that balanced

concern for both "literary meaning in the ordinary sense and the social context in which meaning

alone acquires value."[26] He criticized the New Critics and their modernist forbears for furthering

an overly-technical conception of literature that was completely severed from the interests of the

common reader. This tradition of criticism, he claimed, alienated readers by criticizing poems

and novels "as though the language in which they were written and on which their existence

depends had no connection with everyday human reality."[27] But "sociological" critics like

Lionel Trilling committed the opposite error. They were in "such a hurry to get to the implicit

ideas and social attitudes" in literature that they skimmed it instead of reading it, thereby

abdicating their responsibility to be careful scholars.

What was so evidently needed, in Bateson's view, was "a balance…of literary and

sociological criticism, in which one mode may serve as the complement and the corrective of the

other."[28] He even went so far as to claim that "The infusion of social issues…into purely literary

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[26] F.W. Bateson, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," *Essays in Criticism* 3, no. 1 (January 1953): 25.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

criticism is probably the most crying need of all….”[29] This “balance of opposites” was what

Essays in Criticism hoped to achieve. Twelve years later Bateson could state that “The Arnoldian

ideal of scholarship and criticism…is still the star to which *Essays in Criticism's* waggon is

hitched,” and he took pride that the journal had been commended for pursuing this ideal in

manner that was “toughly professional.”[30] This general desire for a professional, socially

relevant criticism was shared by the myth-minded critics examined below, most of whom

contributed to *Essays in Criticism* during their careers.

　　　　The work of these myth-minded critics must also be understood in the context of broader

changes that were taking place within the discipline in the 1960s and 1970s. Most studies of

literary criticism in twentieth-century Britain agree that at some point in the 1960s the field

began to be transformed by that collection of critical techniques that have come to be known as

“theory.” Chris Baldick rightly notes that “[t]his entity” was not a harmonious movement, but

rather “was a variegated cargo of literary and linguistic theories of continental European origin,

underpinned by larger intellectual systems such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, and post-

Nietzschean philosophy, all given a new edge by contemporary radical movements….”[31]

Chronologies of this emergence vary, with some writers locating the advent of theory in the late

1960s and others the early 1970s. Raman Selden argues for a slightly earlier date in identifying

“the period between the mid-1960s and the present day as the age of theory,”[32] while

Christopher Norris notes “a growing awareness among Anglophone critics” of hermeneutic

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[29] Ibid., 26.

[30] F.W. Bateson, “Editorial Commentary: The Second Breath,” *Essays in Criticism* 15, no. 1 (January 1965): 3.

[31] Baldick, 161.

[32] Raman Selden Introduction to *From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, ed. idem, vol 8 of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1

theory "from the early 1960s on."[33] Such periodizations are all approximate, and there are

exceptions that defy each of them. Moreover, they can make changes within the field seem more

abrupt than they in fact were. Randall Stevenson has noted that already in 1960 the critic

Graham Hough was observing that it was "hardly possible" for a serious student of literature "to

be entirely innocent of any concern with literary theory…."[34] However, by literary theory

Hough had in mind increasingly systemized approaches to the study of literature rather than the

Continental-derived approaches that earned the label "theory" roughly a decade later. It is these

Continental approaches, first evident in Britain in the guise of structuralism, that Selden and

others have in mind when they speak of an "age of theory."[35] And it is these approaches that

Frank Kermode had in mind when he remembered "the late 1960s and early 1970s" as the period

which saw the advent of "the new approaches to literary theory that a quarter century later have

so altered every aspect of the subject."[36] We are given a sense of the impact of these techniques

by Frank Kermode's comment on how his 1967 *The Sense of an Ending* looked in light of the

appearance of structuralism: "I remember feeling rather dismally that quite a lot of work had

gone into a book which became antediluvian almost on publication."[37]

Perhaps the conflicting chronologies of theory's rise in Britain can best be reconciled by

conceding that there was a growing awareness of Continental theory throughout the sixties, but

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[33] Norris, 407.

[34] Qtd. in Stevenson, 89.

[35] Stevenson follows Selden in referring to an age of theory from roughly the mid sixties onwards. Chris Baldick begins his discussion of the rise of theory in 1968.

[36] Frank Kermode, *Not Entitled: A Memoir* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 214.

[37] Qtd. in Bernard Bergonzi, *Exploding English: Criticism, Theory, Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 23. Kermode's comment is noteworthy also for its assumption that literary criticism progresses in a way similar to how technology or the sciences progress; interventions in literary theory become obsolete just as outdated technologies or scientific theories.

that the "age of theory" did not dawn until the end of the decade. Until that point criticism

was characterized by theoretical ventures and experimentation that revealed an increasing

interest in the workings of narrative. It was in the 1960s that critics began to ask how narrative

thought was different than, for example, scientific thought. Again, Kermode summed up what

many British critics of this period felt when he recollected that "Barthes pleased us because he

wrote so well about fiction…and we regarded that as being very much in our line."[38] In fact,

Kermode defined the critical enterprise itself in essentially narrative terms: the modern critic's

task was "making sense of the ways we make sense of the world."[39] Kermode was to establish

himself as perhaps the key figure in initiating this shift of attention to narrative, and the move to

explicate the workings of narrative necessitated an explanation of myth as one particularly

significant type or element of narrative. Kermode was only one of many critics asking similar

questions. This increasing interest in narrative theory was one way that critics sought to justify

their discipline. Science was one way of making sense of the world, but narrative in their view

was another, and literary critics increasingly claimed that they were uniquely qualified to explain

how narrative worked.[40]

Thus, the idea that narrative forms were uniquely valuable ways of making sense of life

came to be a central concern of many young critics, and literary interest in myth during 1960s

and into 1970s was in part a function of this shift of critical attention to narrative. This myth-

narrative connection was perhaps expressed most concisely by Paul West. Criticizing the French

[38] Kermode, *Not Entitled*, 215.

[39] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 31.

[40] A parallel interest in narrative was taking place at the same time in philosophy. See for instance the idea of the "narrative self" in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricoeur, and Charles Taylor.

"anti-novelists" for their failure to offer any interpretation of the inchoate flux of experience

he contended that "…interpretation is really the effect of myth. Myth is the universal pattern that

confers meaning on all kinds of experiences."[41] Thus, the reason why anti-novels failed as

fiction was their lack of a mythological element to give form and meaning to experience. West's

assumption that at the heart of fiction was a dialectic between the mythic and the mimetic,

between myth and the realistic representation of experience, was shared, to varying degrees, by

all the myth-minded critics examined here. Their attempts to explain the nature of this dialectic

led them to explain as well why myth remained for the common reader a powerful means of

coping with modernity.

Compared to American myth criticism, British attempts to theorize the relationship

between myth and literature were more cautious, more circumspect, more concerned with

showing how mythic literature was socially relevant rather than with making sweeping defenses

of the possibilities of transcendence offered by myth. David Daiches was among the British

critics most interested in investigating the relationship between myth and literature, but he felt

that American inquiries in this area were prone to go too far. American myth criticism, he noted,

"has produced much that is illuminating, much that is provocative, and a fair amount that is

wholly absurd. Like so many movements in American criticism it lends itself easily to

unconscious parody, and when the search for myth and symbol gets out of hand it can yield some

pretty fancy nonsense."[42]

Paul West struck a similar note to Daiches in noting the shortcomings and over-

exaggerations of American myth criticism, and his criticisms are helpful for the way they

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[41] Paul West, "The Nature of Fiction," *Essays in Criticism* 13, no. 1 (January 1963): 100.

[42] Daiches, *English Literature*, 128.

highlight what was distinctive about British myth-oriented criticism. West's main criticism

of the American myth critics was that their search for myth could "only too easily end up in a

grandiose cerebrality" and "sheer escapism."[43] Their explanation of how myth reconciled and

transcended conflicts within works of literature was never translated into explanations of how it

could help individuals reconcile and transcend the conflicts they encountered in their lives. The

myth critics sought to reveal in literature a common myth "that enables us to live intelligently in

the presence of a suggested pattern. Such a pattern we can invoke in trouble, and use to develop

a sense of belonging and identity."[44] But they ultimately failed "by virtue of their imaginative

response to the truism that literature is the only means we have of living out a part of our lives

intelligently. Outside books there are too many obstacles; inside them, perhaps, there are

intoxicatingly, dangerously, few."[45] In the end, West concluded, "Myth criticism…offers an

external pattern, but authenticates without reference to society."[46] This was a typically British

conclusion, for it was just this sort of escapism and disconnection from actual social concerns

that the British critics sought to avoid in their theorizing about myth. For them the relationship

between myth, literature and society was a problem to be solved. They accepted the literature

was somehow grounded in myth; this seemed to them undeniable. Their aim, then, was to

describe the nature of literature's relationship to myth and explain why this was significant for

the average reader.

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[43] West, 231; 236.

[44] Ibid., 213.

[45] Ibid., 212.

[46] Ibid., 236.

The American myth critics were not the only group that British myth-minded critics were reacting against. In their engagement with the concept of myth they were also defining themselves against the work of at least two groups of British critics. One was the modernists, who had first established myth as significant term of analysis for literary critics. Because they were seeking a critical idiom more attuned to the needs of the common reader, the myth-minded critics dissented from the entire modernist revolution in literature. They argued that the modernist abandonment of ordinary discourse had effectively severed literature from the average reader.[47] Thus the myth-minded critics tried to rehabilitate the critical reputation of the Romantics. The modernists had repudiated Romantic poetry as too personal, but the myth-minded critics were in sympathy with the Romantic idea of the poet as, in Wordsworth's phrase, "a man speaking to men." More specifically, they viewed modernist strictures about a "mythical method" as too grandiose, too constraining, and too evidently constructed to serve the modernist critical agenda. Moreover, modernists like W.B. Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, and Eliot came under suspicion for having made the error of believing too deeply in their own self-created myths.

In addition, the myth-minded critics sought to separate their work from the *Scrutiny* school of criticism associated with F.R. Leavis. Just as the modernists were censured for their willful neglect of the common reader, the Leavisites were criticized for their attempts to narrow the grand scope of imaginative literature down to a few approved works. The myth-minded critics' justifications of literature were therefore different than those of Leavis and his followers. Whereas Leavisites argued that great literature preserved essential human values and was a means of maintaining cultural continuity against the depredations of "technological-Benthamite"

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[47] See for example Graham Hough, *Image and Experience* (London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1960).

civilization, the myth-minded critics tended to hold that literature had a unique ability to interpret modernity and speak to human concerns within modernity, in part because of its mythical core.

Even though literary critics of the 1960s and 1970s were reluctant to grant myth the level of importance that earlier, modernist influenced, writers and critics had, they nevertheless continued to suggest that myth was a literary form of special significance. Though critics like West, Daiches, Hough, John Holloway, Kermode, William Righter, and K.K. Ruthven were uncomfortable with the use of myth as a blunt rhetorical weapon against science and modernity, they continued to grant myth a special status in their increasingly sophisticated critical approaches. Compared with much earlier British myth criticism or with North American myth criticism, their concept of myth was more cautious and attenuated. They sought to explain myth's significance in credible critical language, without foreclosing the possibility that writers might use myth as a form of narrative that had a unique potential to speak to modern needs. Talk of myth's "transcendent power" gave way to myth's "special significance" as a narrative form or element. At bottom, this critical approach to myth was motivated by the attempt to understand myth's power as a term of modern cultural analysis, and by the concern that literary use of myth be part of an imaginative literature that, after a modernist detour into obscurantism, was once again a viable, socially relevant form of public discourse. Writing in 1970, Graham Hough captured these motivations well in suggesting that British literary critics had "two real needs": "One is for a clearer methodology, a method capable of giving a genuine sense of direction to intellectual development. The other is for a far closer engagement with social reality, with the history that still surrounds us, not with the history that exists over against us as an accomplished

past."[48]   The sections that follow will attempt to show how these motivations took shape in the thought of specific myth-minded critics who directly addressed the issue of myth's relation to literature.

David Daiches

By the 1960s David Daiches was one of the most prominent and respected critics in Britain. A Scot by birth, he became known for his breadth of scholarship. His studies of leading Scottish and English literary figures (Scott, Burns, George Eliot, Woolf, Lawrence) were well-received, but he was equally comfortable writing about American novelists and poets (Cather, Whitman). From 1951 to 1962 he was associated with Cambridge, first as lecturer and then as a tutor. In 1961 he moved to the University of Sussex where he served as dean of the School of American and English Studies until 1967. One of the recurring themes of his criticism is the problem of the place of imaginative literature in the modern world. Like other myth-minded critics, he was deeply concerned that imaginative literature be relevant to the concerns of the average individual, and his thoughts on the relationship between myth and literature were shaped by this concern.

This was a theme he addressed in a lecture on "Myth, Metaphor, and Poetry" given to the Royal Society of Literature in 1961. Here Daiches framed his thoughts on myth and literature in terms of the confrontation between the literary and scientific cultures. His case is interesting, because in a lecture eleven years earlier he had confessed, "I dissociate myself from the myth-

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[48] Graham Hough, "Criticism as a Humanist Discipline," in idem, *Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 13.

hunters, who see the modern literary artist's basic need as new myths...."[49] Yet in the later

lecture he was more willing to consider how myth could serve as a resource for writers of

imaginative literature. Daiches began by suggesting that critical interest in myth resulted from

"[t]he modern concern with the differentiating qualities [sic] of the literary use of language and

the modern insistence that poetic discourse is different in kind from factual or scientific

communication."[50] This concern to define the distinctiveness of poetic language, by which

Daiches meant the language of imaginative literature in general, "led literary critics to ponder

over the nature of myth and its relation to poetic ways of knowing and creating."[51] In other

words, "interest in myth has been pressed on literary critics by their need to emphasize the basic

difference between—to put it crudely—poetry and science."[52] In Daiches's view this effort to

distinguish literary "ways of knowing" from scientific had been going on since the late-

nineteenth century, but the emergence of anthropological and psychological theories of myth

meant that the project was being carried out with ever-increasing sophistication. But without

knowing it, Daiches was describing a telling historical irony. On the one hand he was convinced

that modern literary criticism was more reliant on the knowledge produced by anthropology and

psychology than ever before, that is, more scientifically grounded than ever before. Yet at the

same time he contended that "Modern literary criticism is on the whole more committed to an

affiliation of poetry, myth, and religion than the criticism of any other age has been."[53] Some

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[49] David Daiches, "Religion, Poetry and the 'Dilemma' of the Modern Writer," in idem, *Literary Essays* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1956), 224. In 1966 Daiches referred to the essay as "dated." See "Preface to the Second Impression" in the aforementioned volume.

[50] David Daiches, "Myth, Metaphor, and Poetry," in idem, *More Literary Essays* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1968), 1.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 2.

[53] Ibid., 3.

critics who were skeptical of myth criticism in its various forms had noted this irony as early

as the 1950s,[54] but myth-minded critics themselves seemed oblivious to it.

Daiches's thoughts on the relation of myth to literature resemble those of other British

critics of the 1960s in their concern with how an understanding of myth enables a better

understanding of how literature works as narrative and as way of apprehending truth about

human experience. Working from the assumption that imaginative literature had epistemic value

as a non-scientific way of knowing, Daiches sought to show how myth, when properly integrated

into imaginative literature, offered access to deep truths about human experience. In other words,

his argument took for granted that imaginative literature had its own legitimacy as a way of

knowing and then went on to show how myth helped establish literature's epistemic claims. As

he explained the matter:

> What the literary critic…wants to ask is: Does myth represent a way of
> apprehending or interpreting reality, and a related use of the imagination and
> method of handling language, which is identical with or significantly analogous to
> the way in which the literary artist functions?...Is there necessarily an element of
> myth in all great works of imaginative literature? If so, how can we define that
> element and how will our definition give us a greater insight into the nature of
> knowing?[55]

In answering these questions, Daiches presumed that myth was a way of interpreting experience

whose legitimacy, because of its very universality, did not need to be justified. Embedded in his

argument is the assumption, shared by many of his contemporaries, that myth's explanatory

usefulness was really beyond question because it had been used by all cultures at all times. This

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[54] See for example Wallace W. Douglas's often witty article "The Meanings of 'Myth' in Modern Criticism," cited above, n. 16. Wallace concludes with the observation that "[T]he result [of the rise of myth criticism] has been to turn attention away from literature as literature and to import into criticism confusing terms and concepts drawn from a social science that is itself so insight-ridden as to be peculiarly agreeable to critics who in other contexts seem to feel that the sin without name is that of committing a social science" (p. 242).

[55] Ibid., 5.

was what theorists from Malinowski to Cassirer—both cited by Daiches—had shown,

overturning the arguments of the Victorian anthropologists that myth was merely a feature of

primitive societies. It was thus time-honored and, because culturally transcendent, seemingly an

innate aspect of human nature, a necessary manifestation of the human need to make meaning.

In his attempt to explain just how myth gave meaning to experience, Daiches posited that

myth is essentially a symbolic mode of discourse that imposes meaning on reality. This was

very significant because symbolic discourse was necessary for expressing what he called

"implicated truths" about reality. Daiches acknowledged the phrase was imperfect, but

explained: "by it I mean a truth which reflects human hopes, fears, yearnings, aspirations,

intuition—one could extend the list indefinitely."[56] This led him to a tentative definition of myth:

"Can we perhaps say that myth (whatever else it may be) is symbolic discourse aimed at

achieving human involvement in a neutral universe?"[57] Poetry was also a symbolic discourse

that aimed at telling implicated truths, but in a different way than myth, for "myth aims at mutual

implication between man and nature while poetry aims at implicating man in the history of

human experience."[58]   But this left unanswered the question of what role myth should play in

literature. The whole drift of Daiches' idea of the implicated truths offered by poetry provided

the connection. For in his view poetry was only healthy, was only doing its job of telling

implicated truths, if it was telling truths that were relevant to the reader's experience. This was

the point of contact with myth, for all individuals experienced specific hopes, fears and

aspirations, and myth's very subject matter was "the elemental hopes, fears, aspirations of

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[56] Ibid., 6

[57] Ibid., 9

[58] Ibid., 11.

mankind." The poet's task was therefore to update this mythical material and render it

relevant, "to counterpoint the patterns of his own culture with those primitive elements in such a

way as to give those primitive elements new life, new modernity."[59] Thus, Daiches arrives at the

conclusion that novelists and poets had a responsibility to use myth in a way that was relevant to

modern experience. As he explained more fully:

> We make poetic contact with our human past by metaphor; a myth used
> metaphorically is, if it is properly handled, a myth used after its literal belief has
> passed away in order to explore areas of feeling and awareness to which that myth
> can still be made relevant. And the relevance is not simple; it is complex and
> suggestive, revealing that…the primitive mind is still with us but so changed, or
> so hidden, that a revelation of it, and the relating of it to our present ways of
> thinking and feeling, startles us into a new awareness of the human dimension.[60]

Daiches acknowledged that his lecture was not intended to provide a theory of myth, but the

position implied in the piece is that myth, when properly integrated into relevant imaginative

literature, offered substantial resources for coping with modernity. This was a notion that would

be explored in greater detail by some of his contemporaries.

John Holloway

The idea that myth had importance as a resource in a disenchanted modern world was

also explored by the critic John Holloway. The significance of myth within the context of

Holloway's thought is perhaps more apparent with him than with some of his peers, since he was

also an accomplished poet. The themes and concepts that are emphasized in his critical writings

can therefore be related to those that recur in his poetry. Indeed, Holloway's critical writings can

largely be interpreted through his poetry, which was concerned with what he took to be

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[59] Ibid. 13-14.

[60] Ibid., 14.

modernity's erosion of the self and the possibilities of resisting or transcending this process.

Born in London in 1920, Holloway was of roughly the same generation as Daiches and Hough

and almost the same age as Kermode. By 1966 C.P. Snow could refer to Holloway as "one of

the three or four most distinguished critics of his generation in England."[61] But Holloway also

established himself as a respected poet beginning in the late 1950s. His first volume of poetry

appeared in 1956, by which time he had already published his still classic study *The Victorian*

Sage. Because his work appeared in the 1956 Robert Conquest volume *New Lines*, he was

briefly associated with the group of poets known as the Movement. But he never considered

himself a Movement poet and declined an invitation to contribute to *New Lines 2* (1963). This

distancing is significant, because one of the tenets of some Movement poets was a hostility to

myth, a view Holloway did not accept.

One of Holloway's primary concerns as a critic was defending imaginative literature as a

valid discourse in its own right. Against some who argued that only science was equipped to

provide useful knowledge about reality, Holloway asserted that literature need not abandon its

claims to offer unique knowledge about experience. Targeting scientific apologists like the

Nobel laureate Sir Peter Medawar, he vigorously defended this position throughout the 1960s in

periodicals like *Encounter*, *Critical Quarterly*, *The Listener* and the *Times Literary Supplement*,

as well as through the talks he frequently gave on the BBC.[62] Typical Holloway essays on this

theme could be found under such titles as "Poetry for the Technologist" and "Our Contracting

Universities." Such pieces reveal his sense of urgency about the need to secure for a literature a

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[61] C.P. Snow, Introduction to John Holloway, *A London Childhood* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968; first published 1966).

[62] See, for instance, John Holloway, "Science & Literature: A Reply to Sir Peter Medawar," *Encounter* 33 (July 1969): 81-85.

place in a changing university system. Imaginative literature must be understood as far more than a means of relaxation, Holloway urged. Rather, it should be seen as an invaluable component of any university education that could be considered adequate. But, he worried that new proposals to reform the university system took no account of literature's importance. Responding to the Robbins Report, Holloway observed, "the idea seems chiefly to be, teach more science so as to have more technologists."[63] Imaginative literature did have usefulness and relevance, Holloway would argue, but not according to the utilitarian standards that were shaping the agenda of university expansion. The value of literature was not necessarily as obvious as the value of a technological achievement, but it did not follow that literature was therefore less important, for what it offered were resources for coping with modernity.

Holloway's concern with defending imaginative literature as a discourse with its own value clearly shaped his thoughts on myth's relation to literature. In 1960 Holloway participated in a conference at the University of Bristol on the topic of "Metaphor and Symbol." Taking part in the conference were other noted writers on the subject of myth, such as philosopher Philip Wheelwright, critic Owen Barfield, and theologian F.W. Dillistone.[64] Holloway used this opportunity to work out his thoughts on "The Concept of Myth in Literature."

In his lecture, Holloway considered how the anthropological study of myth could be used by literary critics to develop a more comprehensive understanding of imaginative literature. By considering the contributions of various branches of anthropology, Holloway sought to build a case that myth and great imaginative literature were analogous in significant ways. To do this his considered the views of myth offered by three branches of anthropology. One view was

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[63] John Holloway, "Our Contracting Universities," in *The Colours of Clarity: Essays on Contemporary Literature and Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 10.

[64] C.S. Lewis was also scheduled to present a paper but was prevented by illness.

represented by the "armchair" anthropology of Max Muller and J.G. Frazer, which held that

myths were essentially primitive forms of explanation, "a distinctive kind of attempt…to

comprehend the universe, or the state of man…."[65] Yet Holloway noted that a recent revolution

in anthropology had displaced this older view of myth. The new understanding was advanced by

functionalist anthropologists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, who by means of

fieldwork observed how myth actually functioned in primitive societies. According to these

anthropologists, myth's "function is not so much to answer a question about the world…as to

contribute to, or sustain, some reality now current in the society."[66] In Holloway's opinion both

views contained insights that were helpful to the literary critic who wanted to understand the

power of literature:

> But in the literary field there is no reason whatever to suppose that if we attempt
> to exploit this newer viewpoint of anthropology with regard to myth, and consider
> some of our great imaginative works as sources of power and influence rather
> than information, as great sustainers and moulders of cultural life of the
> community or the individual, we are therefore bound entirely to repudiate the
> view which sees them as expressing 'meanings', or suggesting answers to
> fundamental questions about the nature of man or human life.[67]

This willingness to borrow from other disciplines any concept that might be used to defend

imaginative literature's status as a uniquely important mode of discourse is characteristic of his

thought. In doing so he was perhaps reflecting a literary trend he noted elsewhere: "a movement

characteristic of the time: sharper thinking about problems to be solved and abuses to be set right,

and more self-consciousness and calculatingness about what can be employed as a means of

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[65] John Holloway, "The Concept of Myth in Literature," in L.C. Knights and Basil Cottle, eds., *Metaphor and Symbol: Proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium of the Colston Research Society held in the University of Bristol* (London: Butterworths Scientific Publications, 1960), 125.

[66] Ibid., 123.

[67] Ibid., 125-26.

achieving desired ends…."[68] In other words, his approach was similar to that of many of his

contemporaries who assumed that literature had a vital cultural purpose in an increasingly

scientific world, and were willing to borrow intellectual tools from other disciplines—even

"scientific" disciplines—if it could help them defend that position.

But Holloway did not end his survey of anthropological theory there. He next turned to

the school of anthropologists who understood myth in terms of its connection with ritual.

Referring to the work of Frazer, Jane Harrison, Lord Raglan, and Jessie Weston, he set himself

the task of inquiring whether the body of thought on the connection between ritual and myth

could bring to light "aspects of imaginative works which might otherwise elude critical

observation."[69] Holloway did not argue that works of imaginative literature are rituals in

disguise, but rather suggested that many of the great literary masterpieces functioned within

modern culture in a way similar to the role played by ritual in primitive cultures. One of

Holloway's objectives was to explain the phenomenon of "the great imaginative masterpiece."

Having suggested that literature's function in modern societies was similar to the function of

myth and ritual in primitive societies, Holloway concluded that the function of the imaginative

masterpiece was no longer so mysterious:

> Its irreplaceable value as part of the cultural heritage, its explosive and disturbing power, its remoteness and total difference in kind from anything offered by cognitive thinking or in particular by science, its ability to contact the deepest parts of our nature, and the well-known fact that encountering it can be a decisive experience and mark a stage in our lives, now fall easily into place.[70]

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[68] Holloway, "Our Contracting Universities," 15.

[69] Holloway, "The Concept of Myth in Literature," 127.

[70] Ibid., 131.

In their contrast between literature and science and their emphasis on the power and relevance of imaginative literature, these comments are reminiscent of Daiches' views on the relation of myth and literature. Modern individuals no longer took part in rituals that enacted an underlying myth that they believed. This role of myth and ritual was now filled by imaginative literature, which both ordered and expanded the reader's experience in a powerful way; like myth, literature "has a *mana* of its own."[71] He concluded: "The work's essential interest will be to have added a great new item to the furniture of the world, to have become a thing, a fount of experience. It is precious to individuals because of the great experience which it offers them, and to society because…it thus enhances the life, and the capacity for life of society's members."[72]

Holloway would continue to develop this line of thought throughout his career, arguing repeatedly for the relevance and importance of imaginative literature in a modern world. Because of its quasi-mythical power and its capacity to expand experience, imaginative literature was directly relevant to the concerns of those coping with modernity. Hence, literature should not be studied for its own sake; it must be studied in a way that "speaks potently to those many in a large-scale enterprise whose concern for our own time and its general problems is stronger than…a taste for reading old books….it must evoke and greatly foster such an interest in our own contemporaneity even in those who lack it."[73] On a practical level, this meant that literature could be a source of strategies for resisting modern problems like "the ethos of endless growth"

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[71] Ibid., 132.

[72] Ibid.

[73] John Holloway, *The Establishment of English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 25.

and could even help students see their responsibility for "guardianship of the biosphere."[74]

Yet in his critical writings Holloway never made clear just how literature, performing the

function of myth and ritual, could help readers give meaning to their experience of modernity.

Perhaps this is because he attempted to address this issue in his poetry instead. But other critics

did take on this issue more directly, and it is their work that will be considered next.

Graham Hough

Graham Hough was a prominent British critic who went further than either Daiches or

Holloway in examining how poets and novelists could manage the tension between myth and

experience in their work. Born in 1908, Hough produced much of his criticism while at

Cambridge between 1955 and 1977, and much of his early work appeared in Bateson's *Essays in*

Criticism. His criticism was shaped by many of the same concerns as Daiches, Holloway, and

Kermode's, not least among them the desire to develop a form of criticism that was free of

Leavisite dogmatism. Randall Stevenson, whose survey of post-Second World War British

literary criticism is one of the most historically-informed treatments of the topic, makes Hough's

work one of the recurring reference points of his survey because it is emblematic of the tensions

felt by many critics of Hough's transitional generation. Hough, along with many of his

contemporaries, still assumed in the 1960s that literary criticism was concerned with a fairly

well-defined canon, yet he also felt the need for criticism to be relevant and capable of justifying

its place in an expanding university system, a desire that went hand-in-hand with his willingness

to criticize the elitism of literary education in the 1960s. Hough believed that in the 1960s it was

impossible to ignore that "the texture of living experience" had been transformed into something

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[74] Ibid., 26; 27.

so rapidly changing that much pre-twentieth-century English literature seemed irrelevant to

many. [75] This situation necessitated a more practical, less elitist criticism free of the "vague

odour of old port and oak panelling" that pervaded Leavisite literary education. Hough had little

use for the tradition of criticism represented by Leavis' *Scrutiny*. Such criticism too often

resembled "an orgy of approval and disapproval."[76] Hough's acerbic judgment on the Leavisites

was that:

> They start from a set of attitudes, derived from inherited moral, social
> environment and fragments of a surviving religious faith. They then make a
> careful selection of the literary tradition that will confirm these attitudes; and
> finally announce in triumph that literature has validated whatever they believed to
> start with.[77]

The worst consequence of such criticism was that it robbed literature of its unique ability to

expand the reader's experience: "We cannot expect much from a mentor who can never surprise

us, never shock us, never induce us to change our mind. As long as literature is used in this way

its guidance will be a nullity and an illusion."[78]

In Hough's view, the aim of studying literature was to encounter—in his favorite

phrase—"the whole of man's imaginative experience." But this could not be done if, like the

Leavisites, critics busied themselves with defining a canon of approved works. This approach

only succeeded in severing readers from vast segments of that imaginative experience.

> …we shall continually be meeting minds that work on entirely different premises
> from our own. We shall be confronting beliefs that we find impossible, emotions
> that we have never entertained, experiences that the contemporary world gives us

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[75] J.H. Plumb, ed., *Crisis in the Humanities* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), 103.

[76] Graham Hough, *The Dream and the Task: Literature and Morals in the Culture of Today* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1963), 99.

[77] Ibid., 100.

[78] Ibid.

no inkling of. And we shall be continually forced to realize that they are a part of our human inheritance, that our citizenship of a rather ramshackle, probably declining, continually threatened twentieth-century welfare state is only part of a wider citizenship that is ultimately more real. Literature can do very little to alter the brute facts of power and history. Its capacities in this respect have been generally exaggerated; for this we need to call on other energies; and no amount of literary culture can excuse us from employing them. But it can knock a window in the subtopian fall-out shelter to which contemporary politics and economics seem bent on condemning us. With its aid we have continually before us a view of other possibilities.[79]

In short, literature offered possibilities for coping with modern life, a view of imaginative literature's importance that is remarkably like Holloway's. For Hough literary critics played a key role in allowing literature to do its work, because "the business of criticism is to insert [the literature of the past] into the living fabric of the present."[80] The task was to convince those outside the field of literary criticism that critics fulfilled a vital function. In other words, critics needed to dispel "the scandal of amateurism and indirection that still hangs around literary criticism in the judgement [sic] of philosophers, historians and natural scientists."[81] The primary means of achieving this was to develop more sophisticated ways of dealing with literature's most basic subject matter: language. Hence Hough's interest in the work of figures such as Barthes and Saussure.

Thus, throughout his career Hough was concerned with justifying the importance of imaginative literature and the role of the critic as an interpreter of it. If, as Hough argued, the critic "should be able to give some intelligible account of the relation of literature to the social order,"[82] then one of most pressing concerns for the modern critic was to explain the relationship

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[79] Ibid., 101-02.

[80] Hough, "Criticism as a Humanist Discipline," 13.

[81] Ibid., 20.

[82] Ibid.

between myth and imaginative literature and why that relationship was relevant to everyday experience. This was an issue he took up in his most extended and comprehensive attempt to exemplify his vision of criticism, the 1966 book *An Essay on Criticism.*

Hough felt it necessary to devote two chapters of the work to an assessment of myth criticism as represented by the work of Northrop Frye combined with his own views on the relation between myth and literature. He was sympathetic to and impressed by Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, but he had several reservations about Frye's theories. Interestingly, one of his objections was that Frye's work was premised on the "discredited" anthropology of Frazer's *Golden Bough*. More fundamentally, Hough objected to Frye's argument that mythic patterns always dictate the structure of literary works, myth providing the form and experience the content. Like other critics of his generation, Hough essentially accepted Iris Murdoch's conception of the "journalistic" and "crystalline" poles of literature. On this view, broached by Murdoch in a famous 1961 *Encounter* essay, the "journalistic" pole was the artist's desire to render accurately the contingent flux of experience, while the "crystalline" pole was the urge to impose on this flux a consoling, mythic pattern.[83] This view is implicit in Hough's suggestion that:

> A juster view of the relation of myth to literature would be that myth represents one pole of literary creation; the other pole being experience, reality, 'nature', our sense of how things happen. Ever since literature became literature the two have existed in a state of dialectical tension—on the one side the archaic outlines of a relatively few persistent and unchanging stories, on the other the inexhaustible flux of experience.[84]

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[83] See Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," *Encounter* 16 (January 1961): 16-20.

[84] Graham Hough, *An Essay on Criticism* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1966), 151-52.

Hough believed that the great virtue of Frye's work was that it demonstrated convincingly "that myth is indeed an abiding element in literature…."[85] However, myth did not provide the fundamental structure of all literary works as Frye supposed; myth did not provide a container that the artist then filled up with representational material. Instead, Hough argued, myth provided a body of material that each artist had to engage on his or her own terms, for his or her own purposes: "Mythic elements mingle and fuse with mimetic ones, and both are contained…in a form that is dictated by purely literary considerations….Myth is not the geometry of literature; it is part of its material."[86]

Hough held that modern literature was particularly rife with mythical elements and he believed this was directly related to the decline of Christianity. Myth, he argued, unavoidably raised the question of belief. Until the nineteenth century the deployment of myth in western literature had always been in a sense controlled by the Christian myth, which actually was believed.[87] Insofar as other myths were used in literature they served as rich sources of imagery, metaphor and so on, not as objects of religious belief. But the decline of Christianity had only increased the profusion of mythic elements in literature, out of a search for some transcendent pattern that could provide meaning and structure in place of the Christian myth. This mythopoeic impulse in modern literature derived from a recognition that "there is no ecumenical religion" and from an awareness that "the psychologists and anthropologists have revealed systems of symbolism anterior to the accepted cultural structures." Echoing W.H. Auden's assessment of the "modern problem," Hough lamented the contemporary situation in which "The

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[85] Ibid., 152.

[86] Ibid., 152.

[87] See Graham Hough, "The Muse as Mentor," in idem, *The Dream and the Task*, 11-27.

poet has all the myths of the world available to him; which also means that he has none—

none that can impose itself as indubitably his own by simple right of inheritance."[88]   As He

described this modern predicament elsewhere:

> …literature embodies current mythology and is powerful on that account. It always did, and it always was. What is peculiar is that the myths seem now to have no organized existence outside literature. They are not worked out, modified or checked by religion or a prevailing philosophy….[L]iterature finds itself saddled with nothing less than the responsibility for providing patterns of conduct, feeling and imagination that used once to be in the keeping of institutional religion.[89]

Thus, though Hough acknowledged that literature had always drawn much of its power from

myth, he worried that in modernity literature was becoming too invested with mythical

significance, leading to a neglect of necessary intellectual activities that were "more rational,

more responsible, more closely related to action."

What Hough found particularly intriguing was that the mythical elements in modern

literature were being used for religious purposes, but without actually being believed in a

religious sense. It was in addressing this phenomenon that myth criticism could prove especially

useful:

> What we do learn after reading the mythological criticism of today is the enduring vitality of mythical structures *independent of belief*. We have been apt to think of certain recurring, more or less magical narrative patterns as part of religion and therefore objects of belief; and of certain others as parts of mythology and therefore mere decoration. It would seem that as far as literature is concerned this distinction cannot be drawn [emphasis in original].[90]

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[88] Graham Hough, "The Modernist Lyric," in idem, *Selected Essays*. For Auden's statement of the modern problem see above, Introduction.

[89] Graham Hough, "The Moral Censor," in idem, *The Dream and the Task*, 28.

[90] Hough, *Essay in Criticism*, 155.

Ultimately Hough had no solution to the problem of how myth could be integrated into imaginative literature in a way that could restore to modernity some unified system of belief. Throughout Hough's work runs a concern with seeking strategies for coping with modernity, a theme that comes out even more clearly in the several of his less technical pieces that were originally broadcast on the BBC.[91] The question he kept asking was how individuals could give some sense of meaning to their lives in the absence of a system of religious belief. As Hough explained the situation in an essay on twentieth-century poetry, this was also a problem that the great authors and poets of the recent past had struggled with, and they had turned to myth:

> The one inevitable unifying force in the modern world is that of natural science; and since the poet is concerned with areas of experience that natural science does not touch, he is left to make his own myth, or to select one by arbitrary existentialist choice, from the vast uncodified museum, the limitless junk-shop of the past.[92]

The most that could be hoped for was that individual works of literature would use myth as a way of coping with modernity in a way that opened up possibilities for the individual reader. And critics like Hough could facilitate this exchange between author and reader by illuminating the ways in which a text worked.

Frank Kermode

Hough's view that myth was one pole of the myth-experience dialectic at the heart imaginative literature was shared substantially by perhaps the most important critic of the 1960s, Frank Kermode. This resemblance is unsurprising in light of the fact that that both critics admired and built upon each other's work, though in fact Hough probably owed more to

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[91] Hough broadcast several times on the BBC Third Programme. The six pieces that make up Hough's *The Dream and the Task*, for instance, were originally broadcast on the Third Programme.

[92] Hough, "The Modernist Lyric," 241.

Kermode than vice versa. Indeed, Kermode's influence was substantial, extending far

beyond Hough, but historians have yet to take the measure of his significance in part because his

career is somewhat difficult to place intellectually. He is not identified with one particular

theoretical position, he did not train a generation of students to disseminate his ideas, and his

critical contributions themselves are dauntingly diverse, ranging from Renaissance literature, to

Shakespeare, to modernist poetry, to Biblical criticism. Yet Kermode was perhaps one of the

first British critics to engage with the French theory being produced by Barthes, Levi-Strauss,

Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida, and he was perhaps the key figure in introducing their thought to a

British audience. This he did in part through a famous series of seminars he led at University

College London beginning in the late 1960s.[93]

     Kermode was one of the keenest contemporary observers of the post-war trend toward

mythic thinking. Because Kermode understood the critic's task as "making sense of the ways we

try to make sense of our lives" he was keenly interested in myth as one particularly important

form of "making sense."[94] In other words, Kermode came to an interest in myth through his

interest in narrative theory. His own views on myth were complex and developed throughout the

decade as his own understanding of narrative theory grew more sophisticated. One of the

dominant characteristics of Kermode's criticism was an abiding skepticism, a willingness to put

all bold claims—whether methodological or metaphysical—to the test. He frequently expressed

a suspicion of writers who seemed too committed to their own self-fashioned mythical systems

and he often worried about the tendency of much modern literature to "regress" into myth,

abandoning all effort to engage reality constructively. Yet despite this skepticism Kermode

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[93] For Kermode's account of these seminars see his chapter 5 of his memoir *Not Entitled*, especially pp. 212-221.

[94] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1.

remained willing to grant myth an important and indeed necessary literary role. Myth was a form of narrative that he could not escape or dismiss, and his skepticism extended as well to those moderns who claimed to be able "to live in conditions of reality unprotected by myth."[95]

Kermode's interest in myth was most apparent between the late 1950s and the late 1960s, an interest evident in numerous of his book reviews, review essays, and articles of the period. Indeed, it is fair to say that during this period myth was Kermode's central critical concern. There is good reason to believe that he was first prompted to write on the topic of myth by the emerging "two cultures" debate. Within months after C.P. Snow delivered his famous Rede Lecture in May 1959, Kermode began to consider mythic thinking in light of the purported two cultures divide. In a series of pieces written around this time, he speculated about ways in which myth could be incorporated into modern thought without giving in entirely to the "cult" of mythical irrationalism or the "complex modern primitivism" that he believed to be so common in twentieth-century thought. In a *Spectator* review entitled "The Myth-Kitty," Kermode observed that his contemporaries "set great store by myth." This was attested not only by the fact that "our literary culture is saturated with mythological thinking," but also by an accumulating "unmanageable load of archaeological, anthropological and psychological theory about myth." Mythic thinking gained impetus from the fact that the modernists had given it their imprimatur:

> In the domain of myth we can short-circuit the intellect and liberate the imagination which the scientism of the world suppresses; and this is the central modern position. Myth deals in what is more real than intellect can accede to; it is a seamless garment to replace the tattered fragments worn by the modern mind….

In Kermode's view it was unfortunate that so much literary and artistic thinking about myth was crudely anti-science. He characterized this attitude as the belief that "if we seek the pre-logical

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[95] Ibid., 132.

and oppose the march of the intellect, we are the enemies of science…and the worshippers of

myth." This was deeply unsatisfactory to Kermode, who contended that:

> The need for a change of attitude, for a modification of this myth-science antithesis, is pressing. Mythology, as it was now understood, raises the whole question of belief. This would scarcely be so if it was thought of only as a breeding-ground of images; in fact it is too often the anti-intellectualist substitute for science.

Kermode offered no solution to the problem of how properly to integrate myth into the culture,

but he concluded that poets like Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin, who wanted no more

mythological literature, would be disappointed because "The myth-kitty is inexhaustible; the

ancient gods survive."[96]

Kermode used the nearly simultaneous appearance of Snow's lecture and David Jones's

book *Epoch and Artist* as a further opportunity to examine how the mythic interests of literary

intellectuals fed the suspicions of scientists about modern literary endeavor. Writing in

Encounter, Kermode observed that "the cultural divide about which Sir Charles writes so well

seems to me to reflect a grand modern antinomy that is well worth examining from a different

viewpoint."[97] This "different viewpoint" was the viewpoint of the literary intellectual. In

particular Kermode sought to show, using David Jones as a typical example, why "primitivism"

was so often at the core of a literary intellectual's thinking. He argued that "[t]he Romantic

attack on intellect" had prepared the way for twentieth-century primitivism, of which mythic

thinking was a prominent facet.[98] According to Kermode, the Romantics, reacting to the

materialist agenda of science, valued "primitive image-making powers" above development of

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[96] All citations in this paragraph from Frank Kermode, "The Myth-Kitty," 339.

[97] Frank Kermode, "On David Jones," *Encounter* 13, no. 5 (November 1959): 76.

[98] Ibid., 79.

the intellect.[99] This assumption remained "essential to the production of the kind of art most

people are prepared to call important,"[100] creating a situation in which "mythical, imagistic,

organicist thinking becomes as desirable for the artist as it is undesirable for the scientist; the

first stands on the emblematic, myth-haunted mountain, the second on Peacock's intelligent

pyramid."[101] An artist like David Jones or Yeats, who felt acutely "that the artist has lost

permanent access to a rich common 'mythus,'" might ransack various sources—"Welsh, Irish,

Neo-Platonic, anthropological, and so forth"—to produce his own mythology, "his own *Vision*,

his own answer to Darwin, Huxley, and their successors."[102] As he wrote elsewhere, "This is the

programme of one of the 'two cultures'—the anti-scientific one, revolting from 'exteriority' and

'materialism.'" Such endeavors were motivated by a belief that "art has access to a truth not

available to the intellect." [103] Kermode had little patience for those writers, like Jones and Yeats,

who professed actually to believe in their self-fashioned mythical systems. Yet he conceded that

such systems were somehow aesthetically necessary in the twentieth century: "They are not

required to be valid in themselves, but to provide contexts for the anti-intellectualism that

modern art, for historical reasons, requires; its character is such that it *must* be in conflict with a

scientific worldview to survive at all [emphasis in original]."[104]

Within a year, however, Kermode was advancing a more measured view of myth's role in

the two cultures divide. The context was a review essay in which he assessed, among other

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[99] Ibid., 78.

[100] Ibid., 76.

[101] Ibid., 79.

[102] Ibid., 77.

[103] Frank Kermode, "Hunter and Shaman," *The Spectator*, April 1, 1960: 477.

[104] Kermode, "On David Jones," 76.

works, Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God*. Kermode described the book as "remarkable" and he suggested that Campbell "may have more literary appeal than any mythologist since Frazer."[105] He concluded on a note of equanimity: "Perhaps we should be less disturbed that we have our physicist-hunters and artist-shamans; the division of labour is an old one, paleolithic at least. Mr. Golding caught it exactly in the Jack and Simon of *Lord of the Flies*. Perhaps the need is less to end it than to accept it. We need the hunter to go on living, the shaman to go on living according to the truth."[106]

What such comments make clear is that Kermode was convinced that myth was central to any serious literary endeavor of the time. As the sixties progressed he wrote less directly about the cultural significance of mythic thinking and tried to approach this issue by investigating the specific role myth played in imaginative literature. One way he pursued this line of inquiry was by asking writers how they solved this problem for themselves. Kermode came to believe that all serious modern writers had to take a position on the importance of myth to their work. This conviction is evident in a series of interviews that Kermode conducted with seven leading English novelists in 1962. Kermode's primary concern in the interviews, at least in their published form, was to solicit each novelist's views on what he termed "the myth-fact relation."[107] The article version of the interviews proved to be a highly influential piece, appearing in at least three different journals and one edited collection. The interviews were originally aired on the BBC Third Programme, but excerpts appeared in a *Partisan Review* piece entitled "The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists," in a *Listener* piece

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[105] Kermode, "Hunter and Shaman," 477.

[106] Ibid., 478.

[107] Frank Kermode, "The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists," *Partisan Review* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1963), 74.

under the title "Myth, Reality, and Fiction," and in *Abstracts of English Studies*, as well as in the influential Malcolm Bradbury volume *The Novel Today*.

Kermode confessed in *The Listener* that his interest in the subject was in part prompted by Iris Murdoch's 1961 *Encounter* essay "Against Dryness." According to Kermode, in that essay Murdoch had argued that the great temptation for twentieth-century novelists "was to allow the myth to take over—to falsify human character and the fortuity of real life by an oversubtle attention to occult patterns of meaning and event."[108] In Murdoch's view this was predictable response to the conditions of modern life: "The temptation of art…is to console. The modern writer, frightened of technology and (in England) abandoned by philosophy…attempts to console us by myths or by stories."[109] Yet, as Kermode pointed out, she did not reject the mythic dimension of literature, arguing instead for a fictional form somewhere between the "crystalline" mythic novel and the "journalistic" documentary novel. The novelists Kermode interviewed about their views on myth, reality and fiction were Murdoch, Graham Greene, Angus Wilson, Ivy Compton-Burnett, C.P. Snow, John Wain, and Muriel Spark. It is clear from the *Paris Review* excerpts and the digest version in *The Listener* that not all of these writers conceived of myth in the same way. Kermode recognized this but also contended that the authors were linked by a desire to make myth work for them without giving in to myth to the extent that they falsified facts of experience and produced mere fables instead of novels. This said something significant about the situation of the modern novelist. Each had to tread a narrow line between the mythic and the documentary. Too much emphasis on either pole could render a novel irrelevant to contemporary concerns.

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[108] Frank Kermode, "Myth Reality, and Fiction," *The Listener* 68 (August 30, 1962): 311.

[109] Murdoch, "Against Dryness," 19.

The culminating fruit of Kermode's interest in myth was his 1967 book *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, which developed out of the Mary Flexner Lectures he delivered at Bryn Mawr in 1965. It is considered by many to be the most important theoretical work by a British critic in that decade. A key point of the work was Kermode's distinction between fictions and myths: "Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent."[110] One of Kermode's concerns is to show that "Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive."[111] This could have serious consequences, a fact Kermode sought to underscore with his contention that "anti-Semitism is a degenerate fiction, a myth…."[112] Kermode's concern was to hold myth in tension with the narrative form of explanation that we call fiction. Myth was seductive, and he wanted to caution against the temptation to retreat into myth, which he believed was an all too common characteristic of modern thought. Kermode did not object to myth as such, but to the easy regress into myth, which could lead us to ignore the reality of contingent experience in favor of belief in a consoling absolute. Such a flight from experience could not produce understanding of the world: "We know that if we want to find out about ourselves, make sense, we must avoid the regress into myth which has deceived poet, historian, and critic."[113]

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[110] Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, 39.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Ibid., 43.

However, Kermode almost immediately followed this comment by stating, "And yet, it is clear, this is an exaggerated statement of the case,"[114] and later clarified, "In short, the novelist…has to allow for different versions of reality, including what some call mythical and some call absolute."[115] Thus, though *The Sense of an Ending* approaches the issue of myth's relation to literature through a more sophisticated critical apparatus, many of Kermode's earlier views on myth remain intact. Just as he had earlier criticized the modernists who professed belief in their own self-created myths, so in *The Sense of an Ending* he criticizes the misuse of myth, though not myth per se. In other words, despite reservations about myth's seductive power, Kermode is unable to dispense with myth as a valuable aspect of literature. This was seen by John Bayley, who in his review of the book noted that Kermode's real concern is to discredit "false modernism," or the modernism that "tries to invent new myths."[116] This was precisely the offense that Kermode had earlier claimed David Jones and Yeats committed. The problem, then, was not myth as such, but myth believed in instead of integrated into fiction as a way of making sense of the world; myths were problematic when a writer submitted to them, but were illuminating when a writer used them creatively as subordinate elements in a larger work. In the end, Kermode could not abandon the category of myth as a literary technique for coping with modernity.

Taking Stock in the 1970s

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[114] Ibid.

[115] Ibid., 132.

[116] John Bayley, "The Flexner Sonata," *Essays in Criticism* 18, no. 2 (April 1968): 212.

The work of the myth-minded critics firmly established myth as a central term of both literary and cultural analysis, though a term whose meaning was not always clear. Critics of the 1970s, looking back at the work of the myth-minded critics, would realize that despite the prevalence of critical interest in myth the term remained troublingly vague. This engendered some anxiety among critics who were uneasy that their discipline was in such disagreement about so central a concept. The 1970s therefore saw various attempts to sum up critical opinion on the topic. The work of the myth-minded critics also contributed to a growing understanding that to live in modernity was to live surrounded by myth, in part because so many modern writers had turned to myth as a way of reinvigorating imaginative literature. Three key texts of the mid-1970s provide a cross-section of that decade's attempts to bring clarity to literary discussions of myth. These were William Righter's *Myth and Literature*, K.K. Ruthven's *Myth*, and, to a lesser extent, Raymond Williams' *Keywords*.

All three critics agreed that despite disagreement about the precise meaning of myth for literary critics, it could not be dispensed with as a term of analysis. Ruthven thought that critics had no choice but to continue using the term myth, even though attempts to formulate a definition of myth were pointless: "Nothing would be gained by formulating a brand-new synchronic definition of myth and insisting that everybody accept it."[117] Righter concurred: "It is easy to doubt that the working boundaries of such a concept may ever be drawn…."[118] Similarly, reflecting on the myriad contemporary uses of myth, Williams acknowledged that "…myth is now both a very significant and a very difficult word."[119] And precisely because

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[117] K.K. Ruthven, *Myth* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1976), 82.

[118] William Righter, *Myth and Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 13.

[119] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 177.

they believed it was such a significant term, these critics sought to bring some resolution to the difficulty surrounding it. The response of each was not to frame a new, all-encompassing definition, but rather to take the linguistic turn by "looking at the uses made of 'myth' in the modern literary imagination…."[120]

What they concluded based on their investigations of usage was that recent interest in myth was invariably political, in that the term was used to defend certain cultural interests. In particular, it was bound up with ongoing attempts to defend imaginative literature. Describing the focus of his study of myth Righter explained: "Above all I am dealing with a modern situation and a modern word, representing a multiplicity of pressures and demands, themselves the keys to the senses of myth they have called into being."[121] Foremost among these pressures and demands was a need to defend imaginative literature. This was a point caught by Williams who, with the myth-minded critics obviously in mind, noted that myth "has become involved with the difficult modern senses of *imagination*, *creative* and *fiction*…."[122] Similarly, Ruthven asked rhetorically, "Was it the very ambiguities of 'myth' which first attracted those engaged in the increasingly desperate endeavour of finding new ways of defending imaginative literature against enemies ancient and modern?"[123]

Yet, despite their awareness of how "myth" was a term whose meaning was continually adapted to serve various interests, these critics could not dissolve the concept with their analysis.

> [W]e have no direct experience of myth as such, but only of particular myths: and these, we discover, are obscure in origin, protean in form and ambiguous in

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[120] Righter, *Myth and Literature*, 1.

[121] Righter, *Myth and Literature*, 14.

[122] Williams, 178.

[123] Ruthven, 82.

> meaning. Seemingly immune to rational explication, they nevertheless stimulate rational enquiry, which accounts for the diversity of conflicting explanations, none of which is ever comprehensive enough to explain myth away.[124]

Righter held out some hope that the theories of Lévi-Strauss might bring some clarity to discussion of myth and literature, but came to a similar conclusion that myth could not be explained away. He had no illusions about the concept, declaring: "We have found in it what we have sought, after our own fashion, and in whatever vocabulary happens to be our own made demands on something we have called 'myth', requiring it to answer in kind." Yet he was forced to admit the existence of "moments when the concept seems a necessary part of our thinking…."[125] In the end, these critics of the 1970s seemed to concede that to live in modernity was to live with myth. The concept was simply too attractive to the imagination, too pregnant with meaning, too promising as a means of imposing literary order on the flux of modern experience and history. Critics would have to continue to deal with the fact that, as Righter noted quoting Auden: "'men have always lounged in myth', but perhaps in no time like the present."[126]

Conclusion

This chapter has concentrated on a group of especially prominent critics who dealt with myth at length in the work. They were not the only British critics of the period interested in myth, nor were they even the most enthusiastic about the potential of myth as a concept. Yet their work on the topic was more direct and developed than most of their contemporaries. The

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[124] Ibid., 1.

[125] Righter, *Myth and Literature*, 122.

[126] Ibid., 2.

key move each made was not to conceive of myth as an all-consoling panacea for modernity's discontents—the mistake of the American myth critics—but rather to work out how myth fit within imaginative literature more broadly. Myth became for these critics a strategy for defending imaginative literature and, by extension, literary criticism as an explanation of that literature. Thus the work of the myth-minded critics was part of a larger project to develop a relevant and engaged critical discourse that encouraged relevant and engaged imaginative literature. These critics felt that literature must be of some use to ordinary readers, and one way it could do so was by mediating their experience of modernity, helping them cope with the fact that, to use Hough's words, "A culture dominated by the word is turning into a culture dominated by the number."[127] According to the myth-minded critics, a balanced use of myth could help literature to do this.

The 1960s were a period when critics were developing increasingly sophisticated justifications for the importance of literature and their discipline. As literary criticism evolved into a more heavily theorized discipline, its increasing sophistication was in part manifested in an emerging interest in narrative theory. Critical interest in myth can be seen as one moment in this evolution, for an interest in how narrative worked led critics to ask how myth itself, as a form of narrative, worked. It is therefore unsurprising that some of the leading myth-minded critics would become some of the most theoretically literate British critics, making significant contributions in the field of narrative theory. Hough's essays in the late 1960s and 1970s showed an increasing interest in narrative theory and a growing admiration for the work of Barthes. Holloway would go on to write a pioneering work of narrative theory, *Narrative and Structure*, which was one of the first attempts at sustained engagement with structuralist theory

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[127] Hough, "The Modernist Lyric," 237.

by a British critic. Kermode's career revealed an even greater eagerness to make use of emerging theoretical tools for understanding literature. In the late 1960s and early 1970s he produced a number of works on narrative theory that redefined understanding of the topic in Britain.

The myth-minded critics could not be called naïve mythophiles; their treatment of myth was sober and measured rather than zealously enthusiastic. There were British critics who felt that the critics surveyed here did not take myth seriously enough. John Bayley, for instance, criticized Kermode for being too hard on myth. He charged that Kermode had slandered myth by citing anti-Semitism as an example of how myths call for "absolute assent." [128] Similarly, A.D. Moody criticized Hough for failing to acknowledge that myths "have their power from deep within our own experience, as well as from their common and permanent relevance…."[129] The picture that emerges in surveying the work of West, Daiches, Holloway, Hough, Kermode, and even Righter and Ruthven is of a group of critics who could not entirely escape the category of myth or dispense with it as a term of analysis. For the critics surveyed here myth was under suspicion. The modernists had tried to restructure literature around myth. The North American myth critics had tried to reconfigure literary criticism around myth. These projects made myth suspect. Yet, despite their reservations, each of the critics examined here acknowledged the literary importance of something they called myth and each tried to offer a theory of this importance. For each of them the answer had something to do with modernity. They held that myth—if properly integrated into imaginative literature, if properly balanced with an equally necessary mimetic, documentary element—could aid readers in making sense of and coping with

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[128] John Bayley, "The Flexner Sonata," 211.

[129] A.D. Moody, "Disillusionment," *Essays in Criticism* 17, no. 4 (October 1967): 499.

modern experience. But the most they could was offer theories of how this was possible. The actual balancing of myth and mimesis would have to be done by writers of imaginative literature themselves.

CHAPTER 7

MAKING A MODERN FAITH:

MYTH AND MODERNITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH THEOLOGY

The fact that modern theologians regard Christian myth as mythical is a distinguishing feature of the modern tradition. One way to interpret the history of modern theology is therefore through its attempts to deal with the cluster of questions that the myth question contains.

Gary Dorrien

Introduction

In a front-page article in the *Observer* on March 17, 1963, John Robinson, Bishop of

Woolwich, summarized his recent theological ideas under the provocative headline "Our Image

of God Must Go." Two days later appeared Robinson's book *Honest to God*, which presented

his ideas in greater detail. As it turned out, the controversy generated by the *Observer* piece was

ideal publicity for the book, which rapidly became the quickest-selling work of theology in

history. By the end of the year more than 350,000 English copies were in print and within three

years sales had reached almost one million.   *Honest to God* outraged many, because the book

gave the impression that a bishop in the Church of England was very publicly denying the

Christian doctrine of God, in the opinion of many even to the point of atheism.[1] Immediately a

heated debate emerged surrounding Robinson and his book, a debate that ranged from

theological journals, to letters and columns in the daily newspapers, to hastily-written pamphlets

critiquing Robinson, to discussion programs on both radio and television. The popularity of

Honest to God established Robinson as the face of so-called "radical" theology in Britain even

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[1] This view was expressed most forcefully by Alasdair MacIntyre in *Encounter*. See idem, "God and the Theologians," *Encounter* 21 no. 3 (September 1963): 3-10.

though much of his later work would be far more moderate and mainstream than his 1963

bestseller.

Certainly the media uproar contributed to the book's success, but its popularity must also

have been due to the fact that it touched a nerve with the public. The book's quality contributed

little to its brisk sales, because it simply was not very good. Neither original, nor cogent, nor

tightly-written, it showed all the characteristics of a hurriedly-penned work motivated by an

infatuation with newly-discovered foreign ideas that the author has only partially digested.

Robinson's *Honest to God* was to popular theology what Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* had been

to popular philosophy seven years earlier. And just as the media had labeled Wilson one of

Britain's "Angry Young Men" it now christened Robinson the leader of a new radical theology.

Despite its flaws—noted by many reviewers then and since[2]—the book was at least easy

to read, and it resonated with the public like few other theological books of the twentieth century.

The reason was that Robinson's book encapsulated a dilemma felt by many twentieth-century

Britons. The horns of this dilemma were on the one hand a de facto acceptance of a scientific,

modern worldview and on the other a yearning for some metaphysical meaning beyond the truths

offered by science. That is why Robinson's mode of argument in *Honest to God* now seems so

strange and almost incoherent—the book is the product of a tension between the fundamentally

modern desire to accommodate Christian belief to modern scientific and historical knowledge

and an essentially anti-modern tendency to advocate myth's indispensable role in delivering

truths beyond science. Robinson's attempt to reconcile these conflicting motivations was what

drove the book forward.

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[2] Many of these reviews are helpfully collected in David L. Edwards, ed., *The Honest to God Debate: Some Reaction to the Book* 'Honest to God,' (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1963).

The same tension, present in even clearer form, animated the next theological cause

célèbre of the century, the publication of the symposium volume *The Myth of God Incarnate* in

1977. One lesson that many observers took from the *Honest to God* affair was that the media

played a key role in creating theological controversies. As one historian of the *Honest to God*

debate has noted, "…in the climate of the early 1960s, when the trade in new ideas was

burgeoning media interest, a bishop expressing novel and possibly heretical ideas suited exactly

the heavier Sunday papers and the middle-brow television discussion programmes."[3] Hence, it

was with the influence of the media in mind that the group of theologians responsible for *The*

Myth of God Incarnate deliberately courted controversy by holding a press conference to

announce the appearance of their iconoclastic new book. Like *Honest to God*, *The Myth of God*

Incarnate also became a bestseller, selling 30,000 copies in eight months. And its content was, if

anything, more controversial than *Honest to God*. Whereas Robinson's volume had questioned

the traditional Christian conception of God, *The Myth of God Incarnate* focused specifically on

Christology by subjecting what the authors called "the traditional doctrine of the incarnation" to

radical questioning. But like *Honest to God*, the essays in *The Myth of God Incarnate* were

marked by the same tension between the modern and the mythical. The contributors to the

volume believed that modern knowledge necessitated a reformulation of the traditional Christian

conception of Jesus, but they also believed that Christian faith, precisely because it was

expressed in the flexible language of myth, could successfully accommodate modern knowledge.

The *Honest to God* affair and the controversy surrounding *The Myth of God Incarnate*

can be seen as the bookends marking a moment in the history of British theology. Adrian

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[3] Keith W. Clements, *Lovers of Discord: Twentieth-Century Theological Controversies in England* (London: SPCK, 1988), 179.

Hastings has described the period between the early 1960s and the late 1970s as a distinct

cycle of liberal theology, which was the dominant strain of theology in that period. Academic

theologians in the seventies developed the earlier trends of the sixties, shaping them into a liberal

orthodoxy. This resembled a process that had taken place earlier in the century when theologians

of the twenties forged a liberal synthesis out of the new theological ideas of the Edwardian

period.[4] *Honest to God* signaled the resurgence of liberal theology in Britain, a resurgence that

culminated with *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Significantly, both were works of *popular*, rather

than academic theology, and they were intended to persuade the public that a proper

understanding of the relationship between myth and Christianity could make the faith seem very

attractive to modern men and women. What these two works and the debates surrounding them

show is how deeply an understanding of myth as an inescapable aspect of religious belief was

rooted in British liberal theology of the post-Second World War period.

This movement of myth to the center of theological debate was part of an anthropological

turn in British theology. It was anthropological in two senses: 1) the knowledge produced by the

discipline of anthropology profoundly shaped theological discourse in Britain and 2) the

understanding of myth that theologians borrowed from anthropology turned theology in a

human-centered direction by shifting its focus toward human religious experience and human

expressions about that experience. This more human-centered, rather than God-centered, agenda

reflects the fact that theology of the post-Second World War period was an increasingly modest

discipline, reluctant to make broad claims about the nature of God, and more content to

concentrate on human religious experience and expressions of that experience. John Robinson

explained that this perspective controlled *Honest to God*, "[L]et's not start from a heavenly

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[4] Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1990* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 649.

Being, whose very existence many would doubt. Let's start from what actually is most real

to people in everyday life—and find God there."[5]

Theological interest in myth of this period was thus both an aspect and a cause of an

intellectual shift that reoriented the agenda of theology around human-centered rather than God-

centered questions. Ironically, British theology's increasing interest in myth, rather than

producing a renaissance of creative theology, actually pushed the discipline into an

uncomfortable intellectual gap between the humanities and the social sciences. This uncertain

intellectual position is one reason its place in the university has been eclipsed by the field of

religious studies. Because theologians were increasingly hesitant to make bold claims about

their subject matter, they retreated to intellectual ground that was already occupied by other

disciplines, in particular philosophy, anthropology, and religious studies. An attempt to respond

to modernity by drawing on the spiritual resources of myth resulted in a theology that was more

modern ever. In this sense the concept of myth was for twentieth-century theology a kind of

Trojan horse: theologians turned to the concept because it served their needs of rethinking

Christianity for modernity, but in doing so they aligned their discipline and its methods more

closely than ever with modernity—twentieth-century British theology's turn to myth was one

step in a gradual marginalization of the discipline. To be sure, a mythic turn was not the only

reason that British theology was intellectually marginalized, but it played a key role in that

process.

In an attempt to understand this process, this chapter examines how British liberal

theologians tried to balance the competing claims of modernity and myth in their work. It was

this balancing act that produced the tension in *Honest to God*, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, and

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[5] John A.T. Robinson, "Why I Wrote It," in Edwards, ed., *The Honest to God Debate*, 277.

other myth-oriented theology of the period. Situating the work of myth-oriented theologians

in the broader history of liberal theology, I show how these theologians came to see the category

of myth as essential both to their response to modern unbelief and their response to intellectual

challenges from modern science, critical history, and analytic philosophy.   On the one hand

these theologians took for granted what they termed the "modern scientific worldview," while on

the other they argued that myth, the natural idiom of religion, was not vulnerable to scientific,

historical, or philosophical critiques because it was a form of discourse that transcended the

empirical realm. I argue that in the long run the myth-oriented theologians were unable to

maintain this dual loyalty to modernity and myth. This was because though in principle they

claimed that myth transcended the empirical, in practice they did not treat it as something that

referred to or had its roots in the transcendent.   Rather they treated myth as human expressions

about the meaning of existence. But this position was essentially that of anthropology; there was

little distinctly theological about it at all. Their failure to define clearly a compelling theological

view of myth explains why they largely failed to persuade the public to embrace a modern,

myth-centered Christianity. By the late 1970s, after more than two decades of work on the topic,

British theologians were acknowledging that their attempt to rebuild a modern Christianity

around the concept of myth had been unsuccessful. However, equally significant were the

consequences that they did not acknowledge. Chief among these was that British theologians'

efforts to resolve "the myth question" had actually helped marginalize the discipline of theology

by erasing much of what made it distinct.

The Theological Background: Modernism and Liberalism in British Theology

British theologians' engagement with myth can be seen as part of what religious historians have described as the modernist project in theology. The driving concern of modernist theology was to revise and adapt Christian doctrine into a belief system that was acceptable to moderns who had an essentially secularized, evolutionary worldview. The Irish priest George Tyrell, a leading Roman Catholic Modernist, defined a Modernist as a churchman who believed that a synthesis between the essential truth of Christianity and the essential truth of modernity was possible. As Adrian Hastings has described it, Anglican modernism was in the same spirit, but "a good deal more remote from traditional Christian belief than the mystical and sacramentalist Catholic 'modernism' of George Tyrell…."[6] Modernist theology was essentially, then, an attempt to respond to the perceived challenge of modernity through a mixture of concession and resistance. The concessions centered on the acknowledgement that historical criticism of the Bible, combined with an evolutionary understanding of human origins, had shown that much biblical material reflected a primitive mythological cosmology. The resistance consisted in an insistence that scientific language was incapable of expressing the existential truths about humanity's relationship with God. Thus theology, with its ability to interpret the unique language of religion, was still a necessary discipline. The modernists of the 1910s and 1920s tended to take an experientialist view of the Bible, that is, they viewed it as a collection of texts that were interpretations of religious experience rather than a divine revelation. Versions of this idea would be central to the myth-oriented theology that developed in the 1960s.

"Modernist" theology was simply the cutting edge of "liberal" theology in the first quarter of the twentieth century. After that time the label modernist fell into disuse, in part because it had become negatively associated with an uncritical acceptance of science, with a

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[6] Hastings, 231.

vapid brand of philosophical idealism, and with advocacy of certain policies that fell out of favor, such as eugenics. However, the similar but broader term "liberal" remained a common self-designation for many theologians throughout the century. Theological liberalism was defined by three characteristics in particular: 1) an interest in accommodating Christian doctrine to modern knowledge, especially the knowledge produced by historical criticism of the Bible and modern science, 2) an emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, with a focus on the ethical values and human potential he represented, and 3) an anthropological turn in theological method in which human religious experience and symbolic expressions of that experience—rather than divine revelation—became the focus of inquiry. As J.F. Bethune-Baker, one of the leading liberal theologians in interwar Britain, put it in 1921: "To clear the ground I would start with two or three premisses, and the first of them is that 'orthodoxy', in beginning with God, began at the wrong end."[7] His point was that theologians would do better to ground their work in human expressions about the experience of God. Almost identical words would be written by John Robinson four decades later in the midst of the *Honest to God* controversy.

Bethune-Baker made his comments at the 1921 Girton Conference of the Churchman's Union, soon to be known as the Modern Churchman's Union (MCU). The conference occasioned one of the most significant theological controversies of the century in Britain.[8] The furor concerned controversial statements on Christology made by two of the conference's speakers, Hastings Rashdall and Bethune-Baker. The impression given by (in some cases erroneous) press reports of their speeches was that Rashdall had denied the divinity of Jesus

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[7] Qtd. in S.W. Sykes, "Theology," in C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson, eds., *The Twentieth Century Mind: History, Ideas, and Literature in Britain, vol. II: 1918-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 148.

[8] The story of this controversy is well told in Clements, chapter 4, "From Miracles to Christology: Hensley Henson and the 'Modern Churchmen.'"

while Bethune-Baker's skepticism about Jesus' divinity virtually amounted to a denial. The controversy that resulted forced the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, to convene an Archbishops' Commission on Doctrine in the Church of England, the purpose of which was to determine exactly what degree of doctrinal leeway was permitted in the church. The Commission did not issue its final report until 1938, but its statements and activities leading up to the report made it clear that the kind of inquiry pursued by liberals like Rashdall and Bethune-Baker was allowable and even commendable. In particular, a statement passed at the 1922 Canterbury Convocation stopped well short of disciplining the Modernists, handing them what one historian has described as "an ecclesiastical victory."[9]

Thanks to the Girton Conference and its aftermath, the year 1922 had every appearance of marking the start of liberal theology's ascendancy on the British theological scene. Instead, the liberals were put on the defensive and would not emerge as a strong theological force until the 1960s. The upshot of the controversy in the short term was that liberal theologians enjoyed a kind of protected status in the Church. The presence of the liberal party within the Church of England was solidified, a development which also encouraged non-Anglican liberal theologians in an increasingly ecumenical age. This solidified presence did not mean, however, that theological liberalism was ascendant, for the theological tide of the next few decades would be against it. The failure of theological liberalism to make much headway in these decades was in part due to the fact the Modern Churchman were not cut out to be a bold vanguard for theological change. Ironically, most of members of the MCU were deeply conservative in both temperament and politics. But, more significantly, liberalism was outflanked by theological developments on the Continent. One of the main reasons for this was the appearance in Britain

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[9] Sykes, 149.

of the work of Karl Barth, for the very point of Barth's "neo-orthodoxy" was to attack the

liberal theological program, in particular its focus on human religious experience. Only after the

impact of Barth's work was superceded by that of Rudolf Bultmann would British theologians

again turn their attention to human religious experience, a shift that provided the ideal context for

discussions of myth's place in theology.[10] One historian of modernist and liberal theology in

Britain has observed that the legacy of the modernism that culminated in the Girton Conference

was "to have done some of the heavy spade work in turning over the soil and exposing to the air

the issues that theology would have to tackle in the modern age…."[11] However, most of these

issues would not be tackled in earnest until the 1960s. But it was appropriate that when this

renaissance of liberal British theology arrived, it was initiated by a theologian, Alec Vidler, who

had been influenced and inspired by what he termed the "post-neo-orthodoxy" of Bultmann.[12]

Alec Vidler, the "Cambridge Theologians," and the Resurgence of Liberal Theology

When Robinson's *Honest to God* appeared it was widely described as the harbinger of a

resurgence of liberal—soon to be called radical—theology in the 1960s.[13] That resurgence had

first taken shape among a circle of Cambridge theologians that coalesced around Alec Vidler at

the beginning of the decade. Indeed it would be fair to say that their work marked a revival of

liberal theology in Britain after several decades of relative quiescence. Vidler is a significant

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[10] Though Bultmann was older than Barth by about two years, his work did not appear in English until the late 1940s, whereas Barth's groundbreaking commentary *Epistle to the Romans* had been available in English since the 1930s. Barth's influence thus preceded Bultmann's in Britain.

[11] Clements, 104.

[12] See Alec R. Vidler, *20th Century Defenders of the Faith: Some Theological Fashions Considered in the Robertson Lectures for 1964* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1965), 103.

[13] A historical account of radical theology by a first-hand observer can be found in David L. Edwards, *Tradition and Truth: The Challenge of England's Radical theologians 1962-1989* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989).

figure not only because of the shadow he cast as a scholar and theologian, but also because

the trajectory of his career, which resembled many of his contemporaries', throws an instructive

light on the theological context of the time. The "Cambridge theology" that he helped popularize

in the early 1960s helped prepare the way for *Honest to God* by creating the impression, in

Vidler's words, "that there was going to be a new deal in the presentation of the faith and a

salutary upheaval in the Church."[14] Indeed Robinson's book caused such a stir in part because it

followed hard on the heels of a collection of theological essays, edited by Vidler, entitled

Soundings. Thus the media was able to portray *Honest to God* as the latest work of radical

theology by a theologian with links to Cambridge.

By the early 1960s Vidler was a theologian and church historian of considerable stature

with a long history of involvement in various schemes that sought to mobilize theological

resources to shape society. Along with luminaries such as T.S. Eliot, John Middleton Murray,

Michael Polanyi, and Karl Mannheim he had been one of the members of the members of the

group known as "the Moot." Organized by the ecumenical activist J.H. Oldham in the 1940s,

this influential group met four times a year to present and discuss papers on the pressing issues

of the day   Around the same time Vidler had also started his own discussion network known as

St. Deiniol's Koinonia, named for the St. Deiniol's Library in Wales where Vidler was Warden.

In the late 1940s he took over for Oldham as director of the Christian Frontier Council. This was

an organization that Oldham had devised to help those in positions of societal importance—

scientists, civil servants, teachers, and the like—develop ethical standards to guide their work.

Thus, when Vidler moved to Cambridge in 1956 to become dean of King's College, he

brought with him several decades of experience working on the frontier where theology

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[14] Vidler, *20th Century Defenders of the Faith*, 107.

intersected with social life. During these decades his theology had moved from an early

Anglo-Catholicism to, during the war years, a more eclectic theology influenced by Continental

neo-Orthodoxy and Reinhold Niebuhr's theology of political and social realism. By the time he

arrived at Cambridge he had distanced himself somewhat from neo-orthodoxy. He was

convinced, in part by his involvement with the laypeople of the Christian Frontier Council, that

the pressing theological need in Britain was for an interpretation of Christian belief and doctrine

that answered to the concerns of the contemporary believer. Neo-orthodoxy no longer met this

requirement, for it had become an overly-specialized theological enclave, keeping out the

average believer with walls of jargon. Vidler was also dissatisfied with the trivialities of 1950s

theological discourse, which in his view was all too taken up with pointless, endless discussions

of secondary matters. It was a time, he later said, "when theology was doughy rather than

yeasty," a situation he sought to change.[15] It was these motivations that, with the example of the

Moot in mind, motivated Vidler to convene a like-minded group of theologians who would be

committed to critical inquiry into basic matters of belief.[16]

The group that Vidler invited to meet in his rooms was comprised of mostly younger

theologians who shared his conviction that it was time for a new era of critical inquiry in the

church, and this inquiry should be for the benefit of laypeople who could not relate to traditional

statements of the Christian message. Ironically, John Robinson, whose name would become

synonymous with radical theology, was not invited to join, as at the time he was considered to be

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[15] Alec R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution: 1789 to the Present Day*, rev. ed., vol. 5 of *The Pelican History of the Church* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1971), 274.

[16] Vidler gives a brief account of how the group was founded in Ved Mehta, *The New Theologian* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 73-74.

too conservative.[17] The group's views appeared in public form in 1962 in a volume entitled

Soundings. The essays were of course diverse, but a theme that linked them together was to take

contemporary experience of laypeople as the starting point for theological reasoning. In other

words, the controlling premise of the volume was that issues of Christian belief should be

approached from the perspective of human experience, rather than from a desire to defend

orthodoxy.

However controversial were some of the opinions expressed in *Soundings*, television

media was mainly responsible for catapulting the volume through several printings. Just before

the book appeared in print, Vidler appeared on the BBC religious affairs program *Meeting Point*.

He took the opportunity to criticize harshly the current state of the Church of England, charging

it with being complacent, intellectually stifling, and removed from the concerns of ordinary

people. His remarks immediately sparked a media controversy that served as publicity platform

for the release of *Soundings*. Thanks to such publicity, "Cambridge theology"—critical,

questioning and concerned with articulating a faith that would answer the needs of contemporary

believers—came to be seen as the first stirrings of an emerging "radical" theology.   This

impression was reinforced when in 1963 Vidler and other Cmabridge theologians put on a

lecture series that was later published under the provocative title *Objections to Christian Belief*.[18]

Vidler's significance in connection with myth-oriented theology, then, was as the instigator of a

strand of radical theology that was centrally concerned finding a new language for expressing the

faith. Robinson's work both responded to and further developed this vein,[19] which would be at

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[17] See Vidler, *Defenders*, 106.

[18] Donald MacKenzie MacKinnon et al, *Objections to Christian Belief* (London: Constable, 1963).

[19] In *Honest to God* Robinson acknowledges Vidler's influence on his thinking and quotes from the *Soundings* volume more than once.

the center of British theology into the 1970s, culminating with books such as *The Myth of God Incarnate*. In other words, the myth-oriented theology of the 1960s and 1970s was one dimension of an emerging radical theology that had been given its original impetus by Vidler and associated "Cambridge theologians." Moreover, it was this Cambridge group's influence that helped give subsequent myth-oriented theology its layperson-oriented stamp.

Bultmann and Demythologizing in Britain

Though the turn to myth in British theology was part of the ongoing development of the liberal wing of theology in Britain, it was also the result of developments within the narrower field of New Testament scholarship. Debates about myth in British theology were part of an extended interaction with modernity that had its roots in the Enlightenment. One of the major developments that shaped this interaction was historical and textual criticism of the Bible, which had its origins in the work of the French scholars like Richard Simon in late-seventeenth century and Jean Astruc in the early- to mid-eighteenth century, before developing into the German "higher criticism" in the mid to late eighteenth century. Post-Second World War examinations of the role of myth in the New Testament were in one sense an outgrowth of much older debates about the historical reliability of biblical texts.

In the twentieth century, around the time of the First World War, historical criticism and interpretation of the Bible became linked with the attempt by various theologians to respond to modernity. That is, historical study of the bible was increasingly framed as necessary response to perceived secularization, which was seen as partly due to the "modern" person's difficulties in believing traditional Christian doctrine. As Keith Clements explains, "By the years just prior to the First World War we find churchmen anxiously talking about the 'modern age' as something

not only quite distinct from the realm of organized religion but threatening it—and seeing it implicitly as *the norm* for the population."[20] On this view, the task of theology was to reconceptualize traditional, now unintelligible, forms of belief so that they could be accepted by the modern believer. Historical criticism could aid this project by helping to identify the essential, indispensable elements in the biblical texts so that these could be shorn of the ancient cultural thought forms in which they were clothed.

The desire to extract the true meaning of biblical texts was at the heart of the work of the German New Testament scholar Rudolph Bultmann. Bultmann's work, especially his call to "demythologize" the New Testament, bears examination here because of its immense influence on British theology in the post-Second World War period. Thanks to English translations of his work that began to appear in the late 1940s, by mid-century questions that Bultmann raised "about the mythical character and meaning of the Christian faith dominated the agenda of modern theology."[21] Several of Bultmann's central ideas would become important in Britain when theologians there took up the question of myth's place in theology, in particular his notion of "demythologizing" and his understanding of myth as a symbolic expression of human

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[20] Clements, 17.

[21] Gary Dorrien, *The Word as True Myth: Interpreting Modern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 106. Some works that evidence this impact include Roger Lloyd, *The Ferment in the Church* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1964); David Cairns, *A Gospel Without Myth?: Bultmann's Challenge to the Preacher* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1960); Ian Henderson, *Myth in the New Testament* (London: Robert Cunningham and Sons Ltd., 1952); Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Scripture and Myth: An Examination of Rudolf Bultmann's Plea for Demythologization* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1956); Geraint Vaughan Jones, *Christology and Myth in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character, Extent and Interpretation of the Mythological Element in New Testament Christology* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1956); John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing: Bultmann and his Critics* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1960); L. Malevez, S.J., *The Christian Message and Myth: The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*, trans. Olive Wyon, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1958); H.P. Owen, *Revelation and Existence: A Study in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1957). There were also several American interpretations of Bultmann that were widely read in Britain including Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ Without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961); Burton Throckmorton, *The New Testament and Mythology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959); and John Knox, *Myth and Truth: An Essay on the Language of Faith* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1964).

experience of the world. As Rowan Williams has observed, Bultmann's work contributed to

a theological shift in Britain whereby, from the late forties on, issues of New Testament

interpretation, rather than doctrinal or systematic issues, came to occupy the center of theological

debate.[22] This renewed focus on the New Testament was a precondition for the debates about

Christianity and myth that would dominate theology in the 1960s.

When Bultmann began to develop his ideas on mythology in the Bible he was already a

respected New Testament scholar and one of the pioneers of the method known as form criticism.

He saw the purpose of his scholarly work as enabling a more effective proclamation of the

Christian message. This was the motivation behind the 1941 lecture in which he first proposed

the project of demythologizing the New Testament. The lecture was intended to offer practical

guidance to former students who were serving as chaplains in the German army.[23] Bultmann

wanted to suggest how unnecessary obstacles to hearing the Christian message, which he called

the *kerygma*, could be cleared away. He argued that the mythological worldview of the New

Testament was incredible to modern people, and prevented them from appreciating the core of

the Christian message. He singled out two aspects of New Testament mythology that were

especially problematic, its anthropomorphism and its premodern, prescientific cosmology.

Bultmann contended that "Myth speaks of gods in the same way as of men, of their actions as

human actions, with the difference that it imagines the gods to be endowed with superhuman

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[22] Rowan Williams, "Theology in the Twentieth Century," in Ernest Nicholson, ed., *A Century of Theological and Religious Studies in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 244.

[23] This lecture, other key texts by Bultmann, and essays by his critics were translated into English and collected in Hans Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, vol. 1, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1953); and idem, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, vol. 2, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCK: 1962). Some of Bultmann's writings have been retranslated in the more recent collection *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. and ed. Schubert M. Ogden, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

power and their actions to be incalculable….”[24] Such anthropomorphizing of God, which

emphasized his action in the ordinary order of events, was unbelievable to modern Europeans

who held a scientific view of the world. Similarly, the prescientific cosmology of the New

Testament, with its three-story universe and world of spirits and miracles, could only be seen my

moderns as hopelessly primitive.

At the same time, Bultmann contended that, since none of these aspects of the New

Testament mythology were specifically Christian, they were obstacles that could be cleared away.

They could be discarded at the same time that the *kerygma*, the core Christian message, was

preserved. Bultmann was criticized for viewing myth too harshly, but he insisted that this was a

misunderstanding. He maintained that myth is a vehicle for religious truth, in the sense that

myth expresses humanity’s understanding of its existential position in the world: “The real point

in myth is not to give an objective world picture; what is expressed in it, rather, is how we

human beings understand ourselves in our world.”[25] Thus, Bultmann was not proposing a

rejection of biblical myth on scientific grounds, but rather a translation of that myth so that the

truths it embodied about the human situation would be apparent to moderns. In language that

betrayed the influence of Heideggerian existentialism he insisted that “Myth does not want to be

interpreted in cosmological terms but in anthropological terms—or better, in existentialist

terms.”[26] He insisted that he had no desire to make the *kerygma* “more acceptable to modern

man by trimming traditional biblical texts, but to make clearer to modern man what the Christian

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[24] Bultmann, in Bartsch, ed., vol. 1, 183.

[25] Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in Ogden, ed., 9.

[26] Ibid.

faith is."[27] In other words, biblical myths were a vehicle for the Christian message, but not a

necessary one: "In Bultmann's famous, if excruciatingly confusing, phrase, one must

'demythologize' myth, which means not eliminating, or 'demythicizing,' the mythology but

instead extricating the true, existential meaning of that mythology."[28] Thus, the point of

demythologizing was to "disclose the deepest religious truths that inhere within Christian

myth."[29]

These arguments were grist for John Robinson's mill in *Honest to God*. Robinson's book

both revealed an intellectual debt to Bultmann's demythologizing thesis while at the same time

emphasizing the theological necessity of mythical and symbolic language. Robinson made it

clear that he had no objection to myth as such, for myth was inherent to all religious belief.

Rather, his concern was to suggest that Christianity be purged of certain unnecessary mythical

aspects that no longer resonated with moderns:

> To demythologize—as Bultmann would readily concede—is not to suppose that
> we can dispense with all myth or symbol. It is to cut our dependence upon one
> particular mythology—of what Tillich calls the 'superworld of divine objects'—
> which is in peril of becoming a source of incredulity rather than an aid to faith.
> Any alternative language…is bound to be equally symbolic. But it may speak
> more 'profoundly' to the soul of modern man.[30]

The necessity of preserving only those mythical elements that were relevant to modern believers

meant a new direction for theology, Robinson argued. Instead of preservation, its task was a sort

of continual renovation: "Without the constant discipline of theological thought, asking what we

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[27] Bultmann in Bartsch, ed., vol. 2, 183.

[28] Robert Segal, "Does Myth Have a Future," in Laurie L. Patton and Wendy Doniger, eds., *Myth and Method* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 90.

[29] Dorrien, 104.

[30] John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1963), 132.

mean by symbols, purging out the dead myths…the Church can quickly become

obscurantist….”[31] Robinson essentially advocated, to the extent possible, replacing Christian

myths and symbols that no longer seemed meaningful with myths and symbols that did. His

preferred option was to follow Paul Tillich in abandoning conceptions of a God "out there" in

favor of language about God as the "ground of being." He acknowledged that the latter was no

less mythical that the former, but he claimed that it was more relevant to modern concerns.

With each attempt to defend his book in the debates that followed its publication,

Robinson clarified his views on myth further. In doing so he acknowledged how Bultmann had

shaped his thinking and he framed his arguments as an effort to spell out his own understanding

of the implications of Bultmann's thought. Robinson wanted to find a way to sever the

mythology of the New Testament from a form of supernaturalism which he thought many

modern people could not accept. He had no desire to discard mythology and in fact argued that

it was indispensable not just to theology but also to human understanding of the world:

> Myth is of profound and permanent significance in human thought: most of us
> will always think and theologize in pictures. The crisis of our age is simply
> bound up with the necessity of being forced to distinguish myth for what it is, so
> that we may be able to evaluate it aright and use it without dishonesty and
> inhibition.[32]

Thus, the challenge for modern Christians, in Robinson's view, was to separate myth from

history while realizing that mythological statements in the Bible were there to convey the

theological significance of historical events. "God sent his only-begotten Son" was such a

mythological statement, "*not* in the sense that it is not true, but in the sense that it represents the

theological significance of the history….The important thing is that what is history is no more

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[31] Ibid., 133.

[32] Robinson, "The Debate Continues," in Edwards, ed. *The Honest to God Debate*, 264.

true because it is history nor what is myth less true because it is myth."[33] He summarized the

essence of his position by stating, "My concern…is not to throw out the myths, but precisely to

enable us to use them."[34]

As Robinson's references to it suggest, Bultmann's work was in effect the door through

which "the myth question" entered post-Second World War British theology. His proposal to

demythologize the New Testament was initially appealing to liberal theologians in Britain

because it coincided with their efforts to craft an intellectually acceptable version of Christianity

for the modern believer.[35] In the early fifties Bultmann's main works began to appear in Britain

in English and thereafter an attendant body of critical literature on him rapidly emerged. This

body of literature soon began to reflect a theological consensus that Bultmann took his case too

far, even though he drew attention to some important ways in which the New Testament was

riddled with myth. British theologians criticized Bultmann's view of myth on two fronts. One

was that his understanding of myth was based on discredited anthropology that viewed myth as

the product of a primitive mentality. The other related criticism was that Bultmann was too

willing to jettison meaningful ancient myths out of deference to what the "modern mind" was

able to accept. Whereas Bultmann seemed to assume that the modern mind had no taste for myth,

many British theologians argued that myth was the natural idiom of religious language and

theologians must therefore learn to use it in a way that was relevant to modern people.

This position was summed up by G.V. Jones, one of the first British theologians to

engage at length with Bultmann's ideas. In his book-length critique of Bultmann, Jones

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[33] Ibid., 266-67.

[34] Ibid., 267.

[35] This despite the fact that Bultmann was an avowed critic of liberal theology, which he believed turned Christianity into a sentimental moralism. See Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in Ogden, ed., 12.

contended that "myth is the language of religion and should be taken seriously as such."[36]

Jones pointed out that Bultmann's peculiar definition of myth prevented him from realizing this and from recognizing that mythological thinking was part of the fabric of modern societies. A more recent critic of Bultmann has argued that "Bultmann is operating with a defective concept of myth. He is confusing presuppositions about worldview with myth as a genre."[37] This was essentially Jones's objection. He admitted that:

> …the Western mind has run into difficulty with religious and mythological language because it mistakes 'symbolical expressions of the inexpressible' for statements of objective truth. The modern mind, of which the philosophy of logical positivism is but one symptomatic expression, asks for "objective" facts and for literal intelligibility.[38]

Nevertheless, he contended, mythological thinking was deeply ingrained in modern societies, even though many did not realize this. He explained that:

> Primitive peoples think mythologically, but not all who so think are primitive; indeed, mythological thinking may be evident in the most fully developed religion and in advanced civilizations and may…be an indispensable mode of religious perception.[39]

This was because, "myth is the 'symbolization of the infinite' and the only language adequate to this symbolization. For this reason the mythical is not merely a primitive type of mentality to be outgrown…."[40] Jones's view that myth is the natural idiom of religion and that theologians should be unapologetic about this became a mainstream view among British theologians.

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[36] Qtd. in Jones, 13.

[37] Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 162.

[38] Jones, 13.

[39] Ibid., 241

[40] Ibid., 270.

Theologians like Jones who argued that myth was not merely a primitive thoughtform took support from the pathbreaking work of the Oxford anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard. Evans-Pritchard's work minimized the gap between the primitive and modern by emphasizing the continuing significance of mythic and religious thought. Since the late-nineteenth century British theologians had been aware of research on myth by anthropologists and scholars of comparative religion. From this work they concluded that myth-making was an activity that took place in all ancient human cultures, including the cultures that had produced the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. But for the most part British theologians saw this work as corrosive of Christian belief, for it was often presented as a debunking of foundational Christian texts and beliefs. Evans-Pritchard's work began to shift this widespread view. As Adrian Hastings has pointed out, in the post-World War II period theologians were for the first time able to gain some support from a discipline that had for since the late-nineteenth century been inimical to religious belief. Evans-Pritchard's works on the Azande and Nuer tribes had shown that such "primitives" had more in common with "moderns" than the latter were willing to recognize. As Hastings puts it, in his work "Dichotomy is replaced by a continuity that finds room for rationality among 'primitives' and religion among 'moderns.'"[41] Beginning in the 1950s Evans-Pritchard increasingly turned to theoretical work that developed themes often implicit in his earlier, field-study based works. This eventually culminated in his influential 1965 work *Theories of Primitive Religion*. The book developed at length a criticism he had been voicing for at least a decade: prevailing anthropological theories of religion were wrongheaded, irrational, and biased. The work showed how most anthropologists proceeded on the unwarranted *a priori* assumption that religion was illusory. This assumption was reinforced by the tendency of anthropologists to

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[41] Hastings, 498.

attribute motivations to their subjects that are actually closer to those of the researchers themselves. What this amounted to, Evans-Pritchard argued, was a failure to understand primitive religion on its own terms. Anthropologists needed to recognize that religion was a unique phenomenon: it could not be understood in straightforward functional terms and religious beliefs, as well as the mythic language in which they were expressed, could not simply be taken as evidence of the "pre-logical" nature of a people. Such views shaped the thinking of British theologians as they responded to Bultmann's provocative thesis about the relation between myth and Christianity, giving them a basis for their criticism that his equation of "mythical" with "primitive" was unwarranted.

By early sixties, the main tendency of theologians in Britain was to credit Bultmann for showing how the mythological language of the Bible could be an obstacle to belief, while disputing his suggestion that such language should be thrown overboard as unacceptable to the modern mind or translated into the vocabulary of Heiddegerian existentialism. As one theologian summed up this consensus, "Translation is desirable and necessary, but it is dangerous and cannot be allowed to go too far."[42] If religious believers were going to continue to speak about what was fundamentally inexpressible, British theologians reasoned, then they must speak using the language of myth or not at all. Characteristic of this position was a review of some of Bultmann's writings in the British journal *Theology*. The reviewer, James Mark, argued that myth, conceived of as "an account which is incapable of verification," would always be a necessary and important form of discourse for Christians:

> There are limits to human knowledge which, it seems, we cannot surpass. There are events of which we can form no conception….If we wish to speak of these things, we must do so in the language of myth….The question is whether we want

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[42] H.E. Root, "What is the Gospel?," *Theology* 66, no. 516 (June, 1963), 222.

to or not. Bultmann's assumption is that modern man either does not or finds it impossible.[43]

But Mark disagreed, arguing instead that the correct course was not to give up on myth, but to "learn afresh how to use the language of myth…."[44]

A Crisis of Theological Discourse and a New Way Forward

Mark's definition of myth as "an account which is incapable of verification" is a clue to why British theologians increasingly turned to myth in the 1960s. If myth was by definition incapable of verification, then it could not fall victim to the critiques of scientists or—of greater concern at the time—the critiques of analytic and linguistic philosophers.[45] This attempt to place the subject matter of theology beyond the reach of science and philosophy was a common move by British theologians of the period. It was a response to what they perceived to be a crisis of theological discourse.[46] James Mark's review of Bultmann, the *Soundings* volume, and *Honest to God* can all be seen as efforts to resolve this crisis. And it was liberal theologians who felt this crisis most acutely, as they had historically emphasized the need to present Christian belief in language relevant and intelligible to the modern believer. What is more, for liberals the depth of the crisis was underscored by secularization itself, which they saw precisely as the result of the Church's failure to adapt its way of speaking to modern minds. To theologians confronting

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[43] James Mark, "Myth and Miracle, or the Ambiguity of Bultmann," *Theology* 66, no. 514 (April 1963), 137.

[44] Ibid., 140.

[45] Analytic philosophy's challenge to theology is discussed in Stewart Sutherland, "Philosophy of Religion in the Twentieth Century" in Ernest Nicholson, ed., *A Century of Theological and Religious Studies in Britain*, 253-69.

[46] For works of the period that reflect this anxiety see John Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology, 1900-1960* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1963); R.W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox* (London: Watt, 1958); Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1957); Donald MacKinnon, *The Borderlands of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

such a crisis the concept of myth offered a way forward, as evident in Mark's review of

Bultmann. But the way forward involved a new strategy in liberal theology. Grounding

theology in the explication of Christian myths was in harmony with traditional liberal concerns

about articulating the faith in a way that was relevant and credible. At the same time it was a

departure from traditional liberal tactics in that the focus was no longer on reconciling Christian

belief with modern knowledge by minimizing incredible doctrines. Instead the issue of

Christianity's conflict with modern knowledge was virtually sidestepped. By defending myth as

the natural idiom of religion, as a way of speaking about the meaning of human existence that by

definition could not conflict with scientific or historical knowledge, liberal theologians sought to

circumvent what they saw as some of the key obstacles to Christian faith in the modern world.

This was a strategy born of crisis and anxiety about the status of theological discourse.

The anxieties of theologians during this period were primarily about finding a mode of

expression for theology that would answer the intellectual charges then being leveled at the

discipline. Editorials, articles, and book reviews in theological journals of the period were, as

much as any other single topic, concerned with how theologians could and should say what they

wanted to say. The intellectual challenges that were setting the agenda of British theology all

seemed to boil down to the issue of theological discourse. More specifically, the repercussions

of Bultmann's work and the implications of analytic philosophy forced theologians to confront

the way they articulated the faith to a modern audience. The former suggested that the entire

vocabulary of Christianity would need to reformulated, while the latter suggested that what

theologians said was actually meaningless.

In the mid-sixties the *New Yorker* essayist Ved Mehta went to Britain in an attempt to

come to terms with the new, radical theology taking shape there. He found there as much

anxiety about the state of the theological discipline as he did enthusiasm for the new theology then taking shape. And the anxiety was in part about how theologians could make an intellectually credible case for their faith. Mehta reported, "Most of the theologians I met in England acknowledged at one time or another that the Achilles' heel of their calling might be a lack of extended training in philosophy, admitting that their reasoning powers were not always up to defending their faith, and this at a time when most theologians wished to have a reasoned faith and to be able to conduct a dialogue with agnostics and rationalists."[47] Ninian Smart, one of the most prominent "Cambridge theologians," struck a similar note in a 1965 article diagnosing "The Intellectual Crisis of British Christianity."[48] Smart laid blame for the crisis on analytic and linguistic philosophy: "Christianity is in an intellectual crisis in Britain. This has to do, broadly, with philosophy." But theologians' scrambling attempts to respond to philosophical critiques had only made a muddle of theology. He explained that:

> After the last war, linguistic philosophy boomed, and religious intellectuals became sensitive. You didn't want so much to show that religion is true as that it is meaningful….But the intellectuals were sensitive too about empiricism. So we had analyses (or supposed analyses) of religious language which made its meaning look strange. These unrealistic accounts of religious language have proved quite incapable of providing a secret defence of Christianity.[49]

Such wrongheaded attempts to accommodate Christianity to modern philosophy had had helped further a lamentable "modern trend towards formulating a non-theistic Christianity."[50] Smart's main point was that theologians were philosophically incompetent, and their incompetence resulted in theological ventures that were counterproductive, serving only to induce skepticism

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[47] Mehta, 117.

[48] Ninian Smart, "The Intellectual Crisis of British Christianity," *Theology* 67, no. 535 (January 1965): 31-38.

[49] Ibid., 32.

[50] Ibid.

about the possibility of a transcendent God. Hence Smart's contention that "The way

forward in discussion is by reconstructing the concept of a transcendent…being," something

only possible if philosophy were to become "an integral part" of theological education.[51]

Smart envisioned a theological discipline that, without conceding everything to modern

philosophy, could at least engage with it. His reference to an emerging "non-theistic

Christianity" was a gibe at philosophers like R.B. Braithwaite. In the 1950s Braithwaite

developed his own expressivist theory of religious belief,[52] which led him to join the Church of

England. Seeking to respond to the extreme empiricist position which held that religious

statements were meaningless, he contended that the Christian myth had value regardless of how

historically true it might be: "A man is not, I think, a professing Christian unless he both

purposes to live according to Christian moral principles and associates his intention with

thinking of Christian stories; but he need not believe that the empirical propositions presented by

the stories correspond to empirical fact."[53] Most observers found this position indistinguishable

from atheism.

Far closer to the constructive engagement with philosophy that Smart had in mind was

the work of the philosopher B.M.G. Reardon, who in the early sixties offered a philosophically-

informed defense of myth's fundamental importance for theology. Reardon was a leading

example of a philosophically trained theologian who concluded that, far from dismissing myth as

irrelevant to modernity, modern theories of myth emphasized the ongoing importance of mythic

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[51] Ibid., 36; 37.

[52] On Braithwaite's theory religious statements were really declarations of loyalty to a specific set of moral or religious principles.

[53] R.B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 22.

thinking as that type of discourse which articulated humanity's sense of its own existence. In

his view, science had shown itself "incapable" of offering this sort of meaning. But science's

inability pointed toward the necessity of theology, for "religion, as a projection of the mythical

consciousness, can claim to be necessary for the authentification of man's being…."[54] Reardon

elaborated in terms that many of his peers in theology would have found it easy to agree with:

"Theology, which is only a more overtly pictorial form of metaphysics, perpetuates myth not

merely by its use of image-language but by its capacity to articulate those permanent impulses of

our humanity of which myth is the archetypal expression."[55] This view was attractive to

theologians who wanted to accord myth a central place in theological discourse. Writing a year

later in 1963, John Robinson was already echoing them in an article on modern theology in

Twentieth Century: "…we are now getting used to the idea of myth in relation to, say, the

Genesis stories. Today these are no longer understood as history. Their function, rather, is to

give pictorial representation to certain theological truths about the human situation and the

interpretation of the universe. It is an interpretation that cannot be expressed in anything other

than poetic language."[56]

     Thus, by the sixties liberal theologians in Britain were divided into two camps. One

camp, represented by figures like R.B. Braithwaite and Ian Ramsey, sought to continue the

traditional liberal project of pushing theology in an empirical direction. This meant

reformulating the faith so that it did not conflict with modern science, historical criticism, and

philosophy. And of these, I have argued, during the post-Second World War period the

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[54] B.M.G. Reardon, "Philosophy and Myth," *Theology* 65, no. 502 (April 1962): 138.

[55] Ibid., 137.

[56] The Bishop of Woolwich [John Robinson], "Keeping in Touch with Theology," *Twentieth Century* 172, no. 1018 (Summer 1963), 87.

challenges of analytic and linguistic philosophy were of greatest concern to theologians. But

the other camp of liberal theologians aimed to take theology in a new direction that would

circumvent the scientific, philosophical and historical challenges that had traditionally concerned

liberals. They would achieve this by explicating the mythical nature of Christian belief.

Whereas liberal theologians of the pre-Second World War period had an essentially pejorative

view of myth, these post-war liberals affirmed the value of myth as essentially the language of

religion. Like many of their contemporaries in the field of English studies, these myth-inclined

theologians assumed that myth was significantly related to the subject matter of their discipline.

In their attempt to understand this relationship and argue for myth's central place in theological

discourse, they drew on the insights about myth offered by the disciplines of anthropology,

psychology, and comparative religion. As one observer of the theological scene put it, "[M]any

earlier liberals were convinced theology had outgrown mythical thinking in favor of more

scientific modes of thought grounded in philosophy, history, psychology, and

sociology….Modern myth studies have located the function of myth at the deepest levels of

person and culture, and thus have provided a whole new basis for the positive evaluation of

myth."[57] The task of theology then became to interpret Christian myth and determine what

normative theological role should be ascribed to the mythical content of the Bible. This is what

John Robinson had in mind in *Honest to God* when he advocated "the constant discipline of

theological thought, asking what we mean by symbols, purging out the dead myths…."[58]

These efforts of liberal British theologians to reorient their discipline around myth were

premised on a shared understanding of modernity. According to this definition, modernity was

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[57] Tyron Inbody, "Myth in Contemporary Theology: The Irreconcilable Issue," *Anglican Theological Review* 58, no. 2 (April 1976), 139-40.

[58] Robinson, *Honest to God*, 133.

characterized by the intellectual hegemony of science and a general acceptance of a scientific

view of the world. At the same time these theologians pointed out that most average people did

not hold a consistent or informed scientific worldview, even thought they liked to believe that

they did. In other words, at the popular level modernity was defined by a reverence for science

combined with an unacknowledged tendency to think in anything but scientific terms. This was

pointed out by the theologian John Macquarrie, one of the most incisive British commentators on

Bultmann. Following Karl Jaspers's critique of Bultmann, Macquarrie noted, "The implied

contrast in Bultmann's thought between the mythical and the scientific is quite misleading. The

modern man certainly has a high regard for science and constantly appeals to it, but

then…everyone appeals to science and very few are really acquainted with it….[M]odern man

has his quasi-myths…corresponding in many ways to the myths of former generations."[59] On

this view, moderns professed loyalty to a secular, scientific view of the world, yet continued to

make sense of their existence through myths. British theologians saw this as an opportunity

because if the average modern person was not immune to mythic thinking, then he or she could

be persuaded that the Christian myth was more meaningful than modern quasi-myths. But this

also posed a challenge to the myth-oriented theologians, for it meant that their efforts to tout the

value of Christian myth would depend on the success of their attempts to convince the public that

"myth" was not category opposed to science.[60] But, as they began to realize in the 1970s, this

was a more difficult task than they had anticipated.

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[59] Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing*, 233-34. The "quasi-myth" that Macquarrie had in mind was the thoroughly secular belief that humans had achieved self-sufficiency through science. See also Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion Without Myth* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1958).

[60] Perhaps the most philosophically sophisticated attempts to do so was Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: The Nature of Scientific and Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1974), which aimed to show

A High Water Mark: The Myth of God Incarnate

The symposium *The Myth of God Incarnate* was the high water mark of theological

engagement with myth. The contributors to the volume were several of the leading liberal

theologians of the period. These included Maurice Wiles, the chair of the Church of England's

Doctrine Commission; John Hick, a leading authority on world religions; and Don Cupitt, who

would go on to become the most famous of Britain's radical theologians. The symposium was

prompted by the "growing knowledge…that the later conception of [Jesus] as God incarnate…is

a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us."[61] The strategy throughout

the volume was to define myth as a unique form of thought that conveyed its own type of non-

scientific, non-historical truth. The contributors conceded the validity of historical criticism and

modern scientific knowledge, and they acknowledged that these made it impossible to believe

some doctrines in the same way that first-century Christians had. But Christian belief was not

therefore compromised, because the mythological language in which it was expressed was not

subject to scientific or historical critiques. Because myth did not aspire to "literal" truth in the

first place and because mythological language allowed for a considerable flexibility of

interpretation, it could be continually adapted in light of new knowledge that changed how core

doctrines were conceived. Thus the volume's preface noted that "the pressure upon Christianity

is as strong as ever to go on adapting itself into something which can be believed."[62] Conceived

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that the categories of "science" and "myth" were not nearly as antithetical as Bultmann and his followers had supposed.

[61] John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London, SCM Press, 1977), ix.

[62] Ibid.

of in this way, myth became a highly meaningful way of expressing the unknown or the inexpressible—such as the idea that God became a man—in terms of the known.

This view was clearly articulated by the New Testament scholar Frances Young in her contribution to the volume. She made a point of distinguishing how science and mythology gave very different, but non-conflicting, descriptions of reality:

> As Christian believers, then, we work with (i) the scientific model which finds explanations of phenomena, behavior and events in terms of natural causes, and (ii) what we can only describe as 'mythological' or symbolic models, models which however inadequately represent the religious and spiritual dimension of our experience. To call them 'mythological' is not to denigrate their status, but to indicate that they refer to realities which are not only inaccessible to the normal methods of scientific investigation, but are also indefinable in terms of human language, and in their totality, inconceivable within the limited powers and experience of the finite human mind.[63]

In other words, Young had accepted the view of myth that British theologians had begun articulating in the late fifties and early sixties.

Maurice Wiles went more deeply into the issue in his essay on "Myth in Theology." Wiles agreed with other contributors to the symposium that "The tendency in most theological discussions of myth is to think of myths as expressive of timeless truths about God and his relation to the world."[64] The incarnation was just such a myth, though it was also a myth in the sense of a narrative about a past event that defines a community. But what was most attractive to Wiles about myth was its elasticity, its capacity to expand to accommodate a range of belief. He explained: "If what held Christians together were seen as the use of the same myths rather than the holding of the same beliefs, it might be easier for Christians to accept the measure of

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[63] Frances Young, "Two Roots or a Tangled Mass?," in Hick, ed., 34.

[64] Maurice Wiles, "Myth in Theology," in Hick, ed., 163.

variety that there both should and will be between them."[65] Viewed in this way, Christians

were not necessarily people who believed the same things but rather people who expressed their

religious commitments using similar language. Wiles conceded that many would rightly wonder

what basis the incarnation myth had in history, asking "what sort of link is there between the

myth and the history?"[66] His response was that the myth could still "function as a potent myth"

even though "it is acknowledged that it is not literally true."[67] What was far more important than

literal truth was that there be "some ontological truth corresponding to the central characteristic

of the structure of the myth."[68] Myths that lacked such an ontological correlate should be

abandoned as "inappropriate." The editor of the symposium, John Hick, took a similar position

in his contribution. He echoed Wiles's language in arguing that myths ought not to be judged in

terms of literal truth. Rather, "the truth of a myth is a kind of practical truth consisting in the

appropriateness of the attitude to its object."[69]

Wiles conceded that his "ontological correlate" criterion was not easy to apply. And that

was not the only note of pessimism in his essay. He doubted whether the mythical understanding

of Christianity he recommended could ever serve an apologetic function, given that the popular

understanding of myth was so far from the theological understanding. Most people understood

myth as something delusive, in the sense it was both untrue and led people astray. "This must be

acknowledged," he admitted, "and the term may remain unusable in the general life of the

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[65] Ibid., 164.

[66] Ibid., 158.

[67] Ibid., 165.

[68] Ibid., 161.

[69] John Hick in idem, ed., 178.

church."[70] Such a note of pessimism among myth-oriented theologians was new, but it

would soon become common. The fissures of doubt in Wiles's piece signaled the beginning of

the end of British theologians' quest to reorient their discipline around a positive understanding

of myth. Wiles concluded that myth "may still be a valuable tool for theological analysis," and

he would be proven correct. But this fell far short of the hopes that British liberal theologians

had had for myth in the early sixties, when they had envisioned nothing less that the dawn of a

new era of myth-driven apologetics.

If *The Myth of God Incarnate* and the publicity it generated were any indication, it

seemed in the late 1970s that the liberal theology behind the myth and theology discussions of

the previous decades was firmly in place. The symposium was but one of several noteworthy

works of the 1970s by leading theologians written in a critical liberal spirit, including Geoffrey

Lampe's *God as Spirit* (1976), a critique of traditional Trinitarian theology, and Dennis

Nineham's *The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (1976). But, as Rowan Williams has noted in his

evaluation of twentieth-century British theology, the end of the decade was not a moment of

triumph for the long tradition of British theological liberalism: "The year 1977 was a high water

mark, after which the assumptions and conclusions of the authors of the *Myth* symposium began

to shift or fade in the overall intellectual map."[71] That tradition had from the start defined itself

in response to "modernity" and, in particular, the intellectual challenges of modernity. The main

focus of the liberal tradition had always been reformulating doctrine to make it more

intellectually acceptable and relevant for the modern believer. However, by the 1970s

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[70] Wiles, 164.

[71] Williams, 246.

theologians were increasingly turning their attention to other concerns as modernity's social and cultural dimensions began to supplant its intellectual dimensions in the theological imagination.

If The *Myth of God Incarnate* effectively marked the end of British theologians' engagement with the myth question, this was a chapter in the history of theology that ended more with a whimper than a bang. When liberal British theologians first began to turn their attention to myth two decades earlier, they had been hopeful that taking theology in this direction would both provide a more secure footing for the discourse of their discipline and allow for a dynamic flexibility in articulating the Christian faith. That is, Christianity was inescapably mythic, because all human attempts to make sense of human existence in religious terms were. But the precise way in which the myth was expressed could be adapted and translated into terms that were more comprehensible to the modern believer than the alien terminology of the New Testament. However, two decades of exploring the relationship between Christianity and myth did not result in the gains that theologians had intended. Despite the protestations of the *Myth* contributors that their hope was only "to release talk about God and about Jesus from confusions," as Adrian Hastings has pointed out, their conclusions seemed to imply "the necessity of winding up historic Christianity, with a minimum of pain to all concerned, as unacceptable to the modern mind."[72] Though liberal myth-oriented theologians advocated the value of myth, they, however unintentionally, reinforced a public perception that myth was unacceptable to the modern mind. In other words, the same tension between myth and modernity that hampered John Robinson's *Honest to God* also vitiated the *Myth* symposium. At the same time that the *Myth* contributors affirmed the unique religious power of myth, they

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[72] Hick, x; Hastings, 650.

framed their symposium as the latest in a series of "adjustments" that "have made it possible

for many inhabitants of our modern science-oriented culture to be Christians today."[73] This was

a position that was at once a dissent from and an acceptance of modernity. That such a tension

was at the heart of their position perhaps helps explain why the public failed to embrace the

proposed myth-centered Christianity.

Conclusion

The legacy of British theologians' attempts to deploy myth in an effort to articulate a

modern faith had, at best, mixed results. In part this was because of damage they had done to

their own cause. Episodes like *The Myth of God Incarnate* symposium, portrayed in the media

as an exercise in the debunking of Christian doctrine, reinforced a consensus among laypeople

that when theologians talked of "myth" they meant a false narrative that could not stand up to the

test of critical history.[74] This was not what most of the contributors to *The Myth* had intended to

convey, but that is what many observers concluded.

With such unintended consequences in mind, the Church of England Doctrine

Commission's 1981 report *Believing in the Church* warned against use of the term myth in

theological discourse. No matter how carefully theologians tried to refine their use of the term,

myth was still generally understood to mean falsehood. In particular, argued Anthony Thiselton

in his contribution to the report, myth tended to be associated with primitive worldview, it

suggested a form of communication in which thought was wrapped in opaque language, and it

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[73] Hick, x.

[74] See Avis, 173. Cf. Hastings, 650.

was too often linked with subjectivist notions of truth.[75] Nevertheless, Thiselton seemed to be objecting to the connotations of the term myth rather than denying its value as a category of theological discourse. He used the term Christian "story" instead of Christian "myth," if only because the former did not evoke the negative associations of the latter; Thiselton was able to avoid using the category of myth only be relying on another analytical category that did the same theological work under a different name.

What Thiselton's piece shows is that by the end of the seventies the category of myth had a firm, albeit uneasy, place in theological discourse, though theologians had lost confidence in using the category of myth in presentations of the faith to the public. In this sense more than two decades of theological focus on myth had resulted in failure. In 1963 John Robinson observed "that the word 'myth' is still a source of misunderstanding to great numbers of people, and means simply that which is untrue."[76] But in the late 1970s British theologians were still saying the same thing; they knew that their repeated attempts to correct this misunderstanding had failed and they began to draw back from myth as a result. Myth would remain in use as a common category of analysis for many British theologians, though its apologetic efficacy and appropriateness were increasingly doubted. In the end, the "myth question" in contemporary theology was, as one observer noted, an "irreconcilable issue."[77] This was because the split between the liberal theologians who favored a normative role for philosophy in theology and those who ascribed a normative role to myth was unlikely to be resolved.

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[75] See Anthony Thiselton, "Knowledge, Myth and Corporate Memory," in The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *Believing in The Church: The Corporate Nature of Faith* (London: SPCK, 1981): 45-78.

[76] Robinson, "The Debate Continues," 263.

[77] Inbody, 139.

The turn to myth in British theology was part of an attempt to respond to and negotiate the challenges of modernity. By defending the religious significance of myth British theologians believed they were defending Christianity itself against the intellectual challenges of modernity. But instead of dealing effectively with these challenges, this strategy only succeeded in pushing British theology further in a modern direction. By its own standards the attempt to make Christianity relevant by attending to its mythic dimensions was a failed project. This was in part because the understanding of myth embraced by theologians committed their discipline to an anthropological turn in which human expressions about God, rather than the relationship between humanity and God, became the discipline's primary subject matter. Such a project, driven as it was by conclusions and methods borrowed from anthropology, comparative religion, history, and philosophy, could only succeed in making theology into a hybrid that was a pale imitation of those disciplines. In *The Myth of God Incarnate* Maurice Wiles observed that theology was increasingly reliant on other disciplines,[78] but this reliance could be more of a crutch than a creative resource. Wiles's observation illustrates the ironic position of many twentieth-century advocates of myth: by turning to myth in order to limit modernity's impact on the faith, they in fact implicated themselves even more deeply in that very modernity. Without a distinct subject matter, methodology, or perspective of its own, theology's ability to offer a compelling interpretation of the human experience was eroded. Theology's current position as an academic discipline in Britain reflects this: it has been largely absorbed into the discipline of religious studies. This marginal position explains why so much theology is driven by a desire for "relevance" in attempt to recapture a lost position of cultural authority.

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[78] See Wiles, 164.

In response to broader social and cultural changes, British theologians in the 1970s were seeking new ways to be relevant. As Gary Dorrien has noted, modernist and liberal theologians often made global pronouncements about what "modern man" was capable of believing. But by the 1970s it was becoming increasingly difficult to frame theology in terms of confident pronouncements about the "modern" theological situation.[79] Instead of privileging the concerns of the "modern man" theologians began to listen to voices they had previously ignored. This meant that questions of social justice were brought to the forefront of theology as the agenda of theology was increasingly defined by the concerns and experiences of marginalized religious communities instead of by the perceived needs of "modern man." Thus, during the 1970s theology on the left side of the theological spectrum was shifting from a liberal to a liberationist mode. In other words, myth-oriented theology was eclipsed from the theological left as liberal theologians shifted their attention from the intellectual challenges of modernity to its social and cultural challenges. Some fruits of this shift were the creative and highly productive fields of liberation theology, feminist theology, and—prompted in part by an increasingly multiethnic Britain—theology exploring the relationship of Christianity to other religions. Thus, in a fascinating and ironic turn of events, theologians who had once made it their business to explain the unique value of the Christian myth now began to come to grips with the myths at heart of other world religions.

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[79] Gary Dorrien, "The Golden Years of Welfare Capitalism: The Twilight of the Giants," in Gregory Baum, ed., *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1999), 100.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

In 1974 Britain's greatest myth came to the big screen, but not in the way some might have hoped. The film was *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, an irreverent send-up of the Grail myth by a comedy troupe known for its willingness to lampoon any icon associated with Britishness. The Matter of Britain was thus the ideal target for their brand of humor, and in the film key elements of the mythology are inverted for comic effect. Arthur is far from the heroic king who brings order to a chaotic Britain. Rather than receiving a royal welcome from his subjects, he is confronted by insubordinate anarcho-syndicalist peasants who lecture him on the oppression of the working classes. Arthur's attempts to recruit outstanding knights for the Round Table are somewhat less than successful, as those who do join him are distinguished more by incompetence than by heroism. Galahad himself turns out to be more of a 1970s hedonist than a virtuous champion worthy of the Grail. Mud seems to be the distinguishing feature of this mythical golden age, and Camelot is nothing but an unconvincing model held up against the horizon.

The gulf between Monty Python's vision of Arthurian Britain and the use of Grail mythology in the interwar period is vast, illustrating how by the mid-1970s mythic thinking had become in many ways an untenable project. Whereas in the decades leading up to World War II writers had seen the Matter of Britain as freighted with deep spiritual significance, for Monty Python the same body of myth was merely a joke-delivery device. What was a subject of high seriousness for the modernists had by the 1970s become so much raw material for farce. It is even possible to detect in the Monty Python film a certain attitude of suspicion toward metanarratives; indeed the whole film is an exercise in the deconstruction of a myth.

Postmodernity would not be favorable context for grand endeavors in mythic thinking, and

Monty Python and the Holy Grail can be seen as a harbinger of this.

Modernity, on the other hand, was they heyday of the mythic thinking phenomenon. This was because mythic thinking emerged originally as means by which a variety of writers, thinkers, and cultural groups both constructed and responded to modernity. This dissertation has attempted to illustrate this process by defining the unique form of discourse best described as "mythic thinking," while tracing its emergence and evolution in twentieth-century Britain. It has argued that mythic thinking served as a highly elastic idiom through which a number of significant intellectuals, writers, and cultural groups could frame and articulate their anxieties about modernity. It is the case that the cultural critiques expressed in the language of mythic thinking targeted natural science's epistemic pretensions, the secularizing effects of modern rationality, the excesses of consumerism, the alienating effect of modern urban life, and the emotional estrangement produced by modern mass media. And the turn to myth was justified with claims that myth gave access to deeper truths than historical or scientific explanation, and that it offered a unique means of coping with the psychological pressures that modernity brought to bear on the individual. Nevertheless, to speak of mythic thinkers is not to speak of a group reacting to modernity from outside its parameters, but rather of a group whose reaction to modernity took place within, was shaped by, and reacted upon key institutions and features of modernity.

Mythic thinking's inseparable relationship with modernity is signaled by the fact that its story began with certain intellectual developments typically seen as fundamental to the modern project, namely the emergence and growth of the social sciences. In particular, it was anthropology that the prepared the way for an interest in myth. This happened because of the way in which two strands of scholarship on myth worked to reinforce each other in exploring

ancient subject matter that somehow seemed to speak to early-twentieth century concerns.

The first of these strands of scholarship was a form of comparative anthropology that reached its

apex in J.G. Frazer's massive work *The Golden Bough*. The profusion of myths and associated

rituals that it depicted fascinated nearly all who read it, and it supplied writers in particular with a

stock of resonant material from which to draw; arguably, no other single work had a greater

impact on twentieth-century literature.

Frazer was the epitome of late-Victorian rationalism, hostile to Christianity and skeptical

of religion, which in his view belonged only to primitive stages of cultural development.

However, his work caught the attention of group of scholars who did not necessarily share his

secularist rationalism, but who did see that his work offered a new way of looking at the

civilization of ancient Greece. These were the Cambridge Ritualists, whose work constituted the

second important strand of anthropological scholarship on myth. The Ritualists were fascinated

in particular by the archaic religion prevalent in Greece prior to the Olympian religion of

classical Greece. This interest had spiritual motivations, as the Ritualists saw in archaic Greek

religion a regrettably lost era of spiritual authenticity when religious thought (myth) and

religious practice (ritual) were one. According to the Ritualists, to study the religion of archaic

Greece was to understand the nature of humanity's "religious impulse" and also to realize ways

of reawakening that impulse in a contemporary world excessively influenced by a secularizing

rationalism. This was a theme sounded in particular by Jane Harrison and by Jessie Weston, a

scholar of the Grail mythology who adopted the methodology that the Ritualists had first applied

to ancient Greece.

Intellectuals confronted with the new knowledge produced by anthropology could and

did respond in any number of ways, and the first group to illustrate some of the possible

responses was the modernists. The modernists were the pioneers of mythic thinking in

Britain, and for them the use of myth took two main forms. One was that represented by T.S.

Eliot and his mythical method. In the notes to *The Waste Land*, Eliot cited both Frazer and the

Ritualists as profound influences on his thought. His epochal poem initiated a flood of similar

literature, showing how the work of Frazer and the Ritualists had saturated British culture to the

point that precipitates began to form, in the shape of aesthetic works heavily influenced by

anthropological scholarship on myth.

Eliot's mythical method presupposed the impossibility of religious belief in a modern age;

however, some modernists picked up the theme of spiritual seeking that had been a hallmark of

the Ritualists' work. To these writers, it seemed just possible that myth provided access to the

transcendent and that it conveyed indispensable religious truths. This was particularly apparent

in the work of a number of modernists—John Cowper Powys, Mary Butts, Charles Williams,

and David Jones—who were particularly fascinated with the mythology surrounding the Holy

Grail. Though captivated by and indebted to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century

scholarship on myth, these writers refused to accept the secularizing implications of such work,

interpreting it instead as an enlightening record of humanity's experience and interpretation of

the transcendent.

The modernists, however, were not the only group to respond to the work of the late-

nineteenth and early-twentieth century anthropologists. The effort of the Inklings, and

particularly of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, to develop a form of cultural criticism in which

myth played a key role represented another significant instance of mythic thinking. Like the

modernists who had set such great store by the Grail myth, Lewis and Tolkien turned to myth in

an effort to redress what they saw as the spiritual emptiness of a secular age. Yet their theory of

myth was highly systematic and explicitly Christian, and this was a departure from the way most modernists used myth. For Lewis and Tolkien myth was an epistemological category, it was a particular kind of idiom that expressed particular kinds of truths, namely the transcendent truths of religion. Myth was thus a necessary counterpart to science, because it conveyed truths that simply could not be disclosed by empirical investigation. To make this argument they emulated an intellectual move first made by many modernists: they upended the work of the anthropologists, contending that the implications of a book like *The Golden Bough* were the opposite of what its author claimed. Frazer's work did not discredit myth by showing that all primitive cultures engaged in mythmaking; instead his research offered a record of humanity's longing for answers that were ultimately disclosed by the Christian myth—the one myth distinguished by the fact that it had happened in history.

According to Lewis and Tolkien, British culture had lost touch with myth; the cultural balance had been dangerously tipped in favor of science, with spiritual emptiness and moral confusion as the results. One way to remedy this was by producing literature that was self-consciously mythical, in the sense of drawing on ancient mythology, seeking to create a new form of mythology, or both. This kind of literature was out of favor at the time: the kind of fiction the Inklings wanted taken seriously was simply not regarded by most arbiters of literary taste as "serious" literature. Lewis and Tolkien were thus obliged to make a case for the kind of mythic fantasy literature they favored, and they singled out Leavisite critics as a key obstacle to the appreciation of mythic fantasy literature. Though they perhaps did not succeed in transforming critical opinion, they were in a sense able to circumvent it, as the popularity of their fiction testified. But whether the many readers of this fiction grasped or embraced the theory of myth underlying it remains an open question.

At about the time that Lewis and Tolkien's careers were ending, another group of writes was emerging who sought to integrate myth into their fiction. This was the collection of science fiction writers known as the New Wave. Though to some extent inspired by the example of the Inklings, the New Wave writers used myth in a somewhat different way, exemplified most prominently by J.G. Ballard, who conceived of his works of fiction as "myths of the near future." Concerned about the pressures that modernity brought to bear on the psyche, Ballard attempted to construct contemporary myths that would help individuals cope with these pressures. With roots in the 1960s counterculture, as well as links to genre predecessors like the Inklings, the New Wave writers in general, and Ballard in particular, represented both a post-Second World War effort to establish "speculative fiction" as the quintessential literature of modernity and a unique phase in the ongoing development of mythic thinking.

The New Wave writers also represented the reemergence of a recessive gene in the history of mythic thinking: psychological theories of myth. In the early stages of the development of mythic thinking the very multiplicity of cultures, each with their own myths, was a matter of some concern. Mythic thinking thus initially emerged out of and in response to issues raised by the very existence of the empire. The modernists and the Inklings had been aware of psychological explanations of myth's power, but they were much more influenced by anthropological explanations; references to Jung were few while references to Frazer were many. However, in the work of the New Wave writers psychological interpretation of myth came to the fore. In the 1960s, the heyday of the New Wave, the empire had receded as a source of concern. Instead, the unexplored region of the psyche—"inner space" as they called it—was the great focus of both fascination and concern. The New Wave writers were thus apt to stress how

myth—in the guise of their science fiction—could perform the vital task of mediating between the threatening outer world and the inner world of the psyche.

The prevalence of mythic thinking as a feature of twentieth-century British culture was confirmed by the fact that academic disciplines began to take notice of it and even attempt to adapt it for their own purposes. Moreover, some began to realize that the category of "myth" was a highly-effective rhetorical weapon that could be used in disciplinary struggles within the university. This was a discovery made by literary critics in Britain as they attempted to stake a claim for their nascent discipline in the context of an expanding university system. Literary critics could not plausibly associate their discipline with the authority of science, so in their search for an alternative way of justifying their work they looked to myth; literary critics' turn to myth thus grew out of the attempt by the emerging field of English studies to find a discourse of its own that was authoritative without being scientific. Though unable—and unwilling—to associate themselves with prestige of science, they could associate themselves with the prestige of myth, which literary critics rightly recognized was a concept that had considerable, if nebulous, force. They did this by positioning themselves as the interpreters of the mythic significance of literature, claiming they could elucidate that significance and therefore give access to truths that were somehow more real, and more relevant, than the deliverances of science. Myth thus became a tool that literary critics used in an attempt to construct cultural authority for themselves and their discipline.

Theology was another academic discipline that turned to myth in effort to remain relevant to twentieth-century concerns. Theologians had been struggling to respond to a number of intellectual challenges to the credibility of Christianity, not least among them the criticisms of Christian belief stemming from modern science and social science, critical history, and analytic

philosophy. A number of theologians concluded that the best way to deal with this predicament was to concede the validity of the modern forms of knowledge production while at the same time seeking refuge in the seemingly unassailable category of myth. On the one hand these theologians took for granted what they termed the "modern scientific worldview," while on the other they argued that myth, the natural idiom of religion, was not vulnerable to scientific, historical, or philosophical critiques because it was a form of discourse that transcended the empirical realm. By defending the religious significance of myth British theologians hoped to sidestep some of the more pointed criticisms of Christian theology, even as they attempted to insulate the faith itself from the intellectual challenges of modernity. But in many ways this strategy implicated British theology more deeply in the structures of modernity by making the discipline ever more reliant on methods borrowed from anthropology, comparative religion, history, and philosophy.

This account of theology's engagement of myth in a sense brings the story of mythic thinking full circle. Mythic thinking in very a concrete way had its roots in the British Empire, where missionaries, civil servants, and amateur ethnologists had collected and documented the tales and customs of colonized peoples, then sending their discoveries on to Frazer in Cambridge. Roughly a century later the empire again to began to shape how myth was thought about in Britain. This happened because an increasingly multiethnic Britain prompted theologians to explore the relationship of Christianity to other religions; theologians who had once made it their business to explain the unique value of the Christian myth thus now began to come to grips with the myths at heart of other world religions.

Taken together these six case studies of mythic thinking contribute to our understanding of Britain's cultural and intellectual history in a number of ways. To begin with, we can now

add the category of mythic thinking to the analytical vocabulary we apply to the period. This

is important, because doing so goes hand-in-hand with recognizing that, contrary to the common

assumption, modernists did not have a monopoly on the use of myth as a means of responding to

modernity. Mythic thinking was a widespread and highly variable phenomenon, hence the need

of an analytic category to capture it. By setting out to offer the first cultural and intellectual

history of myth as a mode of thought in twentieth-century Britain, I have attempted to define this

category while establishing it as a necessary element in future discussions of the period.

Second, appreciating the prevalence of mythic thinking complicates and enriches our

understanding of the range of responses to the rationalizing and secularizing trends of modernity.

We have long known that twentieth-century British culture was profoundly shaped by a struggle

between advocates and opponents of modernity. Viewing this struggle through the prisms of

secularization and the "two cultures controversy," the relevant historiography has tended to

represent it as a contest between the sciences on the one hand and Christianity and the

humanities on the other. Acknowledging the phenomenon of mythic thinking complicates our

understanding of this struggle by showing how, in the search for an alternative critique of

modernity, many thinkers and writers turned to the discourse of mythic thinking instead of to religion

or the humanities.

But the struggle over modernity was never a straightforward matter of rationalists versus

irrationalists, or of secularists versus mystics. The lines of demarcation between the two camps

were always blurry, just as the connections between them were always apparent if seen from the

right angle. It is here that this dissertation makes another contribution by encouraging us to

rethink how we conceptualize and approach the subject of modernity in twentieth-century Britain.

It is certainly not the first work to do so, but integrating the story of mythic thinking in historical

narratives on twentieth-century Britain reinforces a growing body of work which argues that

our understanding of British culture's relationship to modernity will become clearer the more we

are able to see past certain antinomies—reason versus religion, rationalization versus

enchantment, and even science versus myth—that many at the time took for granted. Without

realizing the extent to which they did so, mythic thinkers borrowed from, depended on, were

implicated in, or assumed the validity of characteristically modern structures and ways of

thinking; even though mythic thinkers understood themselves to be responding to and critiquing

modernity, mythic thinking was an inescapably modern project. Appreciating this can help us

perceive how cultural projects that were framed as assaults on modernity were in fact constituted

by modernity.

　　Having examined some of the most salient instances of mythic thinking in twentieth-

century British culture, it is possible to suggest some areas for further research into the

phenomenon. One obvious area for further investigation is the manifestation of mythic thinking

in popular culture. By the end of the period considered in this dissertation, mythic thinking had

largely migrated from high culture to popular culture. That is, by the 1980s the use of myth to

interpret and cope with contemporary experience was increasingly carried out by those who were

not intellectuals. Perhaps the most salient example is the importance of myth to new age

spirituality in Britain, a cultural phenomenon in which both Celtic and Arthurian mythology

figure prominently. This is not to say that that myth was alien to popular culture prior to the end

of the period considered here. We know, for example, that the Suffragettes employed mythic

iconography and dressed themselves as figures from classical mythology for parades and other

public events.[1] It is also the case that images drawn from mythology appeared frequently in twentieth-century advertising, such as posters for the London Underground.[2] The steps in the history of mythic thinking that I have examined here could well be retraced with an eye to elucidating the popular uses of myth throughout the century.

One possible direction for such research to take would involve drawing connections between mythic thinking on the one hand and what Michael Saler has termed the "ironic imagination" on the other. Saler has identified the ironic imagination as a noteworthy feature of modern culture since at least the 1830s. It offered a way to experience wonders and marvels within the rationalist tenets of modernity. Though a somewhat nebulous concept, it was essentially the result of imagination tempered by ironic distance in a way that allowed people to believe in fictions "with the double-minded awareness that they are engaging in pretence."[3] The upshot was that: "One could actively believe, albeit ironically, in marvels and wonders, without compromising one's standing as a rational and responsible adult."[4] The ironic imagination flourished among the middle class from the late-nineteenth century on, feeding a demand for popular fiction that cloaked fantasy with the trappings of scientific naturalism. It may well be that the ironic imagination Saler describes served as a channel through which mythic thinking flowed into popular culture.

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[1] Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffragette Campaign, 1870-1914* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987), 125-26.

[2] As documented in Oliver Green, *Underground Art: London Transport Poster 1908-Present* (London: Studio Vista, 1990).

[3] Michael Saler, "Modernity, Disenchantment, and the Ironic Imagination," *Philosophy and Literature* 28, no. 1 (April 2004): 139.

[4] Ibid., 142.

This dissertation has examined mythic thinking in relation to modernity, but analysis of the popular culture manifestations of mythic thinking may ultimately yield a clearer understanding of the transition from modernity to postmodernity. In the period examined by this dissertation mythic thinking was invariably linked with attempts to shift the culture in fundamental ways by providing a way of responding to "the modern problem." "Myth" in effect functioned as metanarrative because the deliverances of myth were thought to have perennial, universal applicability. But by the end of the period examined here, faith in "myth" as a category with universal relevance had ebbed considerably. Interest in myth had mutated—once viewed as a cultural cure-all, myth was increasingly seen as a tool for refashioning or constructing the self. Thus, by the late twentieth century myth had arguably become privatized or subjectivized, a shift reflected in the role myth played in popular culture. One trenchant commentator on modernity and postmodernity, Charles Taylor, has suggested that one aspect of the postmodern suspicion toward metanarratives—or in his terminology "horizons of significance"—is a "slide to subjectivism," evident in a shift towards "self-centered modes of the ideal of self-fulfilment [sic] in the popular culture of our time."[5] Whether or not one concurs with the normative judgments implied by Taylor's assessment, the recent history of mythic seems to bear out his thesis as evidenced by, for example, the communities of enthusiasts surrounding mythic fantasy literature, contemporary Celtic-inspired new age spirituality, or other varieties of neo-paganism.[6] Mythic thinking has arguably mutated from modern project into a postmodern one, consequently tracing mythic thinking may offer one way of tracing the shift from a modernity in which metanarratives had purchase, to a postmodernity in which

[5] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 60.

[6] Graham Harvey notes that many self-identified contemporary pagans came to the religion via a childhood interest in fantasy literature. See idem, *Contemporary Paganism* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 182.

metanarratives are suspect and overshadowed by the quest for personal authenticity. There

are thus ample questions for historians yet to ask about the contours of mythic thinking in Britain.

During the heyday of twentieth-century mythic thinking, the novelist and philosopher Iris

Murdoch observed, "The mythical is not something 'extra'; we live in myth and symbol all the

time."[7] Murdoch may well have been correct, but it is the last word of her assessment that

carries significance for historians. Mythic thinkers turned to myth because they saw it as

timeless, but throughout the century the meaning of "myth" was continually changing in relation

to the times. As this study has sought to demonstrate, it is these shifting meanings, because they

illuminate deeper shifts in British culture, that merit the ongoing attention of historians.

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[7] Iris Murdoch, "Mass, Might and Myth," *The Spectator*, September 7, 1962: 338.

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