

THE OUROBOROS SEIZES ITS TALE:  
STRATEGIES OF MYTHOPOEIA IN NARRATIVE FICTION  
FROM THE MID-FIFTIES TO THE MID-SEVENTIES: SIX EXAMPLES

by

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## ABSTRACT

The research presented here examines complex interrelations between myth and literature, focusing specifically on mythopoeia in some narrative fictions in the period from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies. After giving an overview of different theories of myth developed in the Western tradition since ancient Greek times, the thesis examines both their usefulness and the value of the concept of myth itself, and proposes a new way of defining it by delimiting its semantic field through four separate sets of features: in terms of its structure, content, function and social role. It then analyses six largely modernist novels representative of literary mythopoeia, namely Yacine Kateb's Nedjma (1956), Wilson Harris' Palace of the Peacock (1960), Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters (1965), Chingiz Aitmatov's Белый пароход [The White Steamship] (1970), Michel Tournier's Le Roi des aulnes (1970), and Darcy Ribeiro's Maíra (1976). They were all written during the decades when the 'mythic method' spread worldwide, and when differences between various national literatures diminished as they got closer, influencing each other to a larger extent than ever before.

The novels, which come from six different cultural backgrounds on four continents, reflect various mythopoeic stances, using myth not to rediscover some pristine immediacy, but as a tool for exploring and contesting both the socio-historic world and larger questions of human existence. Although widely dissimilar in regard to their narrative strategies, their novelistic form and content, they have a number of common characteristics: eclectic use of myth, the merging of mythic and realistic planes, interplay of space and time, preference for totemism, animism and shamanism to monotheistic religions, consideration of problems of roots, identity and hybridity, concern for nature, ambiguous ends. More importantly, they all have cyclical time as the main structural device, because uncertainty about the future and loss of belief in eternal progress are primary preoccupations of their authors. As the examined novels show, mythopoeia in narrative fiction is very much present and productive in the second half of the twentieth century, making up an important part of contemporary world literature, for the human propensity to create mythic stories is perennial.

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To the memory of all civilians dismissed as ‘collateral damage’:

“The obliterated shall be remembered.”

Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Il prit une plume pour crayonner sur l'innocence du papier la  
cruauté de son âme.

Espines d'amour

(qtd. in Bechtel and Carrière 189)

Se non è vero, è molto ben trovato.

Italian common saying (Oxford Dictionary 21)

Interrelations between myth and literature are perennial and very complex. Although myth is sometimes seen as a minimal narrative sequence, a condensed story-image, an 'elementary form' existing prior to verbal or any other expression (Jolles 77-101), a collection of symbols that can be reduced to a permanent structure (Bilen 861), or "un système dynamique de symboles, d'archétypes et de schèmes, système dynamique qui, sous l'impulsion d'un schème, tend à se composer en récit" (Durand 54), whose meaning can be put forth just as well through some other mediums — for example, in the form of drawings or "pictomyths" (Vizenor 20) — it is undeniable that all that is mythic is most often expressed by means of literature (Boyer 164), that is, either through oral recitations or through the written word. This state of affairs justifies the often asked question: "Is there such a thing as a non-literary myth?" and explains the fact that myth is usually seen as a specifically literary form: "Myth is literature and must be considered as an aesthetic creation of the human imagination" (Chase 73).

Conversely, it is impossible to overlook the importance of myth for literature. Many writers thought it absolutely crucial, as is illustrated by the famous statement of Jorge Luis Borges: "For in the beginning of literature is the myth, and in the end as well" (242). We do

not need to go that far, or to claim, as Northrop Frye did, that myth furnishes literature with all its principal structures and defines narrative types, poetic forms, character types and patterns of imagery (Anatomy); nonetheless, we are bound to come up against myth at some point of literary analysis, for mythology, in the sense of a body of myths belonging to particular cultural traditions, has always been a source from which writers took themes, subjects, characters, situations, plots, scenes and images for their works, using them in many different ways. Old mythic narratives are sometimes retold from the modern point of view (e.g., Hercules, My Shipmate by Robert Graves, or Joseph und seine Brüder by Thomas Mann), used as principal structural devices for literary works (e.g., Los pasos perdidos by Alejo Carpentier, or L'Emploi du temps by Michel Butor), or employed as structural devices in counterpoint to contemporary plots, giving them larger perspectives (e.g., Ulysses by James Joyce, or The Great Indian Novel by Shashi Tharoor). Mythologems, i.e., mythical motifs, can be used as resonant, powerful stories inside longer works of fiction (e.g., Белый пароход [The White Steamship] by Chingiz Aitmatov, or M/T et l'histoire des merveilles de la forêt<sup>1</sup> by Kenzaburo Oe), combined into a network of connotations, suggestions, associations and metaphors blended into the basically realistic fabric of a novel (e.g., Les Soleils des indépendances by Ahmadou Kourouma, or Leaves of the Banyan Tree by Albert Wendt), or woven into a complex myth-like structure (e.g., Мастер и Маргарита [The Master and Margarita] by Mikhail Bulgakov, or Hombres de maíz by Miguel Angel Asturias).

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<sup>1</sup> The only rendering to date of Oe's novel M/T to mori no fushigi no monogatari into a European language is its translation into French by René de Ceccatty and Ryôji Nakamura.

A “universal cultural phenomenon” (Bidney 22), present in all societies around the globe, myth has attracted a lot of theoretical consideration in the course of centuries, since interest in it has never waned, and it has been explained and understood in many different ways. Throughout the twentieth century, too, it has been “a fascinating and controversial subject for scholars and writers” (Patai 11). Always protean, polyfunctional, multivalent and “everlastingly elastic” (Symonds 313), myth appears in a variety of forms, manifestations and avatars, defying any simple interpretation. Although studied by numerous scholars in relevant disciplines, from anthropology to literary criticism, an agreement about “what the term ‘myth’ means has never been achieved within any of these fields, let alone among them” (Priebe 12). As none of its features can be isolated as the ‘essential one,’ and no simple definition can cover all aspects of its nature, the only way to comprehend it is to take into consideration all of its important traits, shedding light on it from various angles simultaneously.

Mythopoeia in literature has been very rich in the twentieth century, with numerous writers using myth in their works, both as a structural element and as received thematic material. The ‘mythic method’ developed during the first decades of the century as a modernist reaction to the nineteenth-century conventions of realism, and has constantly grown and expanded ever since. It became a global literary phenomenon after the Second World War, spreading especially during the fifties, sixties and seventies, i.e., during the years when myth criticism, a theoretical approach to myth in literature, flourished. During the same period, as a consequence of accelerated inter-cultural communication, differences between various national literatures diminished, as they tended to get closer and to

influence each other to a larger extent than ever before. However, in spite of such prominence of mythopoeia, few critical efforts have been committed to studying this significant stream of literary production on a comparative, inter-cultural basis. By examining *en bloc* mythopoeic novels from four continents and six different cultures, the present research helps shed more light on alternative but important branches of contemporary world literature. It compares and investigates the affinities of these works, and the profound similitude of their authors' horizons — in spite of the differences between their backgrounds — thus contributing to the understanding of the importance and development of a global mythopoeia.

The aim of the present study is threefold: first, to survey different views of myth and their usefulness for understanding it, to examine the value of the concept itself, and to propose a new approach to defining it. Second, to investigate six novels written and published in the period from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies — i.e., during the years which marked the worldwide spread of the “mythic method” and the heyday of myth criticism — namely: Yacine Kateb's Nedjma (first published in 1956; the title henceforth abbreviated to ND), Wilson Harris' Palace of the Peacock (1960; PP), Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters (1965; IN), Chingiz Aitmatov's Белый пароход [The White Steamship] (1970; WS), Michel Tournier's Le Roi des aulnes (1970; RA), and Darcy Ribeiro's Maíra (1976; MR). The novels, which — although diverse in many respects — also share some important similarities, come from different countries — Algeria, Guyana, Nigeria, Kyrgyzstan, France, and Brazil respectively — and are representative of mythopoeic writing in the mentioned period. Third, to draw conclusions from these examples about the applicability

of the proposed definition in regard to literary myth, about the place of myth in contemporary literature, about different aspects of contemporary mythopoeia in narrative fiction, and about the kind of criticism appropriate for analyzing it.

The thesis is presented in eight chapters. Chapter One provides an overview of the prominent theories of myth in the Western tradition, classifies them according to their usability, explores the reasons of the failure of myth criticism, examines terminologies of myth-like stories in small-scale societies, and proposes a new way of defining myth by delimiting its semantic field. In the same chapter, I discuss mythopoeic writing in the third quarter of the twentieth century, and look into the significance and similarities of the novels which are the object of this study. In Chapters Two to Seven I analyze these six novels, each in its appropriate context, and investigate their authors' views on myth, how each of them understands the concept in general, and how he adapted mythic materials and structures in his work. The last chapter, entitled "Afterthoughts," sums up the argument and draws conclusions.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **MYTH AND LITERATURE: INTRICATE CONNECTIONS AND CONTINUING INTERDEPENDENCE**

Mythology, n. The body of a primitive people's beliefs concerning its origin, early history, heroes, deities, and so forth, as distinguished from the true accounts which it invents later.

Ambrose Bierce (90)

One can study only what one has first dreamed about.

Gaston Bachelard (13)

As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way. As for names, the name that can be named is not the constant name. The nameless is the beginning of the ten thousand things.

Lao Tzu (53)

If every methodologically sound scholarly work is expected to begin with a definition of its topic, then the present study is bound to form an exception, at least for a while, as "the difficulty of defining myth is equaled only by that of any attempt to define literature" (Bilen 861). In spite of many efforts, nobody has so far been able to give a generally acceptable answer to a simple question: What is myth? Like so many other basic concepts, myth appears impossible to define.<sup>2</sup> So much so, in fact, that it has become customary to devote a few introductory paragraphs in relevant works to lamenting its indefinability. It seems to prove George Steiner's admonition that "in the humanities, aspirations to systematic definition end, virtually always, in sterile tautology" (Passion 149). This problem arises because different people have attached many different levels of meaning to the term 'myth,' and no definition has been able to encompass all interpretations. As a consequence, many critics state explicitly in their books devoted to the

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<sup>2</sup> In linguistics, for example, it is easy to describe abstract notions of linguistic analysis such as phoneme, morpheme or lexeme, but far more difficult to find a sound definition for the seemingly self-evident concept of 'word' (Crystal 104).

study of literary myth that it is impossible to define myth (e.g., Botero Jiménez 16; Kolakowski ix; Righter 5-7; Ruthven 1), whereas others, instead of trying to provide a simple definition, proceed by describing those manifestations and avatars of myth they consider essential (e.g., Fisch), or by adopting a historical perspective regarding different theories (e.g., Meletinsky 3-124; Weimann 306-359). Those who insist on defining it, like William Bascom ("Forms" 9), Alan Dundes ("Madness" 147-8), Mircea Eliade (Aspects 16-26), and Claude Lévi-Strauss, inevitably come up with a far too narrow semantic field, which tends to answer only to their particular interests, or to those of their field of specialization.<sup>3</sup> More 'open' definitions fare no better: neither Kirk's explanation that myth is "a traditional oral tale" with "some serious underlying purpose beyond that of telling a story" (41) displaying "a curious lack of ordinary logic" (39), nor Walter Burkert's elucidation that myth is "a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance" (22-3), is very clear; both make it difficult to distinguish between a mythic story and any other. Such definitions tend to use the term 'myth' in the meaning of "an all-purpose category of symbolic story" (Leach and Aycock 96), which it obviously cannot be. One of the reasons for this confusion is the universality of myth; as has been pointed out more than once, "there has been no culture which has not generated a set of myths uniquely its own" (Vickery 806).

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<sup>3</sup> Certain authors seem to be really annoyed by those who do not accept their definition of myth. For example, Alan Dundes strongly expresses the view that only folklorists have the right to define myth and berates the "sloppiness" of scholars of other disciplines ("these would -be mythologists"), whose practice, in his words, has "little to do with scholarship and intellectual rigor," for not accepting the rule that myth can only be "a sacred narrative offering an explanation of how the world and mankind came to be in their present form." For example, he insists that the Oedipus story is not a myth, but a folktale ("Madness" 147-9).

Such a state of affairs came about as a result of multiple misuses and abuses of the term, for it has been rightly noted that “hardly any other word today is loaded with more resonance and less meaning” (Michel Panoff, qtd. in Brunel, Preface ix). But this confusion is by no means new; actually, it can be traced back as far as written documents exist, which — in the Western tradition — means pre-Socratic Greek philosophy. In fact, it is precisely during this formative period in the development of European culture, when the foundations of many other key ideas and fields of intellectual endeavor were also laid, that the seeds of understanding myth, as well as of controversies about it — as we perceive the notion today — were planted. Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570-c. 478 BC), the founder of the Eleatic school of philosophy, noted for its scepticism, was the first in recorded history to ‘deconstruct’ mythic stories and to attack the polytheism and anthropomorphism of the traditional religion. His famous statements, for example that Homer and Hesiod imputed to gods all that is shameful in humans, such as theft and adultery, or that horses and oxen, had they been able to paint and sculpt, would surely have represented their gods in their own image, i.e., as horses or oxen, mark the beginning of innumerable attempts to use logical reasoning in order to explain human fascination with myth (Leshner 23-5). Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 535-c. 475 BC) also denounced myth as a false story, which is why he wrote: “Homer I deem worthy [...] of good cudgeling” (83). He thought that narratives about gods, rooted in concrete perceptual reality, cannot — and so falsely claim to — explain the principles of cosmic order: “Many who have learned from Hesiod the countless names of gods and monsters never understand that night and day are one” (23).

At the same time, there arose alternative, more accommodating, philosophic views, initiating the dispute, which continues to this day, between aficionados and denouncers of myth. Theagenes from Rhegium (c. 525 BC) introduced the allegorical understanding of mythic stories and interpreted gods as representations of natural forces and ethical principles. According to his exegesis, Artemis symbolizes the moon, Hera air, Athena wisdom, and Aphrodite libidinousness (Morgan 63). Metrodorus from Lampsacus (c. 450 BC) pushed this approach even further and explained not only gods, but also heroes and humans who take part in myths by similar allegorical schemata. Thus, The Iliad is to be understood as an allegory of cosmic arrangement: Helen stands for Earth, which is surrounded by air (Paris), ether (Agamemnon), the sun (Achilles) and the moon (Hector) (Morgan 98-99). Some later schools accepted and developed this line of thinking. The Stoics used Homer's and Hesiod's epics as proofs of their own pantheistic views. They tried to explain the apparent lack of ordinary logic in mythical discourse by postulating that myth is a deceitful discourse which expresses the truth in images (Theon of Alexandria [I cent. BC], qtd. in Hülser 4: 1916). For example, the struggle between Apollo and Python is simply a depiction of the dispersion by the warm rays of the rising sun of fumes and vapors, which, snake-like, creep low above the ground.

Other schools of interpretations of myth soon followed. The sophist Prodicus of Ceos (V cent. BC) was the father of the psychological approach. He rationalized mythic stories as psychological reactions of primitive humanity to natural phenomena. All rituals and mysteries are, in his theory, connected with the benefits of agriculture and cattle-breeding; religion itself springs from the gratitude people feel for the goods they receive

from the earth. Just as the Egyptians believe the Nile to be a god, bread is in Greece worshipped as Demeter, wine as Dionysus, water as Poseidon, and fire as Hephaestus (Waterfield 249-250). Epicurus from Samos (341-270 BC) accepted Prodicus' idea in general, but turned his argument upside down. For Epicurus, myths are the ailments of the soul; they arose as a consequence of ignorance and the existential terror of the unknown and of death. Democritus of Abdera (c. 457-c. 357 BC), the famous atomist, tried to find rational explanations for myth and to replace them by naturalistic interpretations. Attacking "the madness" of mythmakers and the primitivism of their listeners, he tried to prove that only need, want, fear and folly lie at the source of mythical narratives: "Some men, not knowing about the dissolution of mortal nature, but acting on knowledge of the suffering in life, afflict the period of life with anxieties and fears, inventing false tales about the period after the end of life" (Freeman 118). Critias of Athens (c. 460-403 BC) introduced, rather cynically, the myth-as-social-charter approach, declaring myth to be a hoax, albeit a necessary one, myth and religion being the only tools capable of introducing laws which would establish order and quell inborn human unruliness and aggressivity (Lincoln 34-35). Palaiphatos (IV-III cent. BC) and Euhemerus of Messene (c. 300 BC) maintained that the gods and goddesses were deified men and women; myths are, according to them, accounts of real historical events and people. Careful analysis of mythic stories can help us, it is suggested, to recover the lost knowledge of historical development in ancient times. Euhemerus wrote the famous novel of travel Ἱερὰ ἀναγραφή [Sacred Scripture] in which he described an imaginary voyage to a group of islands in the Indian Ocean. On the chief of them, called Panchaia, he allegedly saw a golden column with a long inscription from

which he learned that Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus had been great kings and were worshipped beyond the grave by their grateful subjects.<sup>4</sup> The Stoic Cleanthes of Assos (c. 331-232 BC) introduced the etymological interpretation, believing that the secrets of the gods lay in their names and epithets; following such reasoning, he found two possible sources for Apollo's name: ἀπολλύναι, "to destroy," and ἀπολάυνειν, "to dispel" (Honko 45).

However, it was Plato (427-347 BC) whose influence proved to be the most influential one in the subsequent development of the usage of the term 'myth.' He opposed ὁ λόγος, logical discourse, to ὁ μῦθος, invented or fabricated story, which he deemed tolerable only in cases where it fosters the acceptable norms of human behavior. Therefore, mythic stories should be cleansed of their immoral and illogical parts. Ironically, he himself was a great mythologist who created several famous myths, such as those of Er the Pamphylian, pervaded with Orphic ideas of metempsychosis (in The Republic), of Eros (in The Symposium), of the creation of the universe (in Timaeus), and of Atlantis (in Critias). He treated his own myths as 'useful lies' necessary to counter the poets' dangerous ones. As for Aristotle (384-322 BC), he declared that myths — at least those known in the Greece of his times — were corrupted in their historic transmission by poets, whose aim had been either to introduce laws and thus promote the common good, or to nurture their own selfish ends. However, he thought it possible to uncover the vestiges of ancient wisdom in myth by applying a careful analysis. It is plausible that philosophy and arts were developed to a high degree in the remote past, and that all we have left of them are their remnants in myth

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<sup>4</sup> Some later historians, e.g., Megasthenes the Ionian (c. 350-290 BC), Polybius (c. 200-118 BC), and Diodorus Siculus (c. 90-21 BC), accepted euhemerism in their attempt to reconstruct the more distant past for which there were no historical documents.

(Metaphysics 380-81). Aristotle was also the first thinker to connect myth with dreams and visionary experience.

Apart from all these theoreticians, a number of so-called logographers, who compiled oral traditions and wrote them down during the sixth and fifth centuries BC, and mythographers, who continued to collect myths in the subsequent periods, were content to gather and systematize the available mythic material and preserve it for future generations. At times they tended to indulge in genealogical minutiae or similar hair-splitting; nonetheless, their work was of remarkable quality and usefulness. Their interests did not lie in trying to understand mythic stories, but rather in enjoying their retelling as they were handed down from the past. Many Greek writers in the Alexandrian and Roman periods, such as the learned poet Callimachus of Cyrene (c. 305-c. 240 BC), his pupil and friend Philostephanus of Cyrene (III cent. BC), the head of the Alexandrian Library Aristophanes of Byzantium (c. 257-180 BC), or, perhaps the best known of them all, Apollonius of Rhodes (c. 295-215 BC), were of the same mind, often basing their literary works on all kinds of mythical lore. In an era of all-embracing historical change, when ancient gods were rapidly losing their adherents, their retelling gradually altered, redefined and reformulated ancient stories, giving them the shape they were to retain for the next two thousand years. This literary tendency was, like so much of Greek culture, exported to Rome, where a number of Latin authors adopted Alexandrian mythopoeic fashion in their works, among them such great luminaries as Virgil (70-19 BC) and Ovid (43 BC-AD 17).

The second crucial step in the development of the notion of myth in Europe came about as a consequence of the political and ideological takeover of the Roman Empire by

the followers of the new monotheistic religion. Christianity, once established, introduced a far more radical approach, which was to change significantly the general attitude towards myth, right down to the contemporary period. Unlike the open-mindedness of classical antiquity in which it was a matter of polite behavior to worship in an alien temple while visiting a foreign city, where different religions and mythologies peacefully co-existed, foreign gods were easily adopted into one's own pantheon and often equated with indigenous ones, and mythic stories freely circulated among different peoples, the teachings of the church, like those of other monotheistic religions, tended to build an impenetrable wall between believers and non-believers. This new attitude was characterized by a rigid dichotomy between, on the one hand, canonical biblical stories that were considered to be *the truth*, to the letter, and the only legitimate word of the one God himself; and, on the other, all other myths, all other stories about gods or events of ontological and cosmological significance, which were dismissed as *false* stories about *false* gods that only corrupt and puzzle the uninitiated and unenlightened. The New Testament makes it perfectly clear: "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1.16).<sup>5</sup> It urges its followers to "have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales" (1 Tim. 4.7), and "not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith" (1 Tim. 1.4). Those who "will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths" (2 Tim. 4.4) should be "rebuked sharply, so that they may become

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<sup>5</sup> All Biblical quotations are taken from The New Oxford Annotated Bible.

sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths or to commandments of those who reject the truth” (Tit. 1.13-14).

In spite of the fact that such attitudes persisted throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, allegorical interpretation of classical narratives continued to be popular; it purported to unveil Christian truths hidden in the works of pagan poets such as Ovid. Dante himself, applying this kind of literary analysis, regarded Virgil not only as the greatest Italian poet, but also as a prophet of Christianity (Howatson and Chilvers 567). Although Renaissance humanism revived classical models of literature and resuscitated interest in old myths, they were still — even when taken to contain the profound wisdom of ancient sages or to be extravagant but important accounts of ancient history — regarded as just fables, as opposed to the fundamental truths of Christian doctrine. As a consequence, being more and more intellectualized and less and less alive, they were downgraded into folk legends, fairy tales, and motifs to be used in literary works or in arts (Seznec).

This state of affairs began to change only in the beginning of the eighteenth century, when, induced by the growth of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the emergence of a new rational spirit of inquiry (Feldman and Richardson xx), the next major step in the development of Western notion of myth was taken. Now, for the first time, both Christian traditions and ‘heathen idolatry’ were being examined on the same level, and became objects of rationalist scepticism. In addition, the voyages of discovery from the early sixteenth century on “widened the mythological horizon,” as adventurers, conquistadors and missionaries brought home reports about customs and traditional stories from many regions of the Earth; their travel narratives “proved more influential in the long run” for

mythological studies than the Renaissance humanistic tradition (Puhvel 11). The newly available information on beliefs and myths worldwide was used as raw material for comparison with classical mythology. As a result, many new ideas and theories about myth began to appear.

The real beginnings of an independent mythical hermeneutics are to be found in Giambattista Vico's La scienza nuova [The New Science] (first edition published in 1725) and in German Romanticism. Vico was the first to interpret the concept of myth as something ancient and primitive, a phenomenon belonging to the distant past which gradually disappears with the development of civilization. The most interesting part of his theory considers the instinctive activity of the poetic consciousness — “the primary form of mind” — which generates myth. Unlike animals who belong to the purely biological sphere and are strangers to anxiety or horror as a reaction to chaos, the first generations of the giants after the flood, although being “stupid, insensate and horrible beasts” (Vico 116), were human enough to create myth as a response to environmental pressures and as an attempt to comprehend the world that surrounded them. In that respect myth, expressed through a language of metaphors and personifications, is ‘a true story’ which introduces the metaphysical significance necessary for humankind in order to structure experience. In other words, myth, whose external literary forms are identical with its internal philosophic logic, is poetry in its essence, a vehicle of truth, and the source for the later rise of rational thinking. Without it we would have neither philosophy, nor any civilization at all. Vico's conviction that literature is, historically, born out of myth was taken over by many thinkers in the twentieth century, in whose opinion myth is not only the original literature of

humankind, but also the literature of the state of wholeness, before distinctions between art, science, philosophy, religion, law, etc., were made (Münch 68). In such a way Vico, and those who followed his ideas, stirred up interest in exploring small-scale “societies with no written language,” because scholars who studied myth hoped to find in them “myth of a more pure and more living nature than is to be found in civilizations where it has been treated in a ‘literary’ form” (Rudhardt 14). Most other philosophers of the Enlightenment stressed primarily the ‘crude’ and ‘irrational’ traits of myth, opposing it to rational thinking, i.e., in Platonic terms, to λόγος. They considered that the replacement of the former by the latter constituted the key evolutionary step in human history.<sup>6</sup> In the same age, thinkers like Pierre Bayle and Voltaire<sup>7</sup> denounced myth even more, claiming that mythic stories were simply false statements “invented by wicked priests to bamboozle and acquire power over the masses” (Berlin 193).

German romanticists, flourishing mainly at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, formed what was called “the first real ‘school’ of myth” (Feldman and Richardson 303) in the post-Renaissance Europe. They introduced pioneering new theories which were profoundly important for most subsequent discourses on myth in various disciplines. In fact, even the very word ‘myth’ as a substantive in modern languages is a product of the Romantic age, appearing in French in 1811 (Robert), in German in 1815 (Grimm), in English in 1830 (OED) (Righter 8), and in Russian in 1847 (Backès 43). Romantic myth scholarship, based on the conviction of the superiority of imagination over reason, developed the claim of myth to totality and perceived it to be the ultimate

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<sup>6</sup> Many contemporary scholars adapt this stance; there are innumerable articles and books with titles like “From Myth to Reason” (Vernant 341-374), or From Myth to Modern Mind (Schlagel).

<sup>7</sup> Voltaire even thought that the study of myth is “a pastime for blockheads” (qtd. in Chase 29).

manifestation of the imaginative faculties of *genus humanus*. As the deepest ground of knowing humanity and expressing it, myth expanded “to encompass dimensions of the collective and historical by way of the genetic derivation of myth from the original proximity of man to nature preserved by the individual in his imagination and fantasy” (Weissenberger 241). Thus the mythopoeic imagination, in the romantic view, was associated with natural instinct, which was believed to be more developed in individuals unspoiled by decadent civilization and living in harmony with the natural environment.

Johann Gottfried Herder, the earliest of the German romanticists, thought that individual ethnic groups, assumed by him to be natural collectives in which humans must live, have their particular identities and characters whose main expression are their mythologies. He praised Scandinavian Eddas, and Chinese and Indian myths, insisting that they are just as worthy of studying as the myths of classical antiquity or the Bible. Myths grow naturally from collective, rather than individual, creative primal wisdom, and through organic historical processes develop as sublime spiritual power which always belongs to a particular nation and historical epoch. Therefore, it makes no sense to reduce them to any universal source or principle, nor to try to explain them allegorically. They “can be understood only if livingly assented to in the spirit of those who created and believed” in them (Feldman and Richardson 226). Myth thus can never be simply true or false, but only relatively so, because its meaning cannot be referred to anything outside of myth itself. In such a manner, Herder dissolved “the distinction between irrational and rational, between ‘primitive’ and ‘enlightened’ man,” and postulated that his contemporaries must either find their own authentic myths or “assimilate the past in a way wholly true to the present” (227-

28). Friedrich Schlegel, hailed by Novalis as the apostle of the romantic movement, thought the imagination to be the primary faculty in our encounter with the world, and that reason is able to operate only after we have established a poetic relationship with our environment. Emphasizing that the task of literature is to cancel “the laws of rationally thinking reason, and to transplant us once again into the beautiful confusion of imagination, into the original chaos of human nature” (Friedrich Schlegel, qtd. in Behler 79), he called on contemporary poets to create a new mythology for modern times. His brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel, regarded mythology as the “‘metaphorical language’ of the human mind created according to the needs of the human being in which ‘everything corporeal is animated’ and ‘the invisible is made to appear’” (Behler 158). Mythology, in his judgment, provides a complete view of the world and is the basis of both poetry and philosophy. The staunchest advocate of myth among the romanticists, however, was Friedrich Schelling, who continued to elaborate his philosophy of mythology for several decades after mythopoeic concerns had faded out of intellectual fashion. His approach to myth, usually qualified as idealist and metaphysical, emphasizes that mythic thought is total and unified, and asserts myth as the highest point of art and a decisive key to the purposes of Absolute Spirit. In words of one of his admirers, Schelling “replaces the allegorical interpretation of the world of myths by a tautegorical interpretation, i.e., he looks upon mythical figures as autonomous configurations of the human spirit” (Cassirer 2: 4).

In this manner German Romanticists associated myth and mythopoeia with eschatology and the aesthetic, and attributed an immediate mythic quality to the literary symbol. They believed that all great literature must possess an underlying mythology as “a

focal point" (Behler 160), and that the reason why the poetry of their contemporaries was inferior to the ancient was the lack of an authentic mythology, which they then strived to construct. Perhaps their conception was best expressed by the fairy tale/myth told by Klingsohr in Novalis' Heinrich von Ofterdingen, in which the evil enchantment of nature and human beings is ended because Eros and Fable (i.e., love and myth) are able to awake Freya, the soul of the world (127-153). In other European countries during the same period myth was also a major concern of romantic literature. Thus in England William Blake sought to create a new mythology which would suit the new era, basing it both on traditional elements from Biblical, classical, Cabalistic, British, Nordic and Indian mythologies, and on contemporary political and social events. In the works he called "prophecies" or "visions," such as The Four Zoas, Milton, or Jerusalem, he created new mythical figures (e.g., Los-Urthona, Luvah-Orc, Tharmas, Urizen), as well as a new hierarchy of beings (e.g., Eternals, Specters, Emanations) and new spiritual realms (e.g., Ulro, Golgonooza), in an attempt to recover and reformulate in his personal cosmogony the true origins of the divine from which nature, history and religion emerged.

As the nineteenth century progressed, romanticism gave way to realism, which became the dominant literary movement of the age, while rationalistic views inherited from Enlightenment philosophy got the upper hand in all branches of western sciences and arts. Accordingly, in spite of the fact that a number of thinkers continued to search for and be influenced by myth, mainstream nineteenth-century literature adhered to the realistic school, while at the same time new sciences were, for the first time in history, developing fast enough to replace religion as the dominant source of explanation of the world that

surrounds us. The thus created dichotomy, ironically, was not unlike the medieval one, with the difference that, by the last decades of the nineteenth century, scientific discourse managed to attain the level of the paradigmatic form of truth statement, while religious tales were more and more understood either symbolically, or only as a foundation of social morality.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that myth theorists in this period did not see their topic in a favorable light; rather, they were annoyed by the fact that mythic narratives were not only scientifically and historically untrue, but often also brutal and bizarre.

Two main group of theories on myth appeared: those put forth by the early ethnologists, and those of the so-called nature myth school. The representatives of the latter saw gods as symbols of nature; their interpretations are best described as “nature allegories tinged with a monomaniacal reductionism to one single type” (Puhvel 13-14). Thus, Adalbert Kuhn, “reducing mythology to meteorology” (Ruthven 13), postulated that the key to all world mythologies can be found in atmospheric phenomena, especially in thunder and storm, which early humans regarded as gods (Vries 31-2); similarly oversimplified explanations lie behind the fire mythology of Johannes Hertel, the moon myths of Georg Hüsing, and the animal allegories of Angelo de Gubernatis (Dorson 47-8). Friedrich Max Müller’s solar mythology is probably the best known of them all. He thought that poetry was the original, intuitive, spontaneous human response to the world, whereas myth came about much later, as a result of what he called “disease of language” (Vries 39). Because the early language was capable only of poetic metaphors, myth arose when their original meaning was forgotten, in an attempt to justify figures of speech no longer understood.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew Arnold, for example, in his essay “Literature and Dogma,” published in 1873, expressed the view that Bible was a profound, collective moral experience arising from specific historical situations, rather than the discourse of God.

Early ethnologists thought that myth only exists among 'primitive peoples' and opposed 'science' to 'superstition,' and 'progressive and dynamic contemporary society' to static and primitive 'savages.' In E. B. Tylor's view, myths had expository and explanatory functions in the time before the emergence of philosophy and science, as some sort of a childlike, crude philosophy of nature (Segal 8-9). Andrew Lang postulated that the fantastic elements in myths, which he called "barbaric," "absurd," "foolish" and "repulsive" stories (qtd. in Detienne 2), belong to an earlier stage of human development, which can still be found in a greater or lesser degree of purity among modern 'primitive' peoples.

The reaction was not slow in coming. After the prevalence of realism and positivism in the nineteenth century, which claimed the vital importance of 'reality' and fostered ideas of scientific knowledge and evolutionary development, came a period of 'return to myth' during the years of Modernism.<sup>9</sup> This is hardly surprising if we remember, as Harry Slochower has suggested (15), that mythopoeic works are more likely to arise in periods of crisis or cultural transition, offering both writers and readers a means of overcoming depersonalization and alienation. The end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were times of quick changes, of a technological revolution, of remarkable economic growth, rapid industrialization and urbanization, which were followed by cultural disintegration and breaking up of traditional ways of living. People found themselves in an era for which there were no set schemes, no historical prototypes, and where events

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<sup>9</sup> 'Modernism' will be understood here as a general term for "different modernist tendencies" (Nicholls viii) and the "polyphony of ideas, issues, and discourses" (Williams and Matthews 3) which made a remarkable break with the past in literature and other arts during the last decade of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

revealed themselves as irreversible. All that brought about a turmoil of uncertainty, so it is not surprising that myths became so important in the literature of the period.

Friedrich Nietzsche anticipated many later positions on myth, although his views are difficult to ascertain because of contradictory statements in different works. Myth, for him, is "a concentrated image of the world" connected to the principle of irrational and instinctive chaos (135). He thought that human beings psychologically require myth to address their spiritual needs through imaginative fiction (Solomon and Higgins 226). Nietzsche criticized Socrates as the champion of the spirit of science and rationality which pushed art, passion and myth into steady decline, and robbed classical culture of its natural creativity. He wrote that the modern "mythless man" "stands eternally hungry, surrounded by all past ages, and digs and grabs for roots," because he is so affected by "the critical-historical spirit of our culture," that, unfortunately, "he can only make the former existence of myth credible to himself by means of scholarship, through intermediary abstractions" (135-36). Nietzsche's "interpretation of mythopoeia as the only means by which people and culture can be reborn is another idea with modern echoes" (Meletinsky 15).

The modern world grown pale<sup>10</sup>, mechanical and abstract, characterized by a lack of aura and by impotence (Benjamin 223-25), needed some rich and imaginative form of life to revive it. Many writers and thinkers felt exiled away from the "Being" (Heidegger 117-19), and hoped to escape the "absolutism of reality" by way of myth, assumed to be the only possibility for humans to feel "at home in the world" (Blumenberg 113), and the only chance of redeeming them "from the formless universe of contingency" (Harvey 31).

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<sup>10</sup> "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown gray from thy breath; / We have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the fullness of death" (Swinburne 31).

“Mythical method” in literature was thus deemed necessary as “a step toward making the modern world possible” (T. S. Eliot 178), and as the answer to “agnostic secularism” found to be “more or less unendurable” (Steiner, Presences 221). Such idealization of myth in Modernism was a direct consequence, on the one hand, of the modern fear of history (Rahv 637-42), i.e., of the impossibility of finding “significant relationships between historical experience and significance, understanding and representation” (Schleifer xii), and, on the other, of the conflicts within Western civilization, as ideas of Enlightenment were exhausted and thus no longer sufficient to explain the unsatisfying incompleteness and tentativeness of science.

It is interesting to note that in each of the three ‘revolutionary’ periods in the history of European culture — the Renaissance, Romanticism, and Modernism — the main tendency was to reach into the past for inspiration and ideas for renewal. In the case of the latter two, it was most notably expressed through the yearning for myth, yearning which is best described as “an aspect of a great longing for primitive mentality, for unity of being” (Kermode 37). Mythical imagination was understood to have “no separation of a total complex into its elements,” i.e., to be “a totality in which there has been no ‘dissociation’ of the separate factors of objective perception and subjective feeling” (Cassirer 2: 108), through which humans could fight “the extreme oblivion of Being” and perceive the distant spiritual lights in the “darkness” of “the world’s night” (Heidegger 95, 91).

Those same years constituted “the period in which national and linguistic boundaries were crossed far more than previously” (Hewitt 7), and in which philosophical, literary and artistic ideas flowed much faster between different European and Western

nations. Modernism was also the time when, for better or for worse, “European civilization and culture exercised a practically world-wide hegemony” (Quinones 21). This primacy extended to the field of literature as well. As a result, Western literary genres and attitudes spread world-wide, to the detriment of many native literary traditions in different countries. In the domain of narrative fiction, the European novel and short story was accepted as the main outlet for literary production in cultures as far apart as Japan, China, India and the Arab world. This was the beginning of the process which, for lack of a better denomination, can be called “globalization of culture” and “the emergence of a world literature” (Moses x).

The popularity of myth in Modernism has suffered from a fairly substantial shrinkage in the subsequent period, caused mainly by the post-structuralist critics’ “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv), their belief that the time of the telling of the great stories is now over, and their attempt to show that myth is a “rigid, ‘totalitarian’ structure, [...] a lie or an illusion” (Eysteinsson 120). Myth was given the shadowy status of “a second order semiological system” (Barthes 114), was understood to deal “in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances” (Angela Carter, qtd. in Schmid 145), and was considered dispensable (Vareille 90). Such hard views, however, rather seem to indicate that those critics were themselves indulging in what was called the “myth of mythlessness” (Jewett and Lawrence 250). Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty has aptly remarked that the “reports of the death of mythology have been greatly exaggerated” (135), as is witnessed by the presence and acknowledged importance of myth in contemporary literature. Such a situation is best described by Michael Bell’s metaphor in which the

mythopoeic in contemporary world is likened to the alligators in Thomas Pynchon's novel V.: "these grow and multiply precisely because of the attempts to destroy them or drive them underground" (Literature 200). In other words, as Hans Blumenberg has suggested, the attacks on myth constitute the essential mode through which it continually transforms itself and survives (629). Throughout the second half of the twentieth century there has been a constant stream of literary production characterized by the use of myth. Literary works that belong here display a variety of styles and have been labeled in different ways. They are by no means limited to Europe and the West, but come instead from many different parts of the world.

Myth criticism is a special branch of literary criticism developed for examination of the complex interrelations between literature and myth. It arose in the first decades of the last century when the interest in myth suddenly increased and when the modernist critics, such as T. S. Eliot, propounded the idea that one of the main tendencies of the new literary movement was the revival of the mythic in the production of the new generation of writers. At the same time, new theories of myth were formulated in other academic disciplines. In this way myth came into the focus of intellectual attention and became an object of study in many different branches of the humanities such as philosophy, ethnology, sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology, folkloristics, classics, and religious studies. Such a wide span of interest confirms the importance of myth in the twentieth century, and strongly suggests that it was an era in which myth was studied more and had more prominence than in any previous period in history. Early in the century, philosopher Henri Bergson put forth

what was called a 'biological' theory of myth. It contends that human intelligence is an ambiguous faculty which easily becomes self-destructive, threatening not only social cohesion, but also the life of individuals, through their awareness of being mortal. Therefore, in order to prevent the possible destructive consequences of too much thinking, "le résidu d'instinct" that humans still have generates reassuring images — out of which myths are made — capable of countering representations of reality produced by reason (Bastide 1049-50). Another philosopher, Ernst Cassirer, postulated that myth is an autonomous form of the human spirit, a self-contained, irreducible, and non-referential symbolic structure, whose functions stand in opposition to those of language, aesthetics and logical reasoning. Best understood as a kind of imaginative language of feeling which organizes *a priori* the perception, and even the thinking process in the pre-scientific periods of human culture, myth-making is "rooted in 'the perception of expression itself'" and has no independent explanatory value (Cohen 339). Cassirer's followers, above all Susanne Langer and Philip Wheelwright, accepted the view that both the subject-object division and material causality were unknown in primeval myth: "Early man, unlike ourselves, did not dichotomize his world into a law-abiding physical universe on the one hand and a confused overflow of subjective ideas on the other. Nature and self, reality and fancy were radically interpenetrative and coalescent" (Wheelwright 134). They concluded that literature, religion, science, history and philosophy gradually emerged from myth through historical processes.

However, the most influential theories of myth in the twentieth century were those made by scholars in the related fields of ethnology, sociology and cultural anthropology,

and those in the field of psychoanalysis. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl believed that mythological thinking was characteristic of the "primitive mentality" and pre-rational thinking of tribal peoples whose minds were "more like those of children than of adults" (35). For Émile Durkheim myth is a narrative with symbolically significant content which reflects the values of a society and certain features of its social structure. It is a part of the religious system and has the role of promoting solidarity, thus giving the members of a society their identity and their historical anchor in the universe. The proponents of myth and ritual theory postulated that myths and rituals always operate together and that myth is the verbalization of ritual. Initiated by James G. Frazer and expanded further by, among others, Jane Harrison, S. H. Hooke, and Clyde Kluckhohn, this approach had considerable success in the early decades of the twentieth century, especially in literary myth criticism, but was later dismissed for its reductionism. Bronislaw Malinowski developed the myth-as-social-charter theory, arguing that there exists an intimate connection "between the word, the mythos, the sacred tales of a tribe, on the one hand, and their ritual acts, their moral deeds, their social organization, and even their practical activities, on the other" (78). Myths are thus not isolated pieces of literature; quite on the contrary, their meaning is always closely linked to specific situations in life. Their role is to give meaning to life, to make the world more acceptable than it would otherwise be, and to assure social harmony. In A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's view, myth serves to regulate the conduct of the individual in conformity with the needs of a society.

In the domain of psychoanalysis two main positions arose: Freudian and Jungian. Sigmund Freud and his followers saw in myths the unconscious manifestations of the

Oedipus complex and repressed sexual desires, and compared myths to day- and night dreams: "Dreams and myths function as infantile wish fulfillment" (Abraham 2: 180). For Carl Gustav Jung, myth is a universal human phenomenon stemming from 'the collective unconscious,' formed during the prehistory of mankind, which is impersonal and lies at the bottom of the unconsciousness of us all. It is expressed through archetypal images which can acquire many different shapes, but can be brought down to six figures (the shadow, the anima-animus, the mother, the child, the maiden, and the wise old man), and an unspecified number of situational archetypes. Jung highlighted the distinction between the work of archetypes in 'primitive' and modern minds: "the primitive mentality does not *invent* myths, it *experiences* them" (qtd. in Hudson 185), whereas modern humans need myth to achieve psychic wholeness and balance. Joseph Campbell, originally a Jungian, developed his own very popular theory by simplifying the tenets of his teacher. He tried to prove that all myths are one, like "a collective Bible for all humanity" (Segal 137), that they are absolutely indispensable for leading a normal life, and that people in small-scale societies are much closer to sources of myth, whose meaning modern humans can extricate only with a lot of difficulty.

Folklorists regarded myth as a specific type of oral narrative, different from legend and fairy tale, whose listeners believe it to be sacred and entirely true; its action takes place in a different world, in the remote past when the present world was still being negotiated (Bascom, "Forms" 4-24), while its principal characters are "gods or other beings larger in power than humanity" (Berthoff 278). Several classicists have written significant studies of myth, but have, in most cases, refrained from speculating much on the essence of the

'mythic,' concentrating rather on the historical fortunes of the notion (Graf; Kirk). On the other hand, in the field of the history of religions, Mircea Eliade has formulated one of the best known contemporary theories of myth. According to him, myth has explanatory and regenerative functions, namely, to answer questions on the origins of the universe, as well as questions about who we are and why we are: "Myths reveal the structure of reality, and the multiple modalities of being in the world" (Myths, Dreams 15). Myth is a story which is "a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant"; it always directly concerns its listeners and supplies "models for human behavior and, by that very fact, gives meaning and value to life" (Myths, Rites 2-3).

Claude Lévi-Strauss developed the structuralist theory of myth, basing it on the hypothesis that myth is a mode of communication and that its underlying logic, in the form of transformations, binary oppositions, and dialectical relationships, has its foundation in universal structures existing in the human unconscious, which also generate similar systems, such as language, kinship structures, and gift exchange patterns. Myth is thus a metalanguage whose primary function is to express the essential structures of the human mind. Culture is a system of communication, and myth is one specific form of it. Its role is to justify our relationship to the world by resolving the contradictions which the human mind, through its binary structure (i.e., through the biogenetic limitation of the human brain), imposes on our experience of the world. Therefore, in analyzing myths, our task is not to discover "how men think in myth, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact" (Tonkin 98-9). Most often, Lévi-Strauss finds this unconscious meaning, i.e., the inner logic of myth, in binary oppositions between concepts

such as incest and exogamy, or the raw and the cooked. The main problem with his theory is that it is not always possible to contract complex mythic structures to binary oppositions, nor to reduce intricate symbolism to simple algebraic formulas (Eigeldinger 198). Furthermore, he was criticized “on the basis that his selection of data” for his huge four-volume monograph Mythologiques “has been directed by a preconceived purpose” (Faraday 404).

The theories mentioned so far — and I have outlined only the most important ones — represent just a small portion of all of those put forth during the last hundred years. William Doty examines more than fifty of them in his book Mythography, but even his inventory is far from being exhaustive. A closer look at the theories listed here makes several points immediately clear: in spite of much effort, a lot of sophistry, and some quite genuine interest in the topic, it is only fair to say that modern attitudes to myth are not particularly original, and that they all, excepting the structuralist theory, give one a sense of *déjà vu*. Some authors, (e.g., Freud; Malinowski) have a reductive approach, since, in their view, “myth is nothing but whatever [the] theorist is primarily interested in” (Russell 132), i.e., the analysis of myth is used only as a proof for their more general theories. Others propose far too monolithic definitions which do not hold water, simply because “we can always find some myth that does not fulfill the conditions stipulated” (Versnel 43). Still others get carried away by their enthusiasm for the subject: “What Lévy-Bruhl has to say, and what those who love to listen to his story, or to the variants diffused by Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell or Martin Heidegger, want to hear, is not an explanation of myth but a myth about myth, expressing more a wish than a theory and more a longing than a wish”

(Goodman 68). In my view, all theories of myth, both those developed in the twentieth century and the earlier ones, can conveniently be divided into five categories: Enlightenment theories, romantic theories, rationalistic theories, structuralist theories, and cynical theories.

Enlightenment views conceive myth as a phase in the growth of human mind, one which was inevitable, but is now past and obsolete. Whether understood as a primitive and irrational worldview of our yet undeveloped and unenlightened ancestors (Epicurus; Freud; Müller; Tylor), or as forming the crucial part of an important, 'synthetic' stage of our consciousness from which all our essential faculties gradually arose (Vico; Cassirer; Wheelwright), myth is necessarily endemic to primitive mentality and represents the beginning of the fundamental process which, in Blumenberg's words, goes "from myth to logos" (49).

Romantic theories posit myth as a superior intuitive mode of cosmic understanding, a primal, original, and essential form of truth, or "the archetype of every phenomenal cognition of which the human mind is capable" (Hermann Broch, qtd. in Strelka x). Authors who subscribe to this outlook (German Romanticists; Jung) are thus inclined to overestimate the scope of myth, claiming that it is either a depository of superior ancient wisdom (De Santillana and Dechend 1-11), or one of the most profound achievements of the human spirit (Campbell), and often end with conclusions such as "Myth can only be understood mythically" (Rudhardt 42).

Contrary to those two categories, rationalistic approach understands myth simply as a specific kind of narrative fiction. Although several authors whose theories belong here

tend to restrict its range far too much — here I have in mind allegorical, euhemerist and folkloric interpretations — or to overemphasize the social role of myth (Durkheim; Malinowski), this approach nonetheless seems to be the only one that offers a solid logical base for demarcating the notion of myth (see pp. 45-50 below). The fact that myth is still very much alive today, and that many modern writers use it in a quite rational way, undermines Enlightenment assumptions. Romantic theories, on the other hand, are untenable through their own exaggerations; Lowell Edmunds described their main difficulty succinctly: “Myth is everywhere and thus nowhere” (2).

Structuralists perceive myth as a mode of communication that, curiously, “has a meaning” only “on the unconscious level” (Patte 234). Although it is undeniable that Lévi-Strauss has enriched the study of mythology with useful methodology<sup>11</sup> and many important insights, his theory, strangely lying between open-mindedness and strict dogmatism, also has several very serious limitations. His attempt to explain so many different forms of human interaction by simple binary oppositions, supposedly based on the biogenetic built of the brain itself, is rather overstretched. Another problem with his formal approach is that “without ethnographic detail it is impossible to factor out any meaningful structure on which to build a paradigmatic hierarchy that might ultimately lead to the formulation of universal principles” (LeCron Foster 374-375). In his analysis of Native South American mythology, Lévi-Strauss treated as a synchronically given set “myths which no one before him had ever envisaged *en bloc*, myths not found side by side in any

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<sup>11</sup> E. C. Barksdale successfully applied Lévi-Strauss’ methodology to examine several famous Russian realistic novels of the nineteenth century, whereas Eric Gould used the structuralist approach for analyzing the mythopoeic works of T. S. Eliot, J. Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence.

culture, but only in Americanist libraries" (Sperber 81).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, his equation of myth with language is far from being proved. As Dan Sperber rightly noted:

Unlike language, governed by a grammar, myths are, according to Lévi-Strauss, generated by the transformation of other myths or of texts which carry a certain mysticism, i.e., by a device that allows an infinite and non-enumerable set of possible inputs. No grammar therefore generates by itself the set of myths, any more than the mechanism of visual perception generates by itself the set of possible perceptions. The device that would generate myths depends on an external stimulus; it is thus similar to cognitive devices and opposed to semiological devices: it is an interpretative, and not a generative system. (82-3)

Cynical theories, finally, see myth essentially as a scheme for deception and insist that it should be exposed and unmasked. Such views were already widespread in Ancient Greece (Xenophanes; Heraclitus; Democritus) and in Early Modern Europe (Descartes; Bayle; Voltaire). In this way, the word 'myth' was first used in the sense of collective belief or ideology, and then — by extension — with the pejorative significance of an improbable and implausible story, a collective deception, or "a concealment and a repression, and a self-delusion" (Samuel 17). By postulating that myth is a system of signs, essentially 'false,' whose property is its efficacy (Loriggio 502), Lévi-Strauss has invigorated this approach. The crucial work in such development of the term was Roland Barthes' Mythologies, in which the author claimed that, since "myth is a type of speech," "not defined by the object of its message, but by the way it utters this message," then "everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse"; or, in other words,

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<sup>12</sup> Another important limitation of his theory has been pertinently noted by Henry Wald: "By reducing men to the station of a thing structuralism reduces time to the present and thus abolishes man's most human property: the freedom to contest and to create" (23 -24).

“myth is not an object, a concept, or an idea,” but “a mode of signification” whose “function is to distort” (109, 121).<sup>13</sup> In such a way, advertising, political slogans, ideologies, and even gossip have all come under the heading of ‘myth.’<sup>14</sup> The weaknesses of cynical theories are similar to those of the romantic ones: they are too inflated to be useful; those two categories stand at the opposite extremes of the discourse on myth.

Approaches and methods of literary myth criticism were largely developed under the influence of theories from these other disciplines sketched above. They affected not only critics, but also writers, such as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Hermann Broch, and Thomas Mann. Most decisive in that respect were Frazer’s version of myth and ritual theory, Jung’s archetypes, and Cassirer’s view of myth as an undifferentiated symbolic form, but also ideas of Vico, Freud, Eliade, and Lévi-Strauss. After its slow but steady growth in the first half of the twentieth century, myth criticism had its heyday in the fifties and sixties — ironically, during the same years that marked the decline of Modernism and the initial spurt of postmodern tendencies in literature — when it spread like prairie fire, rapidly displacing New Criticism as the dominant critical discourse. Its glory, however, did not last long. While as early as 1953 Philip Rahv was complaining of the inflation of myth in literary criticism (635), less than four decades later, in the late eighties and early nineties,

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<sup>13</sup> Curiously enough, Barthes thinks that contemporary myths, as he understands them, come exclusively from the political right wing, whereas the left, and — above all — the revolutionary left, is characterized by outspokenness that does not need to resort to the subterfuge of myth: “la bourgeoisie se masque comme bourgeoisie et par là même produit le mythe; la révolution s’affiche comme révolution et par là même abolit le mythe” (234). Conversely, Lucian Boia wrote an exhaustive study of the ‘scientific’ ideology of communism, which he also calls “myth.”

<sup>14</sup> The fallacy of such assumption lies in the fact that myth is — in narrative terms — diametrically opposite to advertisement or political propaganda; whereas ambiguity and multiplicity of possible meanings are its key characteristics, in advertisement the message has to be as direct as practically achievable.

lexicons of literary criticism were either omitting any mention of this critical approach, or drastically reducing the space for it, as it was deemed it to be a dead issue (Resina 7). Three main problems of myth criticism were the misuse of the word 'myth,' the insufficiency of the theories it was based on, and reductionism. 'Myth' as a term was employed in many different ways, which gave an impression that it has "almost as many meanings as critics who use it" and that "the word is protean and its fate is procrustean" (Douglas 232). At the same time, its two opposing connotations diverged even more than before: on the one hand, 'myth' came to be identified with profundity and meaningfulness, so that the mere detection of 'mythic elements' in a literary work was considered "the blank cheque of honorific commentary" (Bell, Primitivism 76-7), while, on the other, it was more and more often used in the sense of illusion or falsehood. As Tournier correctly observed: "La notion même de mythe est frappée d'équivoque: un mythe, c'est à la fois une belle et profonde histoire incarnant l'une des aventures essentielles de l'homme et un misérable mensonge débité par un débile mental, un 'mythomane' justement" (Vol 12). Such proliferation of usage made it possible that, for instance, female beauty can have its own 'mythology' (Smith), as well as mountain landscapes (Sussez), sea travel (Corbin), nationalism (Trumpener), psychoanalysis (Baker), crime and violence (Jeffrey), and so forth.

Secondly, myth criticism was from its outset based on premises borrowed from anthropological, psychological, and philosophical theories that were not only originally insufficient, as discussed above (pp. 30-34), but also already outdated if not defunct. "The assumptions of Frazerian comparativism were scorned by many anthropologists well before the time that the literary critics were canonizing Frazer" (Manganaro 19). Jung's lumping

together the images of poetry, dream, legend, theology and myth, without paying attention to their specifics, has been criticized for quite some time, and yet there are some fairly recent critical works which propose to establish "a new myth criticism" based on his theories (e.g., Spivey). The third main problem in the study of literary myth stemmed from the curious inclination of several very influential myth critics to try to provide one single answer<sup>15</sup> which would explain either all myths, or the mythopoeic attitude in general<sup>16</sup> (e.g., Frazer's rite of the ritual murder of the king; Jung's limited number of archetypes; or Frye's attempt "to show how all literary genres are derived from the quest-myth" [*Fables* 9]). Such a tendency, typical for Modernism, is based on the belief that there exists "a sharp opposition between conscious 'surfaces' and unconscious 'depth,' between ordinary experience and a hidden realm of mental life of which we are generally unaware" (Schwartz 4). The actuality of such opposition was accepted as a fact in several branches of humanities (e.g., in anthropology, linguistics, psychoanalysis), in which researchers tried to

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<sup>15</sup> An excellent exposition of one such approach is Joseph Fontenrose's summary of Lord Raglan's extreme version of myth and ritual theory: "All myths are ritual texts and all myth-ritual complexes go back to a single ancient ritual. What about legends and folktales? [...] Lord Raglan sees no real differences among traditional tales: a legend or folk tale is simply a myth cut loose from its ritual. As he sees it, all traditional tales, all existing rituals, all religious systems, and, in fact, a good deal else — magic, nursery rhymes, games, riddles, etiquette — are derived from a single Ur-ritual. Historical events, intellectual curiosity, dreams, fantasies, poetic invention, have nothing to do with either the origin or the development of myths, or any part of them. [...] In some late neolithic kingdom of the ancient Near East men thought it a good idea to kill their 'divine king' every year; neighboring kingdoms took up the practice with alacrity, and it spread in ever-widening circles until it embraced the world — to everyone's satisfaction, it seems, except perhaps the divine king's. And so charged with emotion was this ceremony that it not only colored but provided the whole mythico-religious structure of human society thereafter" (2-3).

<sup>16</sup> Such an attitude was parodied by George Eliot in *Middlemarch* in the person of Edward Casaubon, a pedantic scholar engaged in a lunatic and worthless project, "The Key to All Mythologies," which he proposes to discover and then use for explaining the entire field of mythopoeia (277).

track down the connections between the ordinary consciousness and the unconscious systems that condition and govern it, and discover their elementary rules.

As a consequence, myth criticism was — often rightly — accused of offering a fairly limited, repetitive and, above all, reductionist vision of literature, quite unable to account for more than a restricted number of features of literary works. It is always dangerous to assume that a “purportedly universal theory, be it psycho-analytical, dialectical, or whatever, can go straight to the heart of a myth before having considered its place in a genre structurally defined and functionally integrated in ways perhaps particular to the culture in question” (Hymes 275-6). Laura Bohannan has shown how one of the best known Western narratives — Shakespeare’s Hamlet — can easily be misunderstood and interpreted in yet unknown ways by people from a different cultural background — the Tiv from West Africa — and how even the Bard is not universally intelligible (29-33). Quite obviously, myth is a narrative with multiple functions and complex levels of meaning, and no single theory can possibly do it justice; it can be properly understood only if studied in its own context (Vázquez 117). However, different schools of thought need not be in competition, but can be used rather in a complementary manner to address different aspects of myth (Köngäs Maranda 12), as well as to shed light on myth in literature from different angles and thus enhance our ability to analyze and explain it.

Anthropological and ethnological investigations of traditional oral narratives in small-scale societies, mythic and otherwise, have provided literary research on myth with several noteworthy insights. Two of those issues are important for this study. Firstly, it is

interesting to note that even those anthropologists who interpret myth as a meaningful element of culture, and who are not, as a rule, prejudiced against tribal peoples, often subscribe to the view that myth is characteristic of archaic societies, as if they were somehow trying to push it as far into the obscure past as possible. Eliade, for example, in spite of his enthusiasm for myth and his insistence that it is still important today, tends to see it as belonging predominantly to tribal peoples, arguing that it cannot exist in contemporary world in its 'pure' form, because its original characteristics are likely to change and conform to modern narrative modes (Myths, Rites 92). Lévi-Strauss made a similar mistake when he described South American small-scale societies as "cold," lacking historical consciousness, and consequently having a homogeneously 'mythic' understanding of social reality. The fact is, as Stephen Hugh-Jones has shown for the Barasana from southeast Colombia (140), and Terence Turner for the Kayapó of Central Brazil (208), that 'mythic' and 'historical' 'consciousnesses' are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Such residues of nineteenth century social evolutionism, smacking of Lévy-Bruhl's "primitive mentality," are truly astonishing, especially in the light of recent archaeological discoveries which proved that anatomically modern humans, i.e., people exactly like us, have been around for more than 100,000 years (Stringer and Andrews 1264). Other excavations unearthed numerous graves, as well as traces of red ochre used for decoration, i.e., evidence both of typical human activities and of symbolic thinking, from 77,000 years ago (Rossouw 13-14). This means that neither we as a species, nor our brains, have changed at all for a very long time, and that our distant ancestors from those ancient times thought in the same way we do today. Any investigation into the development of

human consciousness would have to penetrate much deeper into the past, but, unfortunately, there is no kind of evidence from those primordial times which might be helpful for the project, so all similar attempts are bound to remain purely conjectural. Human societies display an astonishing variety of cultures and traditions, or, at least, they did before the onslaught of globalization and the multinationals, but in all of them human minds and consciousnesses are the same.

Secondly, a closer look at 'ethno-religious' myths can help us establish logical connections between classical, 'ethnological' and literary myth. The first thing that will catch our eye is that native terminologies for different types of narratives are just as confusing as Western ones, and that stories which anthropologists tend to classify as 'myths' are classified variously in different small-scale societies. In some cases, we encounter terms that are quite close to Western suppositions of what an 'ethno-religious' myth should be. For example, *godiyihgo nagoldi*, "to tell of holiness" of the Western Apache from Arizona, which deal with the events that occurred "in the beginning," i.e., in "a time when the universe and all things within it were achieving their present form and location" (K. H. Basso 34); *'ai-ni-mae* of the Lau from Malaita in the Solomon Islands in Melanesia (Köngäs Maranda 3); *pelunga*, "stories from the time before" of the Kaliai from Papua New Guinea, considered "to contain important truth" and to be "reasonably accurate accounts of events that took place in the remote past" (Counts 33, 35), i.e., in the time before intercourse between the world of humans and that of the *antu*, anthropomorphic spirit beings, ceased to take place; and *niag-lelengba*, "ce-qui-parle-sans-mentir" of the Fali from North Cameroon, who distinguish it from *niag-ni-bantu*, "ce-qui-parle-de-ce-qui-est-

ancien,” i.e., legends and historical accounts, *saglu*, “folktales”, and *ndalam*, “anecdotes” (Gauthier 42). However, these categories do not correspond with each other, and often include stories which do not agree with Western notions of ‘myth.’ Conversely, among the Zuni in New Mexico “tales fall into no clearly distinguishable categories”; even the origin stories, considered to be “the Zuni scripture,” are not labeled in any special way and its versions differ markedly (Benedict 1: xxx). In East Africa, the story of Kintu, in spite of its multiple cosmogonic, ontological and ritual dimensions, is called simply *olugero*, “story,” in Buganda (Ray 60). Likewise, most other African languages also make no distinction “between ‘folktale’ (or ordinary fictional narrative) on the one hand and a blend of myth and legend on the other” (Finnegan, Oral Literature 363). Natives from the Marshall Islands in Micronesia recognize three narrative categories: *bwebwenato*, “myth,” *inoñ*, “fairy tale,” and *inoñ-bwebwenato*, “fairy tale-myth”; stories are classified differently in different villages, or by people of different professions, or even if told on different occasions (Davenport 221, 229).

Another way of discriminating various types of traditional narratives is through specific requirements or restrictions which are, in some cases, imposed when particular types of stories are told. Some myths can only be recited in specific circumstances and in presence of certain persons; otherwise, the presence of a shaman may be required, or celebration of certain rites. For example, among the Klamath and Modoc, two closely related native peoples of Oregon and California, it was preferred “that in addition to the narrator, at least two individuals thoroughly familiar with the myth were present to guard against narrative error” (Sobel and Bettler 307). They believed that telling myths during the

day would put the teller in danger of being bitten by a rattle-snake, and that, if it was done during the warmer months of the year, it might cause him or her to age quickly. Among the Fali from North Cameroon all stories are divided into two supra-categories: "night stories," where *niag-lengba* and *niag-ni-bantu* belong, and "day stories," which encompass all other types of narratives; the telling of a "night story" during the day requires an expiatory rite (Gauthier 48-49). Their women are not supposed to hear and learn cosmogonic myths (44). Among the Western Apaches *godiyihgo nagoldi'* are told only by the medicine men and medicine women (K. H. Basso 34). On the other hand, among the Zuni in New Mexico, even the origin stories are not restricted to priests; they are freely reproduced by all members of community without any concern for the 'true' version (Benedict 1: xxx). Natives from the Marshall Islands in Micronesia have restrictions in regard to *inoñ*, "fairy tale," and not to *bwebwenato*, "myth"; it is the *inoñ* that must be told only at night, or else "the heads of both teller and listeners will swell up 'big as a house'" (Davenport 224).

In many small-scale societies we encounter literary categories which are defined along completely different lines than are the Western ones. For example, *mẽ tum iarên*, "sayings about the old ones" of the Kayapó of Central Brazil, is the typical vehicle of both mythic narratives and of one type of historical accounts (Turner 198). The Mayas from Chamula in the State of Chiapas, Mexico, make a distinction between, on the one hand, *bac'i ?antivo k'op*, "true ancient narrative," which comprises Western categories of myth, legend and folk tale, and, on the other, *rioš*, "ritual speech" and *resal*, "prayer," which contain much mythic material concerning ritual and cosmogonic beliefs (Gossen 150-165). In Madagascar *angano*, "fable, story, legend, myth," is distinguished from *tantara*, "history,

accounts of events that really happened,” but, as Robert Jaovelo-Dzao explains, “dans la mesure où certains mythes racontent, selon les croyances populaires, les faits ou événements qui se sont réellement passés dans les temps immémoriaux, on emploierait volontiers *tantara* à la place d’*angano*” (15), i.e., in Eliadic terms, events from *illo tempore* belong in Madagascar to two different narrative categories. Furthermore, it happens quite often that the members of the studied society themselves admit that their ‘myths’ are fictions — as do the Kewa of New Guinea about their *lidi* (LeRoy 4). In many cases it is possible to chart the distance between the mythic and the fictive in the same story (Ramsey 34), and even when etiological or ontological motives are clearly present in traditional narratives, they are also understood as manifestations of feeling and literary pleasure (E. B. Basso 37-62). Retelling myths is, in the words of Franz Boas, “an outflow of artistic, more specifically literary activity. The one-sided emphasis laid upon the intimate relation between religion and mythology obscures the imaginative play that is involved in the formation of myths” (611).

All this clearly demonstrates that it is unjustifiable to set ‘ethno-religious,’ i.e., ‘true’ myth, against its ‘watered-down version,’ i.e., literary myth (Albert 22; Astier 729; Swiggers 339). Different societies have different narrative categories and different attitudes toward ‘mythic’ stories. Written literary myths have the same function which oral narratives perform in traditional societies. I am using the term ‘literary myth’ only to stress the fact that my study is devoted to the avatars of myth in contemporary narrative fiction. And we should not forget that “l’entrée en littérature ne dégrade nullement le mythe,” quite

on the contrary, it “lui donne une vigueur nouvelle” (Chevrel and Dumoulié 4), i.e., the presence of myth in contemporary literature is rather a sign of its permanence and vitality.

Returning now to the initial problem set forth at the beginning of this chapter, the central question remains unanswered: how can we formulate a suitable definition for such a multiform concept? If it is impossible — or nearly so — not only to define, but to make any sense of the term and notion of ‘myth,’ how can we study it at all? Is it possible that, precisely because so many people have been discussing and writing about it, myth is, in fact, just another ‘imagined’ concept? Arthur Schnitzler once remarked that “the things which are most often mentioned do not actually exist” (qtd. in Schwarz 143). While what he had in mind was love, Egon Schwarz used the same line to comment on Central Europe, and here I am using it in regard to myth. Some scholars have followed such an argument very seriously. Marcel Detienne suggested that myth existed in Ancient Greece only as an academic fabrication which, through Alexandrian intellectual games, stressed primarily its fabulous and extravagant elements. He claimed that the Greeks did not have a notion of ‘myth’ as we understand it today, and that their word ὁ μῦθος did not refer to it, but that it simply meant “story” (131-32). Other studies tried to prove that “myth is a construct that arose in Europe during the age of Enlightenment” (Graf 56), and that Western scholars, by way of terminological ethnocentricity, projected their own conceptions onto small-scale or ancient societies. Conversely, there is no shortage of theories showing how ‘mythic idiom’ not only exists, but also pervades many discourses in other, supposedly ‘objective’ branches of knowledge. Thus, for example, it was claimed that the structure of some contemporary

scientific theories closely follows that of ancient fables (e.g., the ‘big bang’ hypothesis on the origin of the universe [Deforge 13]), while Hayden White postulated that much of history-writing is myth-ridden (Metahistory). However, there is no need to follow all secondary or metaphorical meanings that a word can bear in an attempt to define it. Wittgenstein’s famous remark is very pertinent here: “Many words in this sense then don’t have a strict meaning. But this is not a defect. To think this would be like saying that the light of my reading lamp is no real light at all because it has no sharp boundary” (27).

Before proceeding any further, it is important to first point out what myth is not: it is not a semiological device or a type of speech which can convey just any message regardless of its content; in fact, plot constitutes an important part of every myth. It is not a simple projection of the subconscious drives, nor a purely instinctive function; it is, at least partly, a product of conscious activity. It is not a metaphysical construct either, because its imagery always depends on experienced reality,<sup>17</sup> nor a theory or a hypothesis, because it cannot be proven true or false. Contrary to the claims of Bolle and Smith (720), it is neither ideology,<sup>18</sup> nor confirmation of a society’s religious beliefs, nor a charter of behavior: it “has no obvious practical function” (Charbonnier 55). It is not a symbolic system closed in on itself, since several human faculties, such as imagination, feelings, and reason, are involved in both creating and enjoying mythic narratives. It *is* a story, though not necessarily sacred, and certainly not explanatory, because, as Stith Thompson has shown, “explanations are often added as an afterthought” (173). And it does respond to changing

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<sup>17</sup> As Furio Jesi remarked, “la mitologia non fu [...] religione rivelata. Essa fu piuttosto una partecipazione al reale, un aprirsi alla conoscenza del reale” ‘mythology was not [...] a revealed religion. Rather, it was a way to participate in reality, an opening to learning about reality’ (53).

<sup>18</sup> Blumenberg rightly notes that “there is no such thing as an ‘adherent’ of myth” (237).

conditions in which humankind finds itself by saying something that can only be said in a story. In short, myth is an amusing and meaningful narrative which can be applied in an unlimited number of ways and which helps us establish a balance in spiritual and social values.

Thus, if myth exists, it must be understood as a kind of fictional narrative. In fact, that is the common denominator of nearly all theories (Astier 725; Brunel, Preface ix; Coupe 4; Doty 16-19; Gould 113; Honko 49; Loriggio 506; Münch 69; Richter 5), so the only way to define it is by making a difference between mythic and other kinds of narratives. Since 'ethno-religious' and literary myth are essentially the same, the definition sought should be applicable to both varieties. Narratological analysis has been applied to mythic stories on several occasions, but, as Claude Calame writes, it left it hardly distinguishable from other narrative forms (150-51), which proves that myth cannot be delimited only on the base of its formal characteristics. A useful definition should not be a straitjacket, but leave instead enough leeway, especially when, as is the case, the concept in question is a tricky one. In that sense, Don Cupitt's suggestion that the least misleading approach to defining myth would be to make a list of all of its main characteristics, is pointing in the right direction (29). Even better, in my opinion, is to delineate its semantic field by four separate sets of features, formulated in terms of its structure, its content, its function, and its social role as a shared story. Several other types of narrative fiction may have some of the features described here as typical of myth; however, only a mythic story should have all of them.

Defined in terms of its structure, myth is a narrative characterized by a density of symbolic meaning, a firmness of inner organization, and a rich weave of metaphysical considerations (Sellier 118-125; Brunel, Mythocritique 56-71). As a rudimentary story sequence constructed by a multiplicity of coherently interlocked meanings which create its symbolic richness, myth represents, as Frye has correctly noted, the opposite narrative stance to that of naturalism (Anatomy 51-52). Such structure accounts for the polymorphous semantics and plasticity of myth. Mythic narratives can be approached in many different ways and are always capable of several interpretations, i.e., “le mythe n’offre jamais à ceux qui l’écotent une signification déterminée” (Fricker 130). Through historical development mythic narratives are constantly taken up and reshaped, acquiring new meaning to fit the specific requirements of a given philosophical argument or aesthetic goal. In that way, myth is “un concept malléable et multiforme par excellence: il vit d’inversions, de substitutions, d’ajouts, d’emprunts, de retraits, de multiplications, de divisions, d’innombrables métamorphoses donc, à travers les cultures et les époques de l’humanité” (Tremblay 133). The ‘distinctive’ or ‘curious’ logic of myth, which has disconcerted scholars for such a long time, is a direct consequence of such a structure.

The content of mythic stories has always been a controversial problem. Myth theorists have most often claimed that it consists primarily of origin stories, understood to be true, which explain both “how the world or important features of the world first came to be” (Hatab 146) and “the basic facts of human existence, such as birth, death, storms, floods, fire, and earthquakes” (Littleton 22). However, myth “does not need to be true — or even necessarily be *believed* to be true — to be powerful, to make a difference in how

people think and live” (Eller 6). Rather, it is to be understood as a ‘true story’ only because it is able to express “man’s understanding of himself in the world in which he lives” (Bultmann 1: 10), in a way rational and scientific language cannot. Myths are, essentially, “neither true or false,” but rather “adequate or inadequate, [...] alive or dead” (Deutsch 44). Because they are always situated vis-à-vis a known reality and address questions “about meaning itself” (O’Flaherty 28), their specific content depends on the culture in which they grow. Addressing in an imaginative way essential problems such as the human relationship to the powers controlling the universe, or the limits people must not overstep, they combine facts,<sup>19</sup> concrete reality, figurative objectivity, and free-ranging fantasy to create narratives which destroy the barrier between the serious and the ludic. In such a manner, “what is told in myth seems to be at an infinite distance from ordinary reality but yet to be relevant for it” (Waardenburg 53). Helping us envisage a condition beyond our finite existence by projecting it against the metaphysical canvas of eternity, mythic narratives often break usual concepts of time and space. Mythic time is reversible, in it no event happens before or after any other event, it conflates the past and the present, or rather the eternal and the present. Mythic space is not geometrical, but primarily axiological and symbolical. Even cause and effect rules are sometimes abolished.

Myth has two main functions: existential and exploratory. Firstly, it emerges as an answer to important human needs, i.e., to questions pertinent to non-empirical unconditioned reality that are not and cannot be answered by science; there are three groups

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<sup>19</sup> The importance of facts and concrete reality for myths should not be overlooked, as is recognized by Alan Watts in his definition of myth as “a complex of stories — some no doubt a fact, and some fantasy — which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life” (7).

of such needs: to make empirical realities understandable, to keep faith in the permanence of human values, and to see the world as continuous (Kolakowski 2-4). Arising in response “to a situation of challenge” (Firth 216) whenever we experience “a certain despair in the knowledge that man is doomed to an irredeemable cycle of errors” (Okpewho 218), myth provides us with “an apparent resolution or ‘mediation’ of problems which are by their very nature incapable of any final resolution” (Leach 80), and makes it possible to create in this world a meaningful place for human beings.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, myth is not, as it has been often claimed, an explanation or a means of sustaining the *status quo* in a society, but rather it acts to contest and explore the socio-historic world. Operating “at the boundaries of understanding” (Goodman 77) as “a discovery procedure *par excellence*” (Weiner 609) which “interprets rather than squarely represents” (594), or — as Lévi-Strauss put it — when it is about to tell a story (*conter*) it actually retells it (*conte redire*) by contradicting it (*contredire*) (Naked 644), and in such a way “breaks free of the constraints and organizations of everyday life and entertains new possibilities of thought and action” (Jackson 51). Unlike positivist ontology, “myth contains a fundamental extra-territoriality to finitude,” i.e., it is always open-ended, and thus has “transrational possibility” (Steiner, Presences 219). As “an opening on to other *possible* worlds which transcend the established limits of our *actual* world” (Ricoeur, Reader 490), it becomes a tool of learning and contest, and serves to promote ambivalence, exploit ambiguity, and provide us with “une ontologie spontanée” which is preliminary to any abstraction (Gusdorf 11-19, 287).

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<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, Bernard Dupriez defines myth as “a symbolic narrative in which characters, speeches, and action aim to establish a balance in spiritual and social values [and] in which there is room for everyone” (292).

Myth is supraindividual in the sense that it is a story which is important to and shared by a group of people. A writer cannot create a myth in the same way he or she can write a novel or a poem; a story becomes a myth only when it is accepted by a community. Lévi-Strauss' description of the position of myth in societies with no written literature is very appropriate: "Myths are anonymous: from the moment they are seen as myths, and whatever their real origins, they exist only as elements embodied in a tradition. When the myth is repeated, the individual listeners are receiving a message that, properly speaking, is coming from nowhere; this is why it is credited with a supernatural origin" (Raw 18). The situation of literary myth is surprisingly similar: although we know when and by whom the first account of a myth was written, the writer is always overshadowed by his or her creation. Johann Spies, who in 1587 published the first Faustbuch, is not nearly as well known as his hero, and the same can be said about Tirso de Molina, whose El burlador de Sevilla featuring Don Juan first appeared in 1630. For that reason Michel Tournier defines myth as "une histoire que tout le monde connaît déjà" (Vent 184) and insists that his mythopoeic novels should be reread at the very first reading. A myth thus always consists of several versions, and can be defined as the totality of its variants (Firth 208-9). New generations of writers invent their own versions of old myths, and interpret them in a new fashion. In such a way some myths can stay alive for a very long time. However, myths are products of specific societies and specific times, so they can also die (Mortier 147), while new myths will rise with emerging new cultures. Thus the historically new society of the early modern period in Europe (1500-1700) invented new myths as a response to the profound cultural change it was going through. "Three great ideas" of that period are,

according to Søren Kierkegaard, those of Don Juan, Faust, and the Wandering Jew (1: 368), while Ian Watt, writing a century and a half later and seeing things a bit differently, stressed the importance of four key “myths of modern individualism” — those of Don Juan, Faust, Don Quixote, and Robinson Crusoe (vii-xii).

Myth is sometimes seen as a mode of narration. In that sense the term has been “used not only as a specific genre word, but also in a more general sense which indicates the somehow symbolizing, cosmic, eternity-laden aspects of human consciousness” (Finnegan, Oral Traditions 154). In other words, some narratives, although not socially accepted as myths, may have mythic structure, content and function. Writers like William Blake or E. T. A. Hoffmann consciously, and quite successfully, created new personal mythologies, while novels such as Herman Melville’s Moby Dick or Franz Kafka’s Das Schloss have been widely acclaimed for having ‘mythic quality.’ John White proposed a distinction between “mythic” and “mythological” fiction, i.e., between works characterized by the distinctive logic and polymorphous semantics of myth, and those employing traditional mythologems in their structure (7-11). However, it is difficult to accept such a division, because both approaches are usually applied simultaneously. A number of contemporary works of fiction, which cannot be labeled as myths in the full sense of the term, do have characteristics and interests typical for myth, and thus belong to mythic literary production. Their importance lies — like that of the traditional mythologies — in their responding to the new and changing conditions in which humankind finds itself, conditions which require new stories to help us redefine the end of the millennium and find new answers for the future and fresh beginnings.

The contemporary period of literary history, which roughly corresponds to the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, is characterized above all by two things: by the diversity of styles and approaches which make it impossible to subsume the whole of its literary production under a single designation, and by the globalization of literature. Cornelius Castoriadis compared the state of global connectedness during the (European) late Middle Ages with that in the contemporary world: while in the thirteenth century great cultural centers, such as Venice in Italy, Nara in Japan, Borobudur in Java, Baghdad in Iraq, and Tikal in Mexico, hardly knew anything about each other, by the late twentieth century all that variety was gone and countries became different “only in terms of their past” (196). The emergence of a world literature began in the nineteenth century and was accelerated in the twentieth, when ever-growing cultural connections between different parts of the world “steadily eroded the customary boundaries between different national literatures and distinct literary traditions” (Moses x). In the period after the Second World War this process continued at an ever-increasing pace, intensified by modern means of travel and communication, mass media, and expanding international trade and cultural relations, which lead to profound interpenetration of different traditions (xii-xiii). As Carlos Fuentes explains:

É impossível — além de ridículo — falar em literaturas nacionais. Isto é uma invenção do romantismo. Hoje, não se pode falar de uma física nacional, uma biologia nacional, uma botânica nacional, uma astronomia nacional. E não se pode falar de um cinema nacional, porque, com a velocidade das comunicações, você se dirige, cada vez mais, a uma platéia internacional. O que há são homens e mulheres. (qtd. in Reis 281; Spanish source not given)

It is impossible — almost ridiculous — to speak of national literatures. That was invented by romanticism. It is not possible to speak today about national physics, national biology, national botany, national astronomy. Nor is it possible to speak about national cinema, because, with the speed of means of communication, you are always addressing an international audience. There are only men and women.

Contemporary postcolonial and Third World literatures are thus not only “distinctive and extremely significant reflections of the rise and diffusion of global modernity” but also a part of it (Moses xiii).

Although this period in literary history is most often referred to as postmodern, both the concept and its time frame are still hotly debated, so that “a consensual definition of postmodernism in literature” has not yet been reached (Calinescu 296). All that can be said with certainty is that postmodernism grew out of late modernism and replaced it as the dominant trend in contemporary literature at some time, according to different critics, between the late sixties and mid-seventies (Berman 87), in the sixties (Eysteinnsson 103), in the early sixties (Hassan 55-8), in the late fifties (Huyssen xi), in the fifties (Baldick 174), in the forties (Cuddon 734; Quinones 17), or even with the publication of Finnegans Wake in 1939 (Bell, Literature 173). The word ‘postmodern’ was first used in relation to literature as early as in 1946 by Randall Jarrell to describe the poetry of Robert Lowell as “post- or anti-modernist” (Longenbach 101), and during the mid-fifties the term gained some currency. At the other end of this time span, at the MLA meeting of 1976 there were already six sections on postmodernism (Quinones 4), which indicates that by that time the new tendencies were prevailing. As no literary movement can end, or emerge, abruptly, this

period between the mid-fifties and the mid-seventies marks the change from the dominance of modernism to that of postmodernism.

However, many literary works written during this period are not classifiable as postmodern,<sup>21</sup> but display instead a variety of styles and are labeled in different ways. Many authors continue modernist traditions both in technical aspects of their writing, and in their acceptance of art as the foremost kind of coherence available to humans. Since no single truth or organized system of knowledge can fully apprehend the world and render it intelligible, art is the only way to create a meaning about the universe that surrounds us, an “art richly charged with multiple and overlapping perspectives” (Breslin 18). In opposition to the postmodern random swirl of empty signals and narcissistic involvement with language, as well as to principles of nonselection, aleatory structuring and the ironic dissolution of form (Fokkema 83-85, 87), these writers do not abandon conscious organization of textual elements; rather, they are trying to establish new conventions of mimesis appropriate for the contemporary world. Their works often have certain postmodern traits as well, on the one hand, because of the influence of the age, and, on the other, because modernist and postmodern literatures share many characteristics, such as self-reflexivity, fragmentation, parody and irony, the difference being one of degree.

One stream of such non-postmodern literary production uses myth as the main source of inspiration and material for structuring fiction.<sup>22</sup> The six novels which are the

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<sup>21</sup> Principal characteristics of ‘canonic’ postmodern writing are its insistence on indeterminacy or undecidability of meaning (Calinescu 298), abandonment of the quest for artistic coherence, fragmentation, playful irony, parody, parataxis (Waugh 3), eclecticism, *bricolage*, fabulation and pastiche.

<sup>22</sup> In the same period, several postmodern novelists have also employed myths in their works, only, as one would expect, their “writing reveals more often [...] the *reductio ad absurdum* of all

object of this dissertation are representative of this mythopoeic stream: Yacine Kateb's Nedjma, Wilson Harris' Palace of the Peacock, Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters, Chingiz Aitmatov's Белый пароход [The White Steamship], Michel Tournier's Le Roi des aulnes, and Darcy Ribeiro's Maíra. Written and published between the mid-fifties and the mid-seventies, i.e., during the two decades which separate late modernism from postmodernism and mark the period of transition between the two, the novels reflect various mythopoeic stances in narrative fiction, but their main approach — as will be shown — lies between the modernist use of myth as a structuring device necessary for ordering the “futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (T. S. Eliot 177), and “the postmodern ironic contesting of myth as master narrative” (Hutcheon 50).

Each of the six novels is a recognized masterpiece acclaimed by both critics and the reading public. Their authors, accepted as the most respected contemporary writers in their respective literatures, have all been well received abroad and widely translated into foreign languages. Their influence and importance confirm that their approach to literature and their mythopoeia are still very significant for the contemporary world. Paradoxically, in spite of the diversity of the countries they come from, their cultural backgrounds and their narrative stances, they have a lot of similarities, which proves their common concerns, corresponding interests, and mutual cultural influences in an era of global literature. Although only one of them comes from the First World (Tournier), and the rest from the

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archetypes” (Fisch 155). For example, in John Barth's Giles Goat-Boy (1966), myths, such as those from the Old Testament, The Odyssey and The Divine Comedy, those of salvation based on the New Testament, and the hero monomyth as elaborated by Joseph Campbell (1 -46) and Otto Rank, are all examined, dissected, discredited and rejected. Similarly, John Updike in The Centaur (1963) “toys wittily and self-consciously with a ‘mythic’ dimension of its plot” (Von Hendy 153). Such attitudes, considering that all myths are meaningless and deluding, and that dealing with them in any serious way amounts to “cultural complicity” (Hutcheon 40), are typical for postmodernism.

Third World, the differences between, e.g., Kyrgyzstan and Nigeria, or between the Native peoples of Brazil and Berbers of Algeria are far too important to warrant an approach which would simply counterpose the writing from the 'center' to that from the 'margin.'<sup>23</sup>

The first and most important thing they have in common is that they all regard myth as being extremely relevant for contemporary humans, and that mythopoeia pervades the bulk of their literary output. Although they vary in the way they use mythic themes and structures in composing their fiction, they display a number of common features, as well as a very similar general attitude. Their mythopoeic approach to literature highlights the imaginative experience as primordial: "in the domain of myth we can short-circuit the intellect and liberate the imagination which the scientism of the modern world suppresses" (Kermode 37). Three of these authors, Soyinka, Tournier and Harris, are not only creative writers, but also critics, and have in their theoretical works expressed their own ideas about myth. For Soyinka, the mythic essence goes more deeply into the heart of a culture than anything else; any attempt to restore the dignity of African cultures, which is one of his main goals, must include those essences, and one way to do it is by redefinition of African traditions through contemporary mythopoeia. He found a metaphor for such a project in ancient African practices of replacing old statues of gods with new ones:

When gods die — that is, fall to pieces — the carver is summoned and a new god comes to life. The old is discarded, left to rot in the bush and be eaten by termites. The new is invested with the powers of the old and may acquire new powers. In literature the writer aids the process of desuetude by acting as the termite or by ignoring the old deity and creating the new ones. (Myth 86)

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<sup>23</sup> As Aijaz Ahmad has convincingly argued, "there is no such thing as a 'Third World literature'" ("Jameson" 77).

Tournier understands myth as “une histoire fondamentale.” He claims that “l’homme n’est qu’un animal mythologique,” and that “l’homme ne s’arrache à l’animalité que grâce à la mythologie. [...] L’homme ne devient l’homme, n’acquiert un sexe, un cœur et une imagination d’homme que grâce au bruissement d’histoires, au kaléidoscope d’images qui entourent le petit enfant dès le berceau et l’accompagnent jusqu’au tombeau” (Vent 183-86). As for Harris, he stresses above all the importance of imagination for human self-realization, and explains that myth “endorses a series of instinctualities in all useful but partial windows that we erect upon and into reality” (Selected 207).

Although this new mythopoeia of the third quarter of the twentieth century represents, in its approach, an important shift from the modernist one, it is undisputable that the writers of this period are inheritors of the modernist interest in myth. The fact is that literary mythopoeia can never be the same after its encounter with modernism, when “in the absence of Enlightenment certitudes the search for myth appropriate to modernity became paramount” (Harvey 30). Eager to find depth and coherence outside historical time, modernists developed “the mythic method” as “the central means of assimilating, and yet transcending, realist form.” Their mythopoeia had claims on universality “even if it has itself come to seem increasingly questionable and Eurocentric” (Bell, Literature 167). The new mythopoeic writers, however, do not use myth to escape from the existential situation in history, but rather to confront it, though they also stress the importance of myth and continue to employ some modernist formal solutions in mythopoeia. Thus, for example, Soyinka, Kateb and Harris use the “spatial form” of modernist novels in which all events are to be understood simultaneously, rather than as a sequence, and which transmutes “the

time world of history into the timeless world of myth” (Frank 9, 60); on the other hand, the ‘musical method,’ which Joyce employed in Ulysses and Mann in Der Zauberberg, is taken over by Ribeiro, whose novel MR is constructed as a four-part requiem mass, and by Tournier, who structured RA on J. S. Bach’s Art of the Fugue. Balancing carefully between the serious and the ludic, these writers neither take themselves too seriously, nor fall into the trap of epistemological nihilism. At the same time, they do not understand myth as a ‘master narrative,’ but rather as a tool for exploring and contesting both the socio-historic world and larger questions of human existence.

Instead of basing their works on any one given myth — or on only a single mythology — the authors tend to employ mythic stories from many different sources in an eclectic<sup>24</sup> way, and use them on different levels to construct their novels (for instance, Tournier uses classical, Biblical and medieval mythology, while Harris incorporates in his fiction Ancient Greek, African and Amerindian stories). Various ways in which numerous mythic themes appear and combine within a narrative give these novels a mythic character. At the same time, these mythologems, surrounded by others from different traditions, change and acquire new shades of meaning. The main plots of WS and MR are basically realistic, with embedded myths and traditional tales which create a rich weave of echoes, metaphors, associations and connotations. Soyinka and Kateb created new structures which are, like traditional myths, characterized by a plurality of possible meanings through several levels of abstraction. Tournier conflated two different mythic patterns to create the main

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<sup>24</sup> Of course, “eclecticism is a derogatory epithet only to someone who professes adherence to a ‘pure’ religion” (Rigby 28).

plot of his novel, while in PP the myth of Eldorado is simultaneously metamorphosed in several different ways.

However, the most important connection among the novels studied here is their attitude in regard to narrated time. Nicolas Berdyaev has postulated that there are three basic categories for describing time-history: cosmic time, which is measured by the circular change of seasons, refers to the endless recurrence of things in the natural world, and can be graphically depicted by a circle; historical time, represented by a horizontal line stretching out forward into the future towards what is new, characterized by the fact that every event is unrepeatable, and measured by years and millennia of human history; and existential time, symbolized either by a vertical line or a dot, which is individual and mystical, tells of movement in depth, and does not differentiate between the beginning and the end, or the future and the past; it thus depends only upon intensity of experience and changes in a person, and is not susceptible of mathematical calculation (206-8).

Simple linear historical time, supposedly objective and no more than a surrounding 'ether' to events, was characteristic of realistic novels of the nineteenth century. Modernist writers, no longer able to see in history a progressive triumph of reason, concentrated much more than their predecessors on the problem of representing time in narrative fiction. They saw it as "discontinuous and inexorably bound up with both their subject and events that seem to inhabit it" (Schleifer xii). Their anti-historicism and focus on the microcosmic, rather than the macrocosmic, made existential time the most appropriate for their works, especially in view of such techniques as stream of consciousness or juxtaposition. Henry James' The Sense of the Past or Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse are examples of such

employment of existential time. Circular time also became important in Modernism; as early as in the novels of late Victorian writers like Thomas Hardy men and women are represented in their monotonous existence, propped against the ceaseless cycles of nature and the endless recurrence of things, their only certitude being an allegiance to the past (Raleigh 51). In Joyce's Ulysses and Finnegans Wake circular and existential time complement each other (53). In the same period, scholars like Oswald Spengler (The Decline of the West) and Arnold Toynbee (A Study of History) developed the cyclic conception of history, according to which human societies and civilizations rise and wane just like the seasons of the year.

Cyclical time is sometimes attributed to traditional, or small-scale societies, since it often appears in their oral traditions, and is opposed to the linear time usually understood to be characteristic of more complex civilizations. However, no real human society could be said to live entirely in a cyclical time in which the difference between past and future can be dispensed with and where "destiny is synonymous with origin" (Adam 518). Traditional societies are just as able to control the dimension of time in everyday life as we are. Their time is not linear only "because it is the time of each group in relation to each group," i.e., because "each and every group has its own time and its own space, and, therefore, there is no universal time and space, no dimensional coordinates common to every society" (Duerden 17). In all probability, they too need fictional narratives employing circular time to cope with the contingencies of life.

The importance of ever-recurring cycles of nature of which human beings are a part became even clearer later in the twentieth century, as a result of increasing fear of the future

and a growing distrust of modern science. A stability based on the renewal of human proximity to nature seemed preferable to 'progress,' which was understood primarily as a mad rush into the unpredictable and probably sinister future. At the same time, myth was seen as being necessary for achieving spiritual balance. Obviously, 'myth' in this sense has nothing to do with dogma, political ideology, or any other such 'metanarrative'; rather, it should be understood as a meaningful and amusing traditional story (see p. 45 above). For example, the myth of the Horned Deer-Mother in WS neither empowers nor dupes anyone, but it does help those who cherish it to find meaning in life.

In all six novels studied here cyclical time is used as one of the main structural features. The end of one cycle is perceived to be close at hand, but the continuation of the process is uncertain. Or — in alchemical terms — some important element seems to be missing from the cauldron and we are not sure if the mythic Ouroboros will manage to swallow its own tail, ensuring the beginning of a new cycle and avoiding the apocalyptic end. This structure is adapted to specific novels in different ways: In MR and WS we are informed about a whole cycle, in ND and PP we see several of them, whereas Soyinka and Tournier concentrate on only a small segment, the one just before the critical passage to the next cycle.

Related problems which emerge in the six novels are those of roots, origins and identity, of hybridity and liminality. Thus, the main myth retold in WS describes the origin of the Kyrgyz people, in MR we are told how the Mairum people and their environment came to be, the protagonists of ND are in constant search for their roots, while the main goal of Harris' mythopoeia is to establish a meaningful identity for the displaced peoples of

the Caribbean. Cultural hybridity in many cases seems to be inevitable and is accepted by, among others, Soyinka and Harris, who see cross-fertilization between different traditions as beneficial, and would surely agree with Balachandra Rajan's formulation of it:

The presence of two cultures in one's mind forms a wider and therefore saner basis on which to originate the quest for identity, and [...] the discordance between these cultures can be creative as well as merely confusing. Perhaps one can go further and suggest that the man with mixed allegiances is contemporary Everyman and that to shut oneself off from the challenge of the 'non-Indian' betrays not a sense of nationality, but an obsession with insularity. (107-8)

Aitmatov does not reject hybridity, but insists that every nation should keep its own individuality, while Ribeiro, the least optimistic, sees in the disappearance of smaller cultures an ominous sign for the future of the planet. All these processes are reflected in their respective mythologies; thus, while the chief Mairum god begins to doubt his own immortality by the end of MR, in the painting of "The Pantheon" in IN Christian symbolism is merged with Yoruba mythology.

The problem of language must be a part of such considerations: some of the authors write in languages which are not their mother tongues (Soyinka), or in both their mother tongue and another language (Aitmatov, Kateb). Such practice provoked a lot of different opinions: from Ngugi wa Thiong'o's pronounced opposition to the use of the colonizer's language, which he saw as acculturation imposed through linguistic imperialism ("Language"), to its acceptance by people like Aijaz Ahmad who remarked that "one cannot reject English now [...] any more than one can boycott the railways" (Theory 77). Those who choose to write in a foreign language do it in a creative way, enriching it by

literal translation of idioms and by introducing expressions, proverbs and specific words from their first language (thus, for example, Soyinka provides at the end of IN a short glossary of the Yoruba words he incorporated into the text [259-60]).

The novels contain many different traditional myths. The myth of the Golden Age with its variant, the myth of the garden of Eden, appears in WS, MR and RA. It is one of “the most widespread of humanity’s great myths, attested on all continents, from the distant past to our own times”<sup>25</sup> (Bénéjam-Bontems 460). It reflects the human ideal of living in harmony with the environment and one’s own nature, and, in its Biblical variant, illustrates the state of “exile [which] is a primary symbol of human alienation” (Ricœur, Symbolism 18). Therefore, it is no surprise that it gained prominence in an age when confidence in future was abandoned, and when it was perceived that, as Marcel Proust thought, the only paradise is the one we have lost.

Trickster figures and stories have been used by Ribeiro, Kateb, Soyinka and Harris. Trickster is an ambiguous character, both dupe and manipulator, humble and pretentious, altruistic and selfish, creator and destroyer, but always full of ingenuity, resourceful and cunning (Colardelle-Diarrassouba 29-43). His main characteristics are liminality, wit and metaphysical slipperiness. As he does not belong anywhere entirely, he is able to cross all sorts of borders, to joyfully violate taboos, to demolish systems and to break down categories and conventions of behavior and thought, dispelling the belief that any given social order is absolute and objective. The agility and metaphysical slipperiness of the trickster, which result from his liminality and control over language, represent a power that

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<sup>25</sup> Some of its famous variants are, for example, the myth of Dilmun in Sumer, of Re and Isis in Ancient Egypt, of the Garden of Eden in the Bible, of the Isles of the Blest in Ancient Greece, and of the *tempus aureum* in Horace’s Epodes.

works through discourse building and sacrifice to restore lost wholeness and reform consciousness. Therefore, “tricksters are agents of creativity” who help us understand “that our actions have roots in many layers of reality” (Fabre 10) and “transcend the constrictions of monoculturality” (Hynes 211-12). In a fragmented age, and especially in connection with the problems of roots, identity and hybridity, precisely such interventions are necessary.

The quest-myth, employed in MR, ND, RA and PP, is one of the commonest mythic patterns encountered in many cultures around the globe. The stories about descent into hell or the underworld, those of the Grail and the Golden Fleece, and narratives of initiation are some of its avatars. Contemporary writers gave it new shapes; thus in Ribeiro’s novel it appears in the form of futile pilgrimages, in Kateb’s it merges with yet another myth – that of the labyrinth, while Tournier posits the goal of the quest as the pure land of the Hyperboreans. Some other important myths are also present in these novels: nature myths, myths of origin, of Eldorado, of ogres, of dying gods, of Noble Savages, as well as several others, which will be taken account of in the analysis of individual works.

All the novels which are the object of this study are very interesting and important in the literature of the second half of the twentieth century. They belong to a significant stream of literary production which has not so far received as much attention as it deserves. Although individual authors, as well as their main works, have been all highly praised, widely read, and critically acclaimed, their similarity in attitude and concerns has passed largely unnoticed. And yet it is important to note that mythopoeia in narrative fiction spread practically worldwide in the period that interests us here (mid-fifties to mid-seventies), and

that a number of significant writers from different countries had similar concerns, asked kindred questions about the future, and fell back on the cyclical time of nature and myth in order to recover the balance that appeared to be lost. It has been claimed that the mythic approach to literature “virtually perished with the major modernists,” i.e., with W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, and J. Joyce (Von Hendy 153). That, however, is not so, as these novels here show; on the contrary, the ‘mythic method’ in narrative fiction not only stayed alive, but also spread. It was very much present during the decades which separate the high modernists from the period investigated here: in the thirties, forties, and early fifties were composed such seminal mythopoeic masterpieces as are Bulgakov’s Мастер и Маргарита [*The Master and Margarita*], Mann’s Doktor Faustus, Asturias’ Hombres de maíz, and Carpentier’s Los pasos perdidos. Modernist fascination with myth thus initiated an approach which was adopted by many writers throughout the twentieth century, and which continued to be productive in the last quarter of it, as is shown by works such as Kenzaburo Oe’s M/T et l’histoire des merveilles de la forêt, Keri Hulme’s The Bone People, Mario Vargas Llosa’s El hablador, Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses, Shashi Tharoor’s The Great Indian Novel, and Thomas King’s Green Grass, Running Water. All this suggests that formation of one world literature is well under way, that it cannot be defined by any single term because of its diversity, and that mythopoeia makes up an important part of it.

The six novels I am focusing on here have at their base the same cyclical structure, they all address analogous problems and employ a number of myths in an eclectic way, but, at the same time, they are widely dissimilar in regard to their narrative attitudes, novelistic

form and content. This corroborates Liesbeth Korthals Altes' remark that, simultaneously with the post-structuralist announcement of the death of grand narratives, there came an upsurge of interest in narrativity: "Le Récit est mort, vive les récits" (Salut 3). Although the Ouroboros pattern described here is widespread, it is by no means the only structural feature of contemporary mythopoeic novels: other myths have also been used as a base for constructing works of fiction. For example, André Siganos in his book Mythe et écriture investigates nine novels written between the fifties and the eighties which as their principal structural device use the myth of the labyrinth. These novels come from three continents (Asia, Europe, Latin America) and display a huge variety of forms, themes and topics. Obviously, contemporary mythopoeia, although rather neglected by the critics, is very creative.

Since Aitmatov, Ribeiro, Kateb, Soyinka, Tournier and Harris are close contemporaries who were publishing their works almost simultaneously, it is pointless to discuss their novels in chronological order. A different sequence based on the novels' structure is preferable, since it can highlight their variety and diversity. They show a multiplicity of narrative stances and techniques which can be briefly described as follows: a realistic novel with embedded and juxtaposed mythic stories which comment on the contemporary plot (WS); a fragmented novel with multiple narrative threads whose antiphonal structure opposes fictional and non-fictional elements (MR); a densely textured satirical novel in which the facts of contemporary life are transmuted within the symbolic parameters of traditional mythology (IN); a novel with several narrative voices in which pattern is substituted for plot and whose circular unfolding confuses present, past and future

(ND); an apparently traditional but in fact complexly symbolic and metaphysical novel alternating first-person and third-person narration (RA); and a poetic novel which blurs distinctions between dreams and reality and recreates the history of a country by merging events and legends (PP). Accordingly, I will examine these novels in this sequence of increasing formal complexity.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **CHINGIZ AITMATOV'S THE WHITE STEAMSHIP: MYTH AS METAPHYSICAL AND MORAL ALLEGORY**

By the disappearing sail  
The sea beyond is known.

Kenkabo (Senryu 26)

People create stories create people; or rather stories create  
people create stories.

Chinua Achebe (qtd. in Chinweizu xxviii)

Among contemporary writers who consciously and persistently employ myth in their opuses, Chingiz Torekulovich Aitmatov (1928- ) is one of the most prominent. Using in his fiction mythic and other folk narratives — legends, epics, fairy tales and ballads — as embedded stories commenting on the master plot, and myth as primal structuring principle, he weaves intricate networks of symbolism, imagery and themes pertinent to the actual state of affairs in his own country and in the world. The human condition is always at the heart of his stories and novels, and he uses traditional narratives as a tool to explore it by setting his characters' plights between finite and infinite aspects of experience. For Aitmatov, "the mission of literature is to express the essence [...] of man's spiritual quest" (Shneidman, "Interview" 268), while the questions he asks are always moral, human and universal.

Although, like many of his compatriots, Aitmatov began his literary career writing in strict obedience to the official directives of socialist realism, he began very early to embed elements of Kyrgyz<sup>26</sup> folklore in his works. Having published his first beginner's short stories in the fifties, his early mature works in the sixties (especially "Прощай, Гульсары! [Farewell, Gulsary!]" in 1966) quickly established him as one of the leading

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<sup>26</sup> The Kyrgyz are a Turkic-Mongol people who live in the mountainous regions of Central Asia, primarily in Kyrgyzstan, but also in China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; their population is estimated at 2.5 million (Kuehnast and Strouthes 228).

Soviet writers (Paton 496). His mythopoeic endeavors received their initial impulse from studies inspired by ethnological and folklorist insights. The fact is that he has absorbed in equal measure, on one hand, the traditional culture and oral literature of his Kyrgyz ancestors, and, on the other, classical and modern Russian literature, as well as a number of Western authors in Russian translation. The seventies and eighties saw the publication of his major novellas and novels and his fame grew both at home and abroad. His mythopoeia, originality, exotic Central Asian plots, and complex juxtaposition of different narrative layers attracted a number of western researchers, so that some thirty-six Ph.D. theses in Europe and North America have been devoted so far to his literary corpus (Blankoff-Scarr 83). At the same time, he was one of the three most widely read authors in the USSR in the seventies and eighties, and several of his works were adapted to the stage or the cinema. Aitmatov is thus one of "the world's most published modern authors" (Riordan 4), his works having been translated, according to UNESCO, into no less than one hundred and nineteen languages. His last novel, Тавро Кассандри [*The Mark of Cassandra*], was published simultaneously in Russian and in German and Japanese translations (Blankoff-Scarr 83, 89-90). Aitmatov was also one of the pioneers of Kyrgyz cinema and the head of the Union of Kyrgyz Film-Makers (Shneidman, Soviet 33). He currently lives in Brussels as the ambassador of Kyrgyzstan to the EEC and "travels frequently in Europe to read from his works to enthusiastic audiences" (Mozur 7).

It is important to note that Aitmatov's mythopoeic approach to writing fiction did not make him a lone swallow in an empty sky. The fact is that, in the sixties, seventies and eighties in the Soviet Union, interest in folklore on one hand, and in myth and mythopoeia

on the other, was renewed and that it was shared by many people in different spheres of intellectual life. Eleazar Meletinsky's landmark study, Поэтика мифа [The Poetics of Myth], was published in 1976. Its third part, "Мифологизм в литературе XX века [Mythification in Twentieth-Century Literature]," gave an excellent overview of the topic. Russian mythopoeic literary works from the early part of the century were now republished, and some were made available for the first time (e.g., Bulgakov's Мастер и Маргарита [The Master and Margarita] in 1966-7). A number of writers from different Soviet republics — writing in different languages — experimented with these, for them, new literary possibilities. Thus, for example, Valentin Rasputin's novel Прощание с Матёрой [Farewell to Matyora] (1975) is an elegiac farewell to an already lost paradise, i.e., to an island in a big Siberian river, which will soon go underwater because of a new hydroelectric dam. The writer describes the events during the last summer on the island, the last cycle of natural life before the flood, where present and past, and the living and the dead come together in a mutual exchange of feeling. Otar Chiladze from Georgia probed much deeper into the past and in his novel Шёл по дороге человек [A Man Walked along the Road] (1974) reinterpreted on both epic and psychological levels the myth of the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece, adding to it the stories of Ariadne, Daedalus and Icarus, as well as some myths from the Old Testament. Iurii Rytkheu retold in Когда киты уходят [When the Whales Leave] (1977) the legend about Nau, the thousand-year-old primordial mother of the Chukchi. In her youth, she married a whale who was through a miracle of love changed into a man, and gave birth to the first generation of her people. In the contemporary world, however, humans no longer cherish their links with their sea-born relatives, and because of

their treason and brutality, the whales swim away far from the shore and Nau dies.<sup>27</sup> This literary approach was particularly well received by the writers of Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Far East (Kolesnikoff, "Myth" 63), probably because oral literature in those regions was very much alive until recently. A debate arose in Soviet literary journals about the acceptability and meaning of such works (Panchenko 86-89). In spite of many opposing voices, a number of critics hailed such combinations of different stylistic attitudes in contemporary Soviet fiction, "благодаря чему складывается ее художественная объемность" 'which adds to its artistic richness' (Epshtein and Iukina 247). Vladimir Voronov expressed the view that the role of myth in literature is not simply illustrative or allegorical, but ideologico-constructive, that it expresses the problems of contemporary humans, and is turned towards the future (207-8). What resulted was a relatively high degree of artistic and ideological independence for the writers who used folkloric material and traditional narratives in various ways in their fiction. This approach became so popular that Levon Mkrtchian complained, in an article originally published in Russian in 1981, that "legends and myths have become an almost obligatory attribute of modern prose" (29). Aitmatov was one of the first to choose that direction, and he followed it more persistently than anyone else.

Aitmatov learned to love and appreciate his people's traditions early in life. Born in a small Kyrgyz village in the Talas valley, and growing up partly there, and partly in

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<sup>27</sup> There are several other very interesting novels, novellas and collections of short stories written in a similar vein, of which the most important are Цар-рыба [Emperor-Fish] (1977) by Viktor Astafev (Russian), Мы и наши горы [We and Our Mountains] (1967) by Hrant Matevosian (Armenian), Второе путешествие Каипа [The Second Voyage of Kaip] (1970) by Timur Pulatov (Uzbek), Когда они стали деревьями [When They Turned Into Trees] (1972) by Kazys Saja (Lithuanian), Женитьба Кевонгов [The Wedding of the Kevongi] (1977) by Vladimir Sangi (Nivkh), and Сказка про белого бычка [The Story of the White Bullock] (1969) by Vasile Vasilake (Moldovan).

Russia, he learned both languages, and, being already in touch in childhood with different cultures, became receptive to ideas and philosophies of various origins. Living in the village gave him first-hand experience of the traditional Kyrgyz ways and philosophy of life (Salk 125). Those were the times of sweeping changes, so he also witnessed the forced settling and collectivization of his people. What influenced him the most was the natural beauty of the region and the perpetual cyclical rhythm of life derived from the constant movements between winter, spring, and summer pastures (Kasybekov 43-44). Aitmatov remembers that each moving from pasture to pasture was connected with rituals and celebrations.

Although Islam first penetrated into Kyrgyz lands in the ninth century, its progress was very slow, and as late as in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Muslim historians were still referring to Kyrgyz as 'Kaffirs,' i.e., "infidels" (Abramzon 267). Even during the following centuries, when Islamic pressure mounted, its influence remained mainly on the surface, leaving shamanism, totemism and animism almost intact as the mainstream of Kyrgyz popular religion until the twentieth century. As a nomadic people, the Kyrgyz did not have any system of writing until 1924 when their first alphabet was made from modified Arabic letters. Only four years later it was replaced by a Latin one, which in turn was abandoned in 1940 when the modern Kyrgyz Cyrillic alphabet was adopted (Kuehnast and Strouthes 228). Other aspects of written culture developed at the same time: the first printing press and the first newspapers were established in 1924, and the first publishing house in 1926 (Gutschke 35). Up to that time Kyrgyz literature was only oral. Soon,

however, the first stories and theatre pieces appeared, followed by the first novella in 1928 (Gachev 76), and the first novel in 1937-38 (Mirza-Akhmedova 20).

Aitmatov thus belongs to the first generation of Kyrgyz writers who were able to learn to read and write as children. At the same time, he had the chance to hear in his youth some of the last traditional bards who used to recite Manas and other Kyrgyz epics. He once said that his first 'library' was the Talas valley with its songs, legends and stories (qtd. in Agranovich 144), where he could study the different genres of the very rich Kyrgyz oral literature. The best known such work is Manas, a huge epic with more than 500,000 lines in verse in each of its several versions. It was described as a veritable encyclopedia of Kyrgyz life, containing Kyrgyz myths, tales, and legends, as well as customs, beliefs, geographical and medical knowledge (Valikhanov 288). A special class of traditional bards known as *manaschi*, i.e., reciters of Manas, specialized in performing this epic and in transmitting it orally. Aitmatov was particularly impressed by the interpretation of Sayakbai Karalaye, one of the most famous among them (Time 11-14). It appears as if Aitmatov sought to continue through his writing the role which in the traditional Kyrgyz society was held by *manaschis*. Both Manas and other epics, such as Kozhozhash, Karagul, Seitek and Semetei (Musaev, Rudov and Orusbaev), had an influence on his understanding of literature. Well aware that this rich tradition which infatuated him was dangerously close to extinction, he criticized its ideological detractors, encouraged work on its preservation and secured parts of it in his own fiction. He thus became known as “защитник национальной эпической традиции” ‘a protector of national epic tradition’ (Nikadem 29) and took an active part in publishing a four-volume edition of one of the versions of Manas (Aitmatov et al.).

Like Soyinka, Aitmatov uses a medium foreign to his ancestral traditions to safeguard and transmit those same traditions. However, there is an important difference between the two: while both of them are perfectly bilingual, Soyinka writes exclusively in English, whereas Aitmatov uses both Russian and Kyrgyz (Dadazhanova 70). He began his literary career by translating Russian fiction into Kyrgyz. His early stories were first written (and published) in Kyrgyz and then translated by himself into Russian, whereas later on — since the appearance of “Прощай, Гульсары! [Farewell, Gulsary!]” in 1966 — he wrote directly in Russian. It appears that Aitmatov had problems at the time with the political establishment in Kyrgyzstan, and found it easier to publish his works in the more relaxed atmosphere in Moscow (Mozur 181). Aitmatov claims that he sometimes writes first in Russian, and sometimes first in Kyrgyz (В соавторстве [In Co-Authorship] 110), that writing in another language helps him expand his vision (283), but that he prefers to speak Kyrgyz at home (Mozur 17). Both language versions have been highly praised: on one hand, his literary Kyrgyz has become a modern standard (Hu and Imart 214), and, on the other, he was lauded for perfectly rendering Kyrgyz eloquence into Russian (S. Soucek, qtd. in Ryskulova 82), and for successfully merging the language of folk tradition with that of written literature (Zalygin 363). Some other critics thought that both Russian and Kyrgyz versions of his stories and novels were independent works rather than translated, i.e., secondary (Ryskulova 82). Aitmatov introduced a number of literally translated Kyrgyz idioms and proverbs into Russian, as well as a number of Kyrgyz words, which are indispensable for giving local flavor to his stories and novels (Naurzbaeva 34-37).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Some such examples are: ак-колпак (retained in English translations, but printed in italics: *ak-kulpak*), national Kyrgyz cap of white felt; аксакал (*aksakal*), “elder”; байбиче (*baibiche*), term of

Aitmatov's creativity "founds its sources at the confluence of two distinct traditions: Kyrgyz national folklore and Russian classical and modern literature" (Riordan 8), and that is clearly reflected in his works. Influences of oral literature are very important in Aitmatov's prose. They are not confined only to borrowed themes, motifs, and expressions, or to his worldview, but also qualify his style, which Joseph Mozur describes as follows:

[Aitmatov's] prose possesses a distinct oral quality, with numerous refrains and subplot digressions punctuating the narration. As in the performance of a *manaschi*, such elements retard the portrayal of events and serve to heighten the expression of the conceptual basis of the composition. An air of improvisation pervades his fiction, with abrupt shifts in styles, themes, and even genres. [...] An impression is created that Aitmatov, like a *manaschi*, chooses to relax during certain parts of the 'performance,' only to renew its intensity later. (13)

Classical Russian literature was also instrumental in shaping Aitmatov's manner of writing. Among those who influenced him, he mentions Alexander Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Ivan Turgenev, Mikhail Sholokhov, Maksim Gorky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Anton Chekhov, Ivan Bunin, Leonid Leonov, and, especially, Leo Tolstoy, with whom Aitmatov shares the belief that literature can be used to the benefit of humankind. It was suggested that A. N. Ostrovsky's drama Гроза [The Storm] provided him with the plot for WS (Mozur 60). As for contemporary foreign authors, Aitmatov was particularly impressed by the Japanese writer Kobo Abe ("Человек [Man]" 547), and by the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, whose magical realism he tried to emulate in such later novels as

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respect for older woman; джигит (*dzhigit*), "a brave"; токол (*tokol*), "second wife"; юрта (*yurt*), "nomad's tent"; and комуз (*komuz*), Kyrgyz string instrument.

Буранный полустанок: И дольше века длится день [Blizzard Waystation: The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years] and Плаха [The Place of the Skull] (Time 48).

Miroslav Mikulashek defined Aitmatov's literary attitude appropriately as "романтический реализм" 'romantic realism' (147). The feelings of his main characters are often reflected onto the surrounding nature as a seemingly objective quality; such fusion of the outer world of nature and the inner one of emotion is an effect familiar in romanticism. Main plots in his works are always realistic; they are usually simply but neatly constructed, with masterfully depicted atmosphere, believable and psychologically convincing characters and rural settings. Aitmatov never idealizes the nomadic Kyrgyz past or the Soviet present. His narration, uncomplicated on the surface, exposes in a provocative and poignant way important contradictions in the lives of ordinary people. In the core of his stories and novels there is always an inquiry related to the "essential relativity of things human" (Kundera 6). Various types of traditional narratives — myths, legends, epics, and fairy tales, as well as ballads, songs, sayings and invocations — retold and reinterpreted by the author, are embedded in and counterpointed to the realistic plot at particular stages of its development.

Aitmatov does not use myths simply as allusions or just to give ornamental overtones to his Central Asian or Siberian plots; rather, they provide the organizing principle and basic narrative mode of much of his fiction. By linking the present to the past, and the actual to the mythical, he makes simple everyday events extraordinarily expressive, almost like legends in their own right, while "minor local events" acquire "universal spiritual and ethical significance" (Shneidman, Soviet 36). Myth exercises the controlling

influence in the whole novel or novella, commenting on the main plot, underlining the master themes and pointing out the problems and possible solutions. Different ways in which mythic themes appear and combine within a narrative give the whole work a mythical character. The embedded myths indicate to the readers that the story is not just a story, but that it must contain a more or less hidden message; it is expected that they — the readers — will react to the presence of myth by exploring those deep structures of meaning. The polyvalence of those myths permits them to develop their own free and creative responses.

The presence of myths in Aitmatov's stories and novels is explicit — they are announced as such and rendered in a style reminiscent of that of oral story-tellers, which differs from the style in other parts of the narrative. Although Kyrgyz mythology prevails in general in his work, our writer borrows elements from other mythologies as well, e.g., from Kazakh, Georgian and Nivkh folklore, and also from traditions of Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. Thus, for example, Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate appear in Плаха [The Place of the Skull], the Kyrgyz cult of the earth is combined with Greek myths of Antheus and of Demeter in “Материнское поле [Mother-Earth],” while the plot of the novella “Пегий пес бегущий краем моря [Piebald Dog Running Along the Shore],” which takes place in a remote village of Nivkh sea-hunters, is organized around two creation myths from the folklore of this Paleo-Siberian people.

One of the best examples of Chingiz Aitmatov's mythopoeia is his novel Белый пароход [The White Steamship]<sup>29</sup> (1970), which “many would regard [...] as the author's

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<sup>29</sup> WS has been classified either as a ‘novel,’ or as a ‘novella’ by different critics. Its length and complexity, in my opinion, favor the former designation.

most mature work” (Porter 68), and with which he reached “новую ступень художественной зрелости” ‘new heights of [his] artistic maturity’ (Lebedeva 72). Its original title was После сказки [After the Fairy Tale], while Белый пароход [The White Steamship] was the subtitle in parentheses. The editor of the first edition thought the subtitle more poetic and substituted it for the title. Although После сказки [After the Fairy Tale] is probably more appropriate in view of the content of the novel, his choice was maintained in subsequent editions and translations. WH was a success both among adult reading public and among children. Its illustrated Russian edition for younger readers was republished several times (Porter 68). In such a way Aitmatov managed to realize Tournier’s ideal of creating a mythic novel which appeals to all generations.

In WS the central, seemingly unsophisticated, realistic storyline takes place in a remote outpost in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan, practically cut off from the rest of the world, consisting of only three households. In spite of the grandiose landscapes which surround the little village, the story is anything but idyllic (Jagusztin 354), so that the magnificence of nature stands in contrast to the insignificance and pettiness of human beings. The plot incorporates four folk narratives: two legends, a fairy tale and a myth. They are told to the protagonist, a nameless seven-year-old boy, by his grandfather Momun. The boy himself invents his own fairy tale in an effort to escape the unbearable situation he lives in. Apart from these stories, the novel also contains other elements of Kyrgyz folklore in the form of proverbial sayings, prayers, and a traditional sacrifice to the Horned Deer-Mother. Its narrative point of view is excellently described by Nina Kolesnikoff:

Written in the third person, [the novel] seems at first to employ an omniscient narrator who presents the story, comments on the events, and sketches the

characters. But a closer look at the narrative reveals that the predominant point of view [...] is not that of the omniscient author, but that of the young hero. While retaining the third-person narration, the narrator identifies himself with his young protagonist and reproduces his perception of the world. ("Child" 102)

The novel, which consists of seven chapters, is tripartite in form. In the first three chapters the scene is set for the dramatic confrontation which comes in the last part, whereas the central position is occupied by the myth of the Horned Deer-Mother. In the long exposition we become acquainted with the situation in the village and with seven people — the boy and six adults — who live there. The small community lives in terror of Orozkul, the local petty tyrant, who brutally beats his barren wife whenever he gets drunk and abuses and humiliates her father Momun. The boy has been deserted by both of his parents, who divorced, left the village, remarried and established their new families in which there is no place for him. His mother went to live in the distant city where she found a job in a factory, while the father works as a sailor on the Issik-Kul lake. As a result, the boy lives with his grandfather and his second wife, a malicious old woman who persistently harasses the boy for having been abandoned. Contrary to the traditional Kyrgyz view which respects elders as repository of wisdom, Momun is not appreciated, in spite of being good-natured and always ready to help; rather, he is belittled and made the butt of jokes. The third household in the village consists of Seidakhmat, a lazy young man whose only ambition in life is to avoid any kind of work or confrontation, and his wife.

We also learn about the boy's inner life, which is shaped mainly by the legends and tales his grandfather tells him during the long winter nights, and by the majestic natural

setting of the outpost. Two of the legends eulogize love for the Kyrgyz homeland. The first one tells how

Очень-очень давно вражеские войска шли, чтобы захватить эту землю. И вот тогда с нашего Сан-Таша такой ветер подул, что враги не усидели в седлах. Послезали с коней, но и пешком идти не могли. Ветер сек им лица в кровь. Тогда они отвернулись от ветра, а ветер гнал их в спины, не давал остановиться и выгнал их с Иссык-Куля всех до одного. (42)

Long, long ago, enemy forces came to capture [the Kyrgyz] land. And at that time, such a wind blew up from San-Tash that the enemy couldn't sit in their saddles. They got off their horses but couldn't even move forward on foot. The wind whipped their faces until they bled. Then they turned away from the wind, but it drove at their back so that they couldn't look around. It didn't even let them hold their ground, and the wind drove every last one of them from the Issik-Kul. (44)

The second legend is about a Kyrgyz prisoner whose last wish before his execution was to hear a Kyrgyz folk song. The fairy tale relates how Chupalak, a Kyrgyz Tom Thumb, was swallowed by a wolf, but prevented the beast from attacking the sheep herds again by shouting loudly from its stomach. The wolf almost starved to death and in the end decided to go and try to hire himself out as a dog.

The boy's own story reflects his two wishes: to be reunited with his parents, and to escape the situation in the village. He often goes to the summit of the Guard Mountain and, through the binoculars grandfather Momun gave him as a present, observes the mountains and valleys which surround him, as well as the Issik-Kul lake, which from such a distance looks like a dreamworld. On its surface he sees a white steamship coming and going every day. Its beauty and power fascinate the boy, leading him to imagine that his father works as a sailor on that ship:

Вот он! С трубами в ряд, длинный, мощный, красивый. Он плыл, как по струне, ровно и прямо. [...] Очертания парохода стали еще четче. Теперь можно было заметить, как покачивается он на волнах, как за кормой остается светлый вспененный след. Не отрываясь, мальчик с восхищением смотрел на белый пароход. Была бы на то его воля, он упросил бы белый пароход подплыть поближе, чтобы можно было видеть людей, которые на нем плыли. Но пароход не знал об этом. Он медленно и величественно шел своей дорогой, неведомо откуда и неведомо куда. (37)

There it was! Long, powerful and beautiful, with its funnels all in a row. It traveled straight and smooth, as if on a string. [...] The ship's outlines became even clearer. Now you could see it rolling gently on the waves, and how its stern left a light trail of foam. Motionless, the lad watched the white steamship in rapture. Had it been in his power, he would have begged the white steamship to come closer, so that he could see the people on board. But the steamship knew nothing of this. It moved along its own course slowly and majestically, from an unknown origin to an unknown destination. (38-39)

In the boy's vision, the steamship becomes a conscious living being and a part of myth. He then imagines that he could turn into a fish with a human face and swim down the river all the way to the Issik-Kul lake. His father would then take him out of water, he would become again his normal self, and they would go home together.

The importance of the myth of the Horned Deer-Mother is underlined by its central position in the novel, occupying the fourth out of seven chapters. It tells about the origin of the Kyrgyz people and their coming to their present homeland. In ancient times, it is said, the Kyrgyz lived in Siberia, on the banks of the river Yenisei, which was then known as Enesai, i.e., in Kyrgyz, the "mother-river" (Poliakova 12). Different peoples in the region were in constant war against each other, and, as a result, the whole Kyrgyz tribe was at one

point slaughtered by their enemies. The only two survivors were a boy and a girl. Caught by the enemy tribe, they were about to be thrown into the river from a high cliff, when the Horned Deer-Mother appeared and saved them. Like Romulus and Remus, who were fed by a she-wolf, the children who became the ancestors of the Kyrgyz grew on the Horned Deer-Mother's milk. She protected them from wild animals and human hunters, and led them all the way from Siberia to the Issik-Kul region where their descendants have lived ever since. The Kyrgyz Adam and Eve married there and had seven sons and seven daughters. Whenever the girl was in labor, the Horned Deer-Mother would come to help, bringing a cradle on her horns. All Kyrgyz women in later ages prayed to the Horned Deer-Mother to grant them an easy delivery. Life under the protection of the totem animal lasted for many generations, until greed and pride gained the upper hand, leading the people to begin to kill marals (a species of deer which lives both in Kyrgyzstan and Siberia) for their horns. The animals were trying to hide from ever-growing number of hunters, but as even inaccessible cliffs could not give them shelter, they left the country and have not been seen there since.

The last three chapters contain the dramatic action, the climax and the resolution of the plot. When three marals suddenly appear in the woods across the river from the village, both the boy and the grandfather believe that the Horned Deer-Mother has returned to her people and that life in harmony with nature will start anew. However, on that very day Momun arouses the anger of Orozkul, who then beats his wife again and dismisses the old man from his job. In order to appease Orozkul, the grandfather is forced into the position where he has to shoot and kill one of the marals. He does it in order to save his daughter

and grandson from further mistreatment, but instead he triggers the tragedy. Momun drinks himself senseless as a result, while the rest of them butcher the meat, roast it on a barbecue and have a party. When the boy, ill and feverish, who has been sleeping during these events, finds out what has happened, he is totally paralyzed and unable to decide what to do. It seems to him that his nightmares and the actual events merge in a horrific way. The balance between reality and myth has been lost, so it becomes clear that it is not possible for him to continue to live in such a world. The only thing he can do is to try to save himself inside his own personal myth. So he jumps into the freezing river in a desperate attempt to escape the horror by turning into a fish and swimming to his father.

Aitmatov's version of the myth of the Horned Deer-Mother is not simply taken over from traditional sources; it is, in fact, the product of his reworking of several folk myths which follow a similar storyline but differ in many details. In one of the versions, two brothers named Kara-Murza and Asan went into the mountains to hunt marals and found in the herd two children, a girl and a boy, with antlers on their heads. They killed the boy and brought the girl back to their chief, who married her to his grandson. She later gave proof of great wisdom, so people called her *Muiuz-babiche* ("horned mother"). She also cursed the hunters who killed her brother and, as a result, they were left childless. On the other hand, a servant-girl who drank the water *Muiuz-babiche* washed her head with got pregnant by that act and gave birth to a son named *Dzhelden* ("from the wind"), who became the forefather of one of the Kyrgyz clans. Other traditions tell that the two hunters did not kill a boy, but a white maral, then took home the girl with tiny antlers on her head and married her to a son of their third brother. After giving birth to a baby boy, she disappeared into the mountains

for a month, and when she came back she brought with her a young girl, a daughter of *Kaiyp* (or *Kaiberen*), the good ghost who protects wild animals. The girl, who was later called *Oluiat-baibiche* ("saint mother"), married the *Muiuz-babiche*'s son, and the young couple became the ancestors of the Kyrgyz. In another version, which belongs to the so-called 'taboo folktale' type, the horned girl told her husband after the marriage ceremony that he has to warn her before entering their *yurt* by coughing or making some other noise. Her request puzzled him for years, until one day curiosity got the upper hand. He returned home, having decided to take a look at her through the hole on the back wall of their *yurt*. His surprise was great when he saw inside only a female maral. By the time he managed to get in, she had already disappeared and was never seen again (Abramzon 281-84).

Other myths link Kyrgyz ancestry to wolves or wild dogs, rather than to deer and marals. One such story tells how a daughter of a khan went with her forty maids to gather wild fruit. On their return to the village they found everybody dead, killed by an enemy tribe. Not only humans, but also all the animals were massacred, with only one red dog remaining alive. As the only male left from the previous generation, he became the ancestor of the new Kyrgyz nation by impregnating the forty maids. The myth claims that the very name of the nation is derived from that event: in Kyrgyz *kyrk* means "forty," and *kyz*, "virgin" (Abramzon 288).

Aitmatov shaped a single narrative combining the myth of the Horned Deer-Mother with stories about the migration of his people. Many Kyrgyz legends and epics recount how they moved from South Siberia to the region around the Issik-Kul lake and the Tianshan mountains which they inhabit today (Zhirmunskii 35, 49). Both archaeological evidence

and historical records by Chinese and Persian authors confirm that the Kyrgyz used to live in the area between the Yenisei and the Irtysh rivers, from where they migrated in several successive movements between the thirteenth and the eighteenth centuries (Poliakova 14-32). The reason for their leaving their original homeland was the incessant warfare in the region, which is suitably rendered in Aitmatov's imaginative account.

Mythical overtones are present also in the main narrative line, although it is undoubtedly realistic, giving the impression of recording faithfully an actual way of life. Thus, Issik-Kul (literally, "dark blue water" [Il'ev 68]) is not accidentally chosen to carry on its waves the highest avatar of the boy's ideals: the white steamship. The lake, which lies in the center of the Kyrgyz promised land, has specific links to myth. As it is the only body of water in Kyrgyzstan that never freezes, it was called "warm" and was revered by the people (Poliakova 40). In Aitmatov's story "Плач перелетной птицы [The Lament of a Migrating Bird]," the protagonists pray to the lake, addressed as "the eye of the earth" which "always looks at the sky" (95),<sup>30</sup> to convey their prayers to *Tengri*, the supreme God of the sky in the Kyrgyz pantheon. The countryside around Issik-Kul is described in WS as a primal, uninhabited paradise, untouched by human hands, when the Horned Deer-Mother arrived with the two children:

Кругом снежные хребты, а посреди гор, поросших зеленым лесом, насколько глаз хватает море плещется. Ходят белые волны по синей воде, ветры гонят их издали, угоняют вдаль. Где начало Иссык-Куля, где конец — не узнать. С одного края солнце восходит, а на другом еще ночь. Сколько гор стоят вокруг Иссык-Куля — не счесть, а за теми горами сколько еще таких же снежных гор высится — тоже не угадать. (62)

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<sup>30</sup> "О Иссык-Куль, ты око земли, ты всегда смотришь в небо."

Snowy crests towered everywhere around them and amidst the mountains covered with green forests as far as the eye could see, splashed and sparkled the great sea. White waves moved across the blue water; the wind whipped them from far behind and drove them far away. No one could tell where the Issik-Kul began and where it ended. The sun rose at one end while at the other it was still night. Mountains beyond count soared around the Issik-Kul, nor could one guess how many of the same snowy peaks stood beyond these mountains. (66-67)

Even after the dispersal of the marals and the demise of the Horned Deer-Mother, her spirit is believed to have remained to hover above Issik-Kul and watch over her people (Levchenko 135-36). The position of the outpost in which the action takes place is also significant. It occupies the liminal space between the 'civilized' land and the wilderness, or, in other words, between villages and cities where ordinary reality rules, and mountains and forests in which totemic animals live. Thus, in symbolic terms, it is a space where common and mythic realities meet and communicate, opening many dimensions of insight. Characters like the boy and his grandfather, who are more interested in spiritual and aesthetic things, have their eyes turned to the mountains; whereas those who are primarily attracted by material goods, which means everybody else, look in the opposite direction.

In WS Aitmatov makes the acceptance of myth in contemporary society psychologically believable by attributing mythic consciousness to those of his heroes who are either very young or very old, and so in both cases especially open to the 'work of myth.' In the first case, the reason is the child's non-differentiation between reality and imagination (Kolesnikoff, "Child" 103); in the second, it is the memories that form the greater part of the mental processes of the old man. They both live in a very close proximity to the mythic world, which is opposed to that of the adults, locked in its utilitarian

dimension. Whenever Momun talks to people in his old-fashioned way, for example when he greets the vendor of the mobile shop with: “Ассалам-алейкум, большой купец” ‘*Asalam aleikum*, great trader’ (19; 19), or when he says a prayer to the Horned Deer-Mother (77; 83), or when the boy tells someone about his grandfather’s stories, they encounter lack of comprehension, incredulity, amazement, and even scorn. Thus, for example, when a truck driver came to the outpost, and heard some of the stories from the boy, he was quite astonished and qualified Momun as

Интересный дед. Только забивает он тебе голову всякой чепухой. А ты ведь большеголовый... И уши у тебя такие, как локаторы у нас на полигоне. Не слушай ты его. К коммунизму идем, в космос летаем, а он чему учит? К нам бы на политзанятия его, мы бы его мигом образовали. (107)

A very interesting grandfather. Only he stuffs your head with all kinds of rubbish. You’re a big-headed fellow, after all — and you’ve got ears on you like our radar on the firing range. Don’t you listen to him. We’re marching to communism, we’re flying in space — and what’s he teaching you? He ought to sit in our political instruction sessions, we’d wisen him up in a wink. (113)

On another level, such distribution between ‘mythic’ and ‘realistic’ ways of thinking can be understood symbolically as the past characterized by the respect for myth and harmony with nature (Momun), the uncertain future of such an outlook (the boy), and the sterile, alienated and therefore very aggressive present (Orozkul, Koketai and Seidakhmat).

Animistic, totemistic and shamanistic religious positions were, as we have seen, in the heart of the traditional Kyrgyz worldview, and they are all present in the novel. Animism sees animals, plants, natural phenomena, and even inanimate objects as living, feeling and thinking beings. The boy, who is growing up in the outpost with no other

children to play with, makes friends instead with rocks and plants (Mirza-Akhmedova 46). He gives them names, invents games for them, and pretends to have conversations with them. Thus there is a 'wolf' rock, a 'tank,' and a 'lying camel'; among the plants, the stinging burdock is the enemy he often fights with, the bindweed has the smartest and happiest flowers of all, whereas the shiraljins are loyal friends among whom he takes cover when he feels hurt (WS 9-10; 10-11). During the harsh winter months he is worried about the trees in the forest who "get terribly frightened" (47)<sup>31</sup> standing all alone in the night exposed to the hard frost.

Totemism is first portrayed in Momun's insistence that all members of the *bugu* clan are descendants of the Horned Deer-Mother. In his view, they are all his brothers and sisters. He thinks that everybody should know both the origin of his or her clan, and the names of seven previous generations of ancestors. However, totemism is most powerfully expressed in the myth of the Horned Deer-Mother. The fact is that different species of deer, as well as of wolves, have been the totemic animals of different Turkish tribes since ancient times, as is witnessed by their first written documents dating from the seventh and eighth centuries. In some of those inscriptions ancient khans boast about not killing deer (Poliakova 34-35). Their views in that regard are similar to those expressed in Aitmatov's version of the myth. Totemic animals are bound to return the favor, as happens in the novel when Momun and Orozkul are miraculously saved from the huge log which slipped down a steep slope while they were trying to bring it to the village:

Все произошло в одно мгновение. Лошадь упала, и ее на боку потащило вниз. Падая, она сшибла Орозкула. Он катился, судорожно цепляясь

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<sup>31</sup> "Деревьям ведь очень страшно ночью в лесу" (45).

за кусты. И в этот момент какие-то рогатые животные испуганно шарахнулись в густой листве. Высоко и сильно подпрыгивая, они скрылись в березовой чаще.

“Маралы! Маралы!” вне себя от испуга и радости вскричал дед Момун. И замолк, будто не веря своим глазам.

И вдруг в горах стало тихо. Галки разом улетели. Бревно задержалось на скате, подмяв под себя молодые крепкие березки. Лошадь, путаясь в сбруе, сама встала на ноги. (76-77)

All this happened in an instant. The horse fell and was dragged down the slope on its side. In falling, the animal struck down Orozkul. He clutched convulsively at the bushes as he rolled. Just at that moment, some kind of horned animals started in fear within the thick foliage. Leaping high and powerfully, they took shelter in a grove of birch trees.

“Marals, marals!” cried grandfather Momun, beside himself with fear and joy. And then fell silent, as if not believing his own eyes.

Suddenly, everything grew hushed in the mountains. The jackdaws dispersed all at once. Having crushed strong young birch trees in its path, the log was caught by something on the slope. (82-83)

On the other hand, the killing of the totemic animal symbolizes betrayal of the holy covenant, and is a deed equivalent to self-destruction. The horrible scene of Orozkul's chopping off the deer's horns stresses the brutality and sacrilege of such an act. It implies the destruction of all human ideals and the inauguration of a reign of brutal power. The Horned Deer-Mother came for the second time to help people, and again fell as a victim of human cruelty. Similar patterns, including the coming of a totemic protector, its expulsion from the world as a result of human arrogance and cruelty, the dark period, and finally the return of the protector, are used in *Altın Arıy*, another Central Asian epic (Marazzi vii-xii),

and it seems that Aitmatov was inspired by it. However, there is a difference: unlike the authors of the epic, Aitmatov does not explicitly mention any possible return of the totemic protector.

The structure of WS can be understood as a failed initiation quest. It begins early in the novel when Momun realizes that his grandson has reached school age and buys him a briefcase. It is a very important event for the boy: he is now to embark on the exciting journey of learning about the world. However, all the adults to whom he shows his new briefcase in his enthusiasm (Orozkul, Seidakhmat, grandmother) just laugh at him and do not take him seriously. Even when he later proves to be a diligent student it only irritates his grandmother. His efforts are thus thwarted from the very beginning; the world of the adults is not accepting him. The tripartite sequence of an initiation rite is usually described as consisting of separation, initiation, and return (Tumanov 145). The separation, which began with his going to school, deepens through his loneliness and reaches its summit when he learns about the killing of the Horned Deer-Mother. He is now abandoned even by his grandfather. In the second sequence of the initiation rite the participants have to symbolically 'die' in order to be reborn again as adults. In various ways they descend into the 'underworld' where they have to overcome evil forces. The boy faces hell not underground, but in this world. The distorted faces of the revelers who gorge themselves on maral meat are more demon-like than human. So he turns to the water, symbolizing life-giving properties, in order to escape such death-in-life, but his attempt to be reborn in a better world is not successful, the evil forces are too strong, and he fails the third part of his initiation quest.

Some critics understood the boy's plight as a foiled shamanic journey. According to such interpretations, the fact that he is compared to lightning means that he is to be understood, in the context of traditional Kyrgyz religion, as a child of the God of the sky, *Tengri*. His close relation with clouds, to whom he talks, confiding his secret desire to be transformed into a fish, points in the same direction.<sup>32</sup> Shamans are believed to communicate with spirits and to be able to take different animal forms (Alekseev 79-97). The boy talks with marals in his feverish dreams, just as shamans do in their trances, and climbs the Guard Mountain to watch Issik-Kul, just as shamans on their journeys climb the Cosmic Mountain to see higher cosmic zones (Eliade, *Shamanism* 99, 104, 259-69). Grandfather Momun's claim that one out of every seven people is a prophet, and that a prophet does not know himself to be a prophet, may be applied to his grandson, as there are exactly seven people in the outpost, and nobody else can be understood in such a way. Thus the boy can be interpreted as an unrecognized shaman whose journey into another sphere of existence failed (Maryniak 100-3).

The circular time of the novel is based on two different cycles: the yearly cycle of the four seasons and the historical cycle of the appearance and disappearance of the totemic animal. Aitmatov does not specify when the contemporary action of *WS* takes place, but several references to the Second World War indicate that it must be sometime in the fifties or in the sixties. It is appropriate for the mythic tone of the novel that the time is determined primarily by the boy's age and by the changing seasons. The author depicts two full cycles

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<sup>32</sup> A similar motif appears in Aitmatov's novella *Белое облако Чингисхана* [*The White Cloud of Genghis Khan*], in which a white cloud follows the world conqueror on his campaigns, symbolizing the support of the God of the sky (37-39). When the cloud finally disappears, Genghis Khan understands that his luck is over, cuts short his last expedition and returns to his home camp (100 - 1).

involving the Horned Deer-Mother, which in WS embodies the principles of eternal life and eternal return. We cannot but be amazed at how the present tragically repeats the past and to what extent human beings seem to be incapable of avoiding making the same mistakes over and over again. Because of that, the novel is pervaded by an apocalyptic mood and its end is ambiguous: we are not sure if the boy's death means the end of all hopes, or if his voice, like that of a modern-day Chupalak, will be heard from inside the wolf of modernization and alienation.

Numerical symbolism plays an important part in WS. The number seven is repeated on several levels: the boy is seven years old, there are seven people living in the village: three men, three women, and the boy, while the novel itself consists of seven chapters, the myth of the Horned Deer-Mother occupying the fourth. Kyrgyz Adam and Eve have seven sons and seven daughters, the importance of knowing the names of seven previous generations of one's ancestors is stressed, and, in Momun's saying, one out of every seven people is a prophet (Il'ev 68-69).

The plot of WS is organized around several binary oppositions: past/present, mythic/real world, village/city life, nature/culture, earth/water. Aitmatov does not idealize the past; on the contrary, he is well aware that it also frequently witnessed human cruelty to other humans. However, through it he shows us that only if we establish a balance between myth and reality, and between nature and culture, can we hope to achieve a just society (Kieffer 464). And this balance is precisely what the contemporary world with its ideologies of constant growth — whether communist or market-oriented — lacks. Visions from the past are necessary for contemporary writers not only to strengthen their artistic

images, but also to help them understand the present better (Novikov 44). In other words, only a dialogue between the past and the present can lead to a healthy approach to eternal human problems. On the other hand, just as actual material reality is not enough for human spiritual needs, living in myth alone and forgetting about the ordinary world is also very dangerous; when the horrible situation in which he lives forces the boy to hide completely inside his personal myth, he drowns in the freezing waters of the mountain river trying to escape into the world of fantasy.

The city, where links between generations are broken and people live “как в тюрьме” ‘like in jail’ (38; 39) is an even stronger symbol of the alienation and materialism of modern society. People do not know each other there, family members see each other only during the weekend, and the whole urban complex looks like a vast penitentiary. The description of the mountains is diametrically opposite: “В бору было чисто, как всегда, и строго, как в храме” ‘As always, it was chaste and severe in the forest, as in a temple’ (68; 73). Nature does not need us, it is suggested, but we humans need nature, even if many of us are unaware of the fact. Water is often understood as the source of life and as a protector of the persecuted (Poliakova 60); in Central Asian traditions it is also a symbol of purity, participating in the divinity, since it both falls from the sky and reflects it (Roux 137-41). The boy also sees in it a possible source of comfort, as opposed to the cruel life on earth: first it is the Issik-Kul lake which lies in the center of his dreams about the white steamship and his larger-than-life father, and then the mountain river by which he would like to escape in the form of a fish.

Nature in Aitmatov's works is never just a background or a stage where the action takes place; it always has a much more important ethical, psychological and mythical role (Rumpler and Kleimenova 273). The Horned Deer-Mother is at the focus of his nature myth. In the traditional Kyrgyz mythology she was thought to be a daughter of *Kaiyp* (or *Kaiberen*), the patron of wild animals (Agranovich 153), and, by extension in the contemporary world, of the environment itself. The story about the Horned Deer-Mother is thus an ecological myth expressing a world-view of humanity as an integral part of nature. Throughout it Aitmatov insists that humankind needs to establish harmonious coexistence with nature without striving to set itself over and above it. Life on earth is a "harmonious cycle that humans can join but not change" (Olcott 225). By hurting nature we also hurt ourselves. Grandfather Momun understands that well and cares profoundly for the forest and the animals that live in it; the boy is also totally immersed in the natural world, making friends with rocks, grass and flowers. The actions and attitudes of Orozkul, Koketai and Seidakhmat demonstrate very clearly what happens when people do not live in harmony with nature. The strongest accusation of Orozkul in the boy's dream are Kulubek's imagined words of reproach: "Тебя никто здесь не любит. Тебя не любит лес, ни одно дерево, даже ни одна травинка тебя не любит" 'Nobody likes you here. The forest doesn't like you, not a single tree does — not a single blade of grass' (154; 160). The Horned Deer-Mother as the totemic forebear and the protector of the Kyrgyz establishes an essential link between humans and the natural world, so her killing symbolizes the tragic and dangerous break between humanity and the environment. This motif comes from another Kyrgyz epic, Kozhozhash, in which a young man goes into the mountains to hunt

wild goats. He kills so many of them, that finally the Lamé Gray She-Goat confronts the hunter entreating him to spare the Old Gray He-Goat, since there are no more wild goats left to ensure the survival of the species. Without any care for her words, the young man shoots her mate and then fires at her too, but misses. In an attempt to try one more time, he follows the Old Gray She-Goat high among the mountain peaks, where she leaves him on an inaccessible cliff from which he falls to his death (Novikov 179-80).

On another level, the story about the Horned Deer-Mother is also a myth of national origins, telling their hearers how they came to occupy the land they now inhabit, and assuring them that this process, while arduous, was good, proper and just. Such myths enable members of a society — in this case the Kyrgyz — to recognize themselves, to confront the unknown and to identify their culture, culture being — in Herderian terms — a society organically unified by mythology. Once arrived in the Issik-Kul region, the Horned Deer-Mother said to the two children: “Это и есть ваша новая родина. Будете жить здесь, землю пахать, рыбу ловить, скот разводить. Живите здесь с миром тысячи лет. Да продлится ваш род и умножится” ‘This is your new homeland. You will live here — will farm the earth, catch fish and raise cattle. You will live here in peace for a thousand years. Your kin will endure and multiply’ (62; 67). The *raison d’être* of the nation and its homeland is thus established. This facet of the myth shows how much Aitmatov is worried by the contemporary tendencies of small ethnic groups to disappear and be absorbed into larger entities, either through ‘building up of the Soviet communist nation’ (Aitmatov and Ikeda 117) or as a consequence of free trade and globalization. His emphasis on the importance of memory and — by implication — of history, was noteworthy in the

ideological system where a national past was supposed to end shortly on the 'rubbish heap of history.' This aspect of the myth is also linked to the role of the Horned Deer-Mother in bringing forth future generations. She is the one who gives children to Kyrgyz families and helps women in labor. Those who betray her, as seen in several versions of the myth (see p. 82 above), are punished with sterility. Orozkul is thus childless in spite of all the efforts he and his wife make, and all the medical centers they visit.

The ethical dimension of myth is perhaps the most important one for our author. In his works we rarely leave the arena where good and bad confront each other. Aitmatov fully accepts the moral canon of Kyrgyz epic poetry and transfers it to the contemporary world. The boy protagonist is heroic in his choice not to accept evil, and finds moral support in the myths that form his worldview. In the same sense, myths are also relevant for the contemporary world, as "the hero's virtues as a worker and citizen are rooted precisely in his knowledge of and respect for traditional religious practice" (Olcott 214). Thus WS can be understood as a call for the preservation of a spiritual heritage, symbolically represented by the Horned Deer-Mother, in an overly pragmatic and materialistic world. When Momun shoots her he destroys not only his own dream of goodness and justice, but also the boy's faith in everything sacred.

Perhaps the most important binary opposition in WS is the one between two worlds, between a world imbued with mythic consciousness, and a world totally lacking it. Instead of opposing to the classical Kyrgyz mythic outlook some modern industrial-technological or class-conscious mythology, the author chose to present the contemporary world as totally mythless. The reason for that is probably the inadequacy of any such surrogates on

ontological, cosmological and ethical levels. Aitmatov remarked in one of his interviews that people living without legends and myths are condemned to spiritual poverty and are incapable of understanding the complexities of the modern world (“Мы изменяем [We Are Changing]” 327), an opinion which is clearly visible in his works. In WS, a society without myth is reduced to greed, tyranny and laziness. In the character of Orozkul Aitmatov portrays those who despise their culture, care only about money and material advantages, and are unable to understand the beauty and meaning of ancient stories:

Да ерунда все это, какая там, к черту, олениха, когда за копейку готовы друг другу в горло впиться или в тюрьму засадить! Это в прежние времена люди верили в олениху. До чего же глупые и темные были тогдашние люди, смешно! А теперь все культурные, все грамотные! Кому нужны они, эти сказки для малых детей! (74)

All that's pure bullshit — and what the hell does some deer count for when everybody's poised to grab for your jugular for a kopek, or clap you in jail? It was in prehistoric times when people believed in some kind of deer. There was no end to the stupidity and ignorance in those days — it was plain ridiculous. Now, on the other hand, everybody is civilized and literate. Who needs those babyish fairy-tales? (79-80)

Orozkul's ideal is “the city” where “people know how to respect a man according to his job,” and where “the bosses sit around on the back seats and are driven through the streets” in “black, smooth, sparkling cars” (76-77).<sup>33</sup> In his daydreams he is one of the ‘bosses,’ people are afraid of him, and his children speak only Russian. Material interests alone are obviously not sufficient to make a society work. Unlike communist ideology, which tended

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<sup>33</sup> “Но то в городе... Начальство там какое ездит по улицам. [. . .] Машина эта, черная, блестящая, плавная. [. . .] Там умеют уважать человека по должности” (71).

to represent mythology and religion as 'the opium of the people,' in the novel it is power, together with vodka, which intoxicates people and make them act as if they 'don't know what they are doing.' Myths, on the contrary, make them sober and respectful of nature and other human beings. As a consequence, we can only hope that the contemporary world will find a place for mythopoeia in it, mythopoeia understood as "a rhapsodic affirmation of life" (Chase 35).

The myth of the Golden Age is usually understood as describing an idyllic paradisiacal human situation which supposedly existed in primordial times, only to be ended by a notable transgression. It is present in WS in a specific version which combines its typical features with the new ones: Aitmatov postulates that such a paradisiacal situation did not exist only once, at a certain point in history, and that, once gone, it was irrecoverable, but rather that it occurred several times in the past, whenever peaceful coexistence between nations and between humans and nature was established. In other words, it exists as a possibility in any age, including the contemporary world, and its realization depends entirely on human ability to master greed, pride, and aggressiveness. Aitmatov thus stresses respect for nature as a *sine qua non* for establishing harmonious human society, and condemns human selfishness, cupidity and arrogance as the main culprits for the situation humankind finds itself in.

Aitmatov's novels cannot themselves be qualified as myths; they are works of fiction employing traditional myths to accentuate philosophical and moral issues and to shed light on problems of human existence and the meaning of life. Both traditional narratives and his own versions of them act in his works as vehicles of contestation of the

contemporary world, and of communication of insights that cannot be expressed otherwise. His heroes move between Kyrgyz mountains and the boundless expanses of myth to cast from there a look at our ordinary reality (Levchenko 162-63). Embedded traditional stories juxtaposed to the realistic plot are set in a mirror game which must be ultimately activated by the reader-decoder. The contemporary reality, set against the Golden Age of mythic time, is treated with irony and hostility, while a modern tragedy is illuminated by an ancient myth.

Aitmatov sees myth as essential but not necessarily transcendental, i.e., as a kind of narrative necessary for humans in their struggle for meaning, while not referring to any eternal transcendental reality. Like Harris' view that "man is both fossil and psyche, an inheritor of the dead past, but also the creator of his own kind of being" ("History" 23), Aitmatov believes that only a creative use of traditional myths can be beneficial for the contemporary world. In the domain of literature, he says, "вовлечение мифов в творчество — это острейшая человеческая потребность сконденсировать в себе весь опыт, знания и страсти" 'to involve myth into creative writing is a natural human need to condense in ourselves the whole of experience, knowledge and passion' (qtd. in Levchenko 171).

An important characteristic of Aitmatov's mythopoeia is his preference for shamanistic, totemistic and animistic traditional stories, as opposed to those of revealed religions. Such inclination probably comes as a result of his view of humanity as an integral part of nature, but it may be surprising considering the fact that Islam is the majority religion in Kyrgyzstan. The reason for his indifference to traditional Islam is his dislike of

any form of ideological essentialism with totalitarian pretensions of possessing the final truth. It is precisely on those grounds that he strongly condemned Muslim fundamentalism (Aitmatov and Ikeda 181). On the other hand, he finds certain Christian traditions inspiring, and he used Christian motifs in several of his works, most notably in Плаха [The Place of the Skull].<sup>34</sup>

It is obvious that Aitmatov likes mythic stories and enjoys retelling them. In that way he continues oral traditions in the medium of written literature. He conveys traditional myths in a very appropriate way, successfully imitating the style of oral story-telling and presenting, “in accordance with mythological tradition, [...] the fantastic as strictly truthful” (Kolesnikoff, Myth 44). Myths in his work are convincing, showing no sign of becoming “mythological zombies, the walking dead” (O’Flaherty 26), as happens so often when traditional myths are retold in books. Aitmatov creates his own versions of myths in a manner appropriate for contemporary fiction, while, at the same time, they are in perfect accord with the mythologies of the specific cultures described in his works (e.g., Kyrgyz in WS, Nivkh in “Пегий пес бегущий краем моря [Piebald Dog Running Along the Shore]”). The main problem in transposing traditional myths into written literature lies in the fact that they are always tied to the particular cultural framework in which they operate, so that, when cut away from it, they tend to lose a lot of their power and to change meaning

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<sup>34</sup> Some critics tried to find parallels between WS and certain Christian myths and symbols. For example, Igor' Zolotusskii pointed out that the fish is an ancient symbol of Christianity, representing faith, silence and submissiveness, and that water is a symbol of life (63). Thus, according to him, the boy's decision to jump into the river expecting to be changed into a fish means that the only refuge from the predicaments of this world can be found in the depths of religion. Georgii Gachev, on the other hand, saw in the plot of WS a reinterpretation of the passion-play, with the absent father standing for God, the Horned Deer-Mother for the Virgin, Momun for Judas, and the boy for Jesus (218).

significantly. Aitmatov successfully solves this problem by representing in the realistic part of his narratives the social environment that the myths operate in, by presenting several traditional narratives and their interaction at the same time, and by showing their psychological impact in the consciousness of his characters. In that way his approach is very similar to Ribeiro's, with the difference that the Brazilian author does not belong to the community whose myths he evokes, and that he tends to conflate traditions from several different, although culturally close, native Brazilian societies, rather than to represent only one of them. Both Ribeiro and Aitmatov stress the necessity of survival of 'small' cultures in a world already desperately unbalanced, and the importance of mythopoiea in modern fiction for preserving those traditions and for enabling them to face the future by uncovering new meanings in an imaginative way.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **DARCY RIBEIRO'S MAÍRA: SEARCH FOR SPIRITUALITY IN A DESPIRITUALIZED WORLD**

Der Kannibale [...] hat seine Feinde zum Fressen lieb, und er frisst nur die, die er lieb hat.

Sigmund Freud (67)

Ne crains point, ô civilisé aux orteils recroquevillés, ton Sauvage est ton Sauveur, et ton sauvage n'est pas loin, il dort encore au fond de ta conscience.

Roger Gilbert-Lecomte (qtd. in Maubon 111)

Unlike other authors presented in this study, Brazilian Darcy Ribeiro (1922-1997) was primarily an anthropologist, as well as educator, academic, politician and outspoken social critic, before he turned, when he was in his fifties, to the surprise of all who knew him, to writing fiction (Garcia 17). For many years he had been immersed in anthropological, ethnological and folklorist research and devoted almost a decade, from the mid-forties to the mid-fifties, to fieldwork among the Indian nations of the Amazon and central Brazil, among them the Kaduveo, Terena, Kaywá, Ofaié-Xavante, Bororo, Karajá, Urubú-Kaapor, Kaingang, Xokleng and various Xingú groups (Meggers ix). During this period he also organized the *Museu do Índio* in Rio de Janeiro in 1952, and conducted a study on acculturation under the auspices of UNESCO, showing that there is no genuine 'assimilation' transforming Amerindians into Brazilians, but that the natives are "simplesmente exterminados através de várias formas de coação biótica, ecológica, econômica e cultural" 'simply wiped out through biotic, ecological, economic and cultural forms of coercion' (Ribeiro, *Confissões* 190-91). Ribeiro was later a professor at the *Universidade do Brasil* in Rio de Janeiro, as well as one of the founders of the *Universidade de Brasília*, where he also taught. In the political arena he became famous as

an outspoken critic of Brazilian urban capitalistic civilization and a militant fighter for the physical and cultural survival of the Indians, exposing the reality of the Brazilian government's 'development' of large areas of Amazonia and the Mato Grosso, which brought about a steady decline of the remaining indigenous tribes, leading inexorably to their systematic extermination.<sup>35</sup> Using Orlando Villas Boas' famous anthropophagous metaphor,<sup>36</sup> Ribeiro stressed the fact that, in the contemporary world, the 'civilized' societies are devouring indigenous populations, since the only effect of 'assimilation' is that the Indians are becoming more marginalized and their different cultures are disappearing.

In the early sixties Ribeiro entered political life as Brazil's Minister of Education and Culture, but in consequence of the establishment of a military dictatorship, he had to leave the country in 1964, as did many other intellectuals, artists and writers, and spend thirteen years in exile. Although invited by Claude Lévy-Strauss to be a lecturer at the prestigious *École pratique des hautes études* in Paris, Ribeiro preferred to stay in Latin America. He taught at universities in Uruguay, Guatemala and Mexico, helped the restructuring of national universities in Venezuela, Peru and Costa Rica, and acted as an advisor to Presidents Allende in Chile and Velasco in Peru (Ribeiro Coelho 16-17). In January 1971 he took part in drawing the Barbados Declaration on the ethnocide of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, a document which criticized religious missions for their complicity with colonialism and appealed to the churches to discontinue all missionary work in the future (Novaes 105). After his return to Brazil he continued both his academic

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<sup>35</sup> In 1979 Ribeiro noted that, in the first eight decades of the twentieth century, some eighty indigenous peoples in Brazil — out of 230 in all — have completely disappeared (*Testemunho* 13).

<sup>36</sup> "Antigamente o índio nos comia. Agora, somos nós que estamos comendo o índio" 'In the old days, Indians ate us. Today, it is us who are eating the Indians' (qtd. in Ribeiro, *Ensaio* 157).

and political careers, but, focusing more and more on literary activity, he produced several novels and a book of poetry. Ribeiro received a number of recognitions for his research work and was distinguished by *honoris causa* Ph.D. degrees from the universities of Uruguay (1968), Paris (1979), Copenhagen (1991) and Rome (1996 [Ribeiro Coelho 237]). His death in 1997 was caused by cancer, which he had fought during the last thirty-five years of his life.

Ribeiro wrote a number of anthropological monographs, including such seminal ones as Religião e mitologia Kadiwéu [Kaduveo Religion and Mythology] and Diários índios: Os Urubus-Kaapor [The Indian Diaries: The Urubú-Kaapor], a multi-volume work on Latin American and Brazilian civilizations, studies on 'civilizational process' and acculturation, works on education, and several books of essays, before trying his hand at fiction. His research on the indigenous cultures of both Amazonia and the Mato Grosso, as well as on regional variations of Brazilian society and their repercussions for urbanization, industrialization and public education, provided him with raw material for and profound understanding of the existing social problems he later used in his novels. In his essay "Ética para antropólogos [Ethics for anthropologists]" Ribeiro insisted that it is impossible for anthropologists who study indigenous societies to maintain an 'indifferent' and neutral position without paying attention to their plight (Testemunho 42-44). Claiming that fiction offered him a better opportunity than scientific anthropological monographs to express all he had learned about indigenous cultures during the years of his fieldwork, he published in 1976 his first literary work, Maíra, "um romance da dor e do gozo de ser índio" 'a novel about the sorrow and joy of being Indian' (Testemunho 206). With O mulo [The Mule]

(1981) and Utopia selvagem: Saudades da inocência perdida: Uma fábula [Savage Utopia: Nostalgia for Lost Innocence: A Fable] (1982) it forms a trilogy focusing on the different facets of the life and survival of indigenous peoples in contemporary Brazil, and on the social situation in the interior of the country (DiAntonio 66). MR is not only Ribeiro's first, but also his most famous and probably best novel, claimed as one of the key works of contemporary Brazilian fiction (DiAntonio 67), one which will mark the second half of the twentieth century in Brazilian literature in the same way Mário de Andrade's Macunaíma marked its first half (Castro 412). Written as a sophisticated intermingling of realism and modernism, at the same time telling a story and questioning it, it displays a polyphony of narrative voices and employs ambiguity as a structural element of the narrative process. Ribeiro uses his considerable anthropological experience to evoke the world of a still 'uncivilized' Indian tribe, showing theirs to be "a doomed world, threatened by all kinds of religious, economic, and cultural factors" (Gledson 205). The Mairum tribe in the novel is caught between two worlds and marginalized by both: the world of the old ways, become infeasible, and the world of the nation that surrounds them, where they have no place except through self-negation. The myths portrayed in the novel function both as a structural device organizing the narrative, and as comments on the realistic plot. Some of Ribeiro's other works, such as Utopia selvagem [Savage Utopia] or his later labyrinthine novel of apprenticeship Migo (Lucas 174), are also pervaded by mythopoeia.

Ribeiro's novel belongs to two important literary traditions: to that of fictional representations of the native peoples of his country, and to Latin American mythopoeic literature. Narratives about the indigenous nations of Brazil, their contact with European

colonizers, the conquest of the interior of the country<sup>37</sup> and the multiracial nature of Brazilian culture have always had an important place in Brazilian literature, and indeed in Spanish American as well, beginning in the sixteenth century with writers such as Pêro Vaz de Caminha, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, El Inca Garcilaso and Alonso de Ercilla. The beauty of the newly conquered country fascinated and inspired European writers, while the exoticism of the unknown interior contributed to “its translation into mythical territory” (Maligo 153). The Amerindians who inhabited it were variously seen as noble savages to be admired, pagans to be Christianized and befriended, cannibals to be suppressed, or dangerous enemies to be restrained in order that the interior of the country could be developed. The interior itself was understood in opposite ways: either as an equatorial paradise, i.e., a Garden of Eden, an image which European imagination was projecting onto recently ‘discovered’ parts of the world, especially tropical America (Arinos de Melo Franco 12), or as a green hell, essentially different from the ‘civilized’ coastal regions. Colonial Brazilian literature often celebrated the conquest and portrayed interactions between colonizers and Amerindians. Thus, for example, its two main works in the eighteenth century are two epics, José Basílio da Gama’s *O Uruguai* [The Uruguay] and José de Santa Rita Durão’s *Caramuru*, which extol the virtues of Portuguese warriors and their noble Indian allies, vilify their savage enemies, and eulogize the beauty and richness of the country.

A new stage of Brazilian literature began in the first half of the nineteenth century, after the declaration of independence in 1822. During the three previous centuries the

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<sup>37</sup> First contact and exploration of the unknown interior are key tropes in colonial literatures as a whole.

Portuguese crown had strictly prohibited the establishing of printing presses and libraries in its American colonies (Nunes 13), with the result that only a few works written in Brazil were published in Portugal, and the rest circulated in manuscript form among relatively few colonial readers (Haberly, "Colonial" 49). Now, for the first time, facilities for higher education were established, as well as a printing press, a public library, and scientific establishments. The new generation of Brazilian writers inherited from their predecessors the image of the 'archetypal' Indian and used it above all in order to appropriate some genuine American roots that would provide a sense of national authenticity. What they wanted most of all was to find a particularly Brazilian voice, and to "create a mythical childhood" (Brookshaw 45) for the country's history in a moment when it became sovereign. They thus turned inward towards their primeval forests, rivers, mountains, and indigenous people, in an attempt to define what Regina Zilberman called "the representation through art of a national identity" (143).

Indianism in Brazilian literature flowered mostly in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s.<sup>38</sup> Gonçalves Dias, the greatest poet of the period, himself one quarter Indian, sung about an entirely Amerindian lost Eden, while the novels of José de Alencar, especially O Guarani [The Guarani Indian] (1857) and Iracema (1865) — the two most widely read Brazilian novels, each going into more than a hundred editions (Haberly, Three 33) — developed romantic utopian ideals which grew to become Brazilian national myths. Unlike European romantic fiction depicting contacts between the 'civilized' and the 'savages,' the Brazilian author "does not treat exoticism as a foreign cultural element, but rather as an integral part

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<sup>38</sup> The 'Indian fever' which gripped Brazil during those years was such that the emperor Pedro I took *Guatimozin*, the name of the last Aztec ruler of Mexico, as his Masonic alias, whereas his heir Pedro II learned to speak Tupí (Haberly, Three 16).

of Brazilian national identity and culture” (Ventura 39). In O Guarani [The Guarani Indian] a Portuguese family and its native allies are surrounded by hostile Indians. As the situation gets desperate, the father of the family blows everybody up, both friends and enemies, with only his daughter and a young Indian hero surviving. The two of them are further threatened by a sudden flood, but they manage to uproot a palm tree and to sail down the river on it. To make the time pass, the young man retells the story about Tamandaré, an Indian cultural hero, who with his mate repopulated the Earth after a previous Deluge. The end of the novel is left open, so the readers can decide for themselves whether the young couple will unite only in heaven, as seems to be the girl’s wish, or whether they will emulate the Indian myth. In Iracema, the more famous of the two novels, a Portuguese colonizer meets, in the course of his expedition to conquer Céara, a Tabajara Indians’ priest’s beautiful daughter Iracema, whose name is an anagram for America (Haberly, Three 48-49). They fall in love and she helps him in his mission. In the end, his campaign is a success, while she dies giving birth to their son Moacyr, who is then taken back to ‘civilization’ by his father, crowned with glory. Some writers in the nineteenth century used the ‘archetypal’ Indian figure in several other ways too: to create colorful images, to personify the natural environment, or as a symbol of freedom. More realistic depictions of the life in the interior appeared in the novels written in the last decades of the century by writers such as Inglês de Sousa and Euclides da Cunha. At the same time, the *Indigenismo* movement, flourishing from the 1880s and throughout the first half of the twentieth century in both Brazil and Spanish America (Merquior 372), brought about social protest advocating Indian rights against brutal exploitation. Writers who belonged to this

movement considered indigenous cultures and values equal to their European counterparts and wanted to legitimize and preserve their intrinsic features. However, their argument that the Indians “must step into modern society of their own accord with the help of those who feel the injustice of their situation” (Prieto 149), tended to foster assimilation of the native population into the mainstream of national life.

Emerging during the period of territorial expansion, coffee and rubber exploitation, and a rising concern for national integration, the *modernismo* movement between the twenties and forties did not see the jungle any longer as a frontier which needed to be ‘civilized.’ Rather, it glorified the Brazilian ‘melting pot’ and consequently — in spite of its enthusiasm for all things primitive and exotic — tended to satirize traditional myths of colonization and to carnivalize conquest. The key novel of the period was Mário de Andrade’s Macunaíma, which the author called a “rhapsody” (Haberly, Three 146) and which is best described as a potpourri of subjects taken from national folklore (Braga 65). Its eponymous protagonist is an irreverent Indian anti-hero who, in an inversion of the frontier myth, attempts to conquer the concrete jungle of São Paulo. Andrade integrated Indian creation and trickster myths into the national folk culture, using as sources for his fiction both colonial historians, such as Capistrano de Abreu, and anthropological studies, such as Koch-Grünberg’s Del Roraima al Orinoco containing myths and legends of the Taulipang and Arekuna of Northwest Brazil and Venezuela. “The novel concludes on a melancholy note, suggesting that nothing remains of the Brazilian Indians except for the memory that a parrot transmits to the narrator, who passes it on to the reader as the core of a possible cultural identity” (Ventura 42). Because of the assumption, common during the

*modernismo* years, that incorporation of indigenous populations into Brazilian society is a *fait accompli*, their very real problems have been pushed aside and neglected.

Although Ribeiro, together with some other contemporary Brazilian writers such as Antônio Callado (*Quarup*), José Louzeiro (*O verão dos perseguidos* [*The summer of the persecuted*]), and José Mauro de Vasconcelos (*Kuryala*), continues to write within that tradition, he, like the others, brings in a very important innovative approach, managing to avoid not only those two main, “conflicting sentiments buried deep within the culture of the European colonizer from whom most Brazilian writers descend: that of guilt and that of self-righteousness” (Brookshaw 1), which characterized most of the portrayals of the Indian in Brazilian literature, but also the populist and nationalistic trends of the *modernismo*. Not wanting to typecast, vilify or idealize the Indians, his desire is to portray them realistically, in the context of their own cultural world, where the whites are only seen insofar as they interfere with tribal life. Accordingly, Ribeiro takes in *MR* “comme base de départ le point de vue indien” (Bernard Emery 71) which enables him to reverse the traditional myths of the frontier and to turn upside down the old romantic myth justifying the social and racial power structure of Brazil. His novel integrates mythological and indigenous configurations in order to oppose a homogenizing, univocal reality manufactured by technologically advanced society. Ribeiro abolishes the frontier between ‘the civilized’ and ‘the savage,’ refusing to see the Indians as “fossiles de l’espèce humaine” (Raillard 31) and giving them “a new symbolic value within the dynamic of Brazilian history” (Brookshaw 9). Although he cannot claim to be ‘the voice of the indigene,’ his knowledge of their traditions and myths and his vocation give him considerable credibility.

Latin American mythopoeia was highly developed by the time Ribeiro came on the scene. A number of important writers, influenced both by modernist achievements and by mythic traditions and indigenous cultures in their own countries, made Latin American mythopoeic literature perhaps the most interesting one in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, for example, the complexity and multiple narrative threads of Miguel Angel Asturias' Hombres de maíz (1949) can be understood only through the reference system of Maya mythology, which is the unifying principle of the novel and — in the author's version — a blend of ancient tales, as preserved in the classic texts like Popol Vuh, and contemporary Guatemalan Indian folklore. The plot of Alejo Carpentier's Los pasos perdidos (1953) is structured as a frustrated quest of the nameless protagonist-musician, sometimes understood as a Sisyphus freed from his toil (D. L. Shaw 54), who tries to put aside his inauthentic life in the alienated modern world and to renew his artistic creativity by looking for inspiration deep in the jungle, among the authentic people living in harmony with nature and its circular time, secure from historical change. In José Maria Arguedas' Los ríos profundos (1957), characters act "in the halo of the mythic dimension, their lives reverberating beyond their historical situation" (Columbus 177).<sup>39</sup> Although Brazilian writers who use myth in their fiction are not as well known as their Hispanic counterparts, they also produced a number of interesting works, such as Memórias de Lázaro [Memories of Lazarus] (1952) by Adonias Filho, A paixão segundo G. H. [The Passion According to

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<sup>39</sup> Some other outstanding novels from South and Central America written in a similar vein are José Lezama Lima's Paradiso (1966), Gabriel García Márquez' Cien años de soledad (1967), Carlos Fuentes' Zona sagrada (1970), Augusto Roa Bastos' Hijo de hombre (1960), Juan Rulfo's Pedro Páramo (1955), Juan José Saer's El entenado (1983), Manuel Scorza's Redoble por Rancas (1970), and Mario Vargas Llosa's El hablador (1987).

G. H.] (1964) by Clarice Lispector, Um nome para matar [A Name to Kill] (1967) by Maria Alice Barroso, and Ópera dos mortos [The Voices of the Dead] (1967) by Autran Dourado.

Ribeiro's novels belong to that stream of narrative fiction. He employs myths and symbols on different levels of narration. The mythic tales he uses stem both from European tradition (Greek myths, Biblical stories, the myths of the Noble Savage, of the garden of Eden, and of Eldorado) and from the native cultures he knew so well. While employing existing mythic narratives, Ribeiro also created, most notably in MR, his own mythology, in an attempt to present and integrate different levels of reality. He derived fundamental structures for the Mairum myths in the novel from the Urubú-Kaapor tribe of the Tupí-Guaraní, among whom he did fieldwork (Diários 143-46, 231-32, 352-58, 378-79, 411-17, 444-46), and from the Apapokúva-Guaraní, whose traditional stories were collected by Curt Nimuendajú and first published in 1914. The very name 'Maíra' is taken from Urubú-Kaapor myths, which relate how Old God the Father Maíra-Monan, feeling alone, let out a breath and created his son Maíra out of it. For a long time the Young God looked for a place to settle down, until he found a giant tree. He entered it and the feeling pleased him so much that he made the tree multiply, which is how the Amazonian jungle came into being. His presence in it renders the natural environment sacred. Maíra later carved the first human beings out of wood (Ribeiro, Uirá 20). As for the twins — or brothers — who have the same mother but different fathers, like Maíra and Micura in the novel, such mythological figures are spread over vast areas of South America. Although the details tend to vary between cultures, their common characteristic is that one brother is a solar figure and immortal, whereas the other belongs to the lunar world and is a mortal (Clastres 1045).

MR has been described as an ethnographic novel in which the author successfully bridges “the differences between doing anthropology and writing fiction” (Columbus 165). Having spent “os dez melhores anos de sua vida dormindo em rede nas aldeias indígenas das Amazônia e do Brasil Central” ‘the ten best years of his life sleeping in a hammock in Indian villages of the Amazonia and Central Brazil’ (Ribeiro, Testemunho 11), Ribeiro’s personal experience became as important for his creative writing as his anthropological knowledge. He himself thought that a novel could express his insights about the Indians better than any scientific work (Raillard 30). The fact is that the distance between anthropological texts and literature has never been big (Fleischmann 103), since the ‘other’ cannot be understood without being opposed to the ‘I’ of the writer. ‘Ethnopoieia’ is thus a type of phenomenology which, while requiring profound anthropological knowledge, fully admits its artistic character and subjectivity. Abandoning the posture of scientific neutrality, its thinking and cognizing subject is aware that his uncertainty and personal feelings preclude his writing from being accepted as an impartial account (Heinrichs 272-77). However, precisely because of such lack of intentional objectivity, ethnographic fiction can be considered less biased and its view of the ‘other’ more comprehensive:

While the monograph intends to be an authoritative appropriation of cultures as holistic, internally consistent, and transparently interpretable, the fragmentation and the refusal of totalization in Maíra reflects the anthropologist’s perception of an Other who is ultimately elusive, closed to the penetrating gaze of the scientist. (A. F. Emery 94)

The organization of Mairum society, villages and rituals in the novel are to a large degree based on those of the Bororo people, as are the beliefs that the dead are constantly

present, flying in circles above the central hut of a settlement, and that after death people go to a counter-world, where it is night during our daytime (Testemunho 57). Some rites, such as ceremonial laceration and the tying of penises, are taken from the Urubú-Kaapor (Huxley 147, 153). The central character of Avá is based on one Bororo Indian who worked as an informant for both Ribeiro himself and Claude Lévi-Strauss (Fernandes 84-115). His name was Tiago Marques Aipobureu, and he was — just like Avá — educated by the missionaries, first in Brazil, and then in Europe. On his return to his native village, he realized that he has lost his Bororo identity, or, as he himself has put it: “Assim tornou-se solitário, solitário entre os seus e estranho aos estranhos” ‘Thus I became a solitary man, alone among my own people and a stranger among strangers’ (Baldus 96). This means that the fictional tribe of Mairums can be seen as a paradigm “de la tribu indienne, ou plus exactement de la nation indienne” (Bernard Emery 59), as well as of their current situation (or rather their situation at the time of writing in the seventies).

The action of MR takes place in the Northern Mato Grosso on the banks of the river Iparanã, one of the tributaries of the Amazon, and focuses on the Indian world from within. It depicts the tribe of Mairums changing and adapting to the invader society while fighting for its own survival as a group. The appeal of their mystic, magical world stands in opposition to the materialistic culture of the twentieth century: “Por que vocês se afligem tanto, trabalhando sem descanso, como se árvores fossem deixar de dar frutos?” ‘Why are you forcing yourselves so much, working without a break, as if the trees had stopped giving fruit?’ (Ensaaios 27). Unfortunately, the tribe is hemmed in on all sides, destined to disappear fighting against practically insurmountable odds, like “um davizinho mairum [...]

lutando contra um supergoliath civilizador” ‘a little Mairum David [...] fighting a civilizing super-Goliath’ (MR 174; 144). Although only a generation earlier there were many Mairum settlements, they are now left with only one village and two hundred people. The novel gives a realistic picture of the forces that surround them, of the land-grabbing politicians, the corruption of the FUNAI (Fundação Nacional do Índio [The National Foundation for the Indian]), the lassitude of the Catholic missionaries, the self-righteous zeal of Protestant missionaries. The main theme is the problem of the tribe’s acculturation and survival. Ribeiro expresses explicitly his consternation in face of the visible vanishing of the small native ethnic communities. His novel puts into question the idea of progress in face of such development and tries to devalue the old cliché about the ‘savages’ and the ‘civilized.’ According to him, the only “morally defensible position” for a Brazilian intellectual, in view of the plundering and exploitation of indigenous peoples, is to recognize his/her society as unjust, violent, and backward (*Américas* 165).

However, *Maíra* is not simply a novel of ideas and social protest; it is much more profound than that. It has a very complex structure artfully blending form with content. The novel consists of sixty-six relatively short chapters utilizing various narrative voices, focuses and tones. The voices include ‘we’ — the collective voice of the Mairum people, a distanced third-person narrator, the twin gods of creation, the first-person voices of the novel’s main characters, and a third-person mythic voice. In several chapters, the twin gods, *Maíra* and *Micura*, enter into the minds of characters in order to provoke them to express their thoughts and to narrate the events from their point of view. There are two main narrative threads, one following *Avá*’s and *Alma*’s separate decisions to return (in his

case)/to go (in hers) to the Mairum village, their joint trip and their stay there, and the other following the investigation conducted by an emissary of the military government into the causes of Alma's death. The first chapter of the book, depicting the discovery of her corpse on the banks of Iparanã by a member of a Swiss entomological expedition, is, at the same time, the conclusion of the first narrative thread, and of the main action of the novel itself, and the beginning of the second. The third set of chapters follows events in the Mairum village from the death of their old chief Anacã, which leaves them leaderless, to the appointment of Jaguar as a new chief followed by the tying of penises ceremony. The fourth level of narration concentrates on the mythical substratum of the book and outlines, through an anonymous narrator, the main Mairum myths.

Ribeiro uses such a modernist, fragmented form to counteract the documentary realism and scientific 'objectivism' of anthropological monographs. His approach is made clear in a short chapter at the mathematical center of the novel (the 33rd out of 66 chapters) entitled "Ego sum" — meaning "I am" — which stands as an affirmation of the implied author figure. Some critics understood it as a shortened form of the Cartesian maxim "Cogito, ergo sum," 'I think, therefore I am,' i.e., either as expression of awareness of the self-reflective narrator (Klengel 215; Ramos 164-70), or as the meta-narrator's dispute with the narrator (Ramos 163). The chapter mentions the sources Ribeiro used, recalls his experiences among the Bororo, the Kaduveo and the Urubú-Kaapor, and explains the *raison d'être* of the novel. The purpose of his writing is to preserve the memory of the 'other' that would survive (cultural) death. However, this function is limited by a hopeless incapacity to convert oneself into the 'other,' or to understand him: "Quem sabe deles sou eu e eu não sei

nada” ‘He who knows about them is I, and I don’t know anything’ (209; 176). This means that the writer cannot assume any way of getting close to their proper being: “Mas não aprendi” ‘But I didn’t learn’ (212; 179). Writing cannot reproduce the reality; the text only fulfills the function of transmitting beauty and giving fame to its creator: “Também e principalmente quisera a glória — como o oxim” ‘Also and above all, I had wished for glory, like an oxim, a sorcerer’ (213; 180).

From the Mairum myths incorporated into the novel we learn how Mairahú,<sup>40</sup> known also as the Nameless One and the Old One, suddenly became aware of himself in the original darkness: “Ñanderuvuçu ou petei, pytu avytepy añou ojicuaã” ‘Ñanderuvuçu found himself alone, in the middle of the darkness he awoke alone.’<sup>41</sup> After creating light first, he brought the world into being, with highlands and lowlands, rivers and lagoons. Then he made the first creatures: juruparis, half fish, half men, who inhabited the waters of the rivers, and curupiras, the tribe of incomplete and deformed soul-eaters who inhabited the forests. He also created the animals, who at that time lived in villages and spoke their own languages like human beings, and finally the forebears of humans — the Mairum Ambir, who were neither male nor female. After that he decided that he wanted to feel his creatures, and belched out a son, Maíra, who descended into the trees in order to enjoy the feeling of being a tree, and into the body of Mosaingar, whom he, Maíra, then turned into a woman in order to give birth to him. Realizing that he/she was the finest creature of the Father God, but that he/she still needed improvement, Maíra, feeling lonely, took a brother, the little opossum Micura, who entered Moisangar’s belly, and the twins were duly born

<sup>40</sup> The suffix ‘*hú*’ in Tupí means “father of,” hence ‘Mairahú’ is “Father of Maíra” (Ramos 161).

<sup>41</sup> The first sentence of the myth, quoted in the novel in Tupí, was written down and translated into Spanish by Nimeundajú: “Ñanderuvuçu llegó solo, en medio de la oscuridad se desveló solo” (155).

among the Mairums, where they were at first not accepted, but soon enough became teachers and reformers. Before long, Maíra realized that “o mundo de Mairahú [...] é feio e triste” ‘the world of [...] Mairahú is ugly and sad’ (167; 138), so, acting as a trickster against the will of his father, he decided to change it into a world that would be truly a joy to live in. First, he stole the fire from the double-headed King Vulture, then brought into the world good food and tobacco, and finally made the division between male and female and introduced the joys of sexual life. Although Mairahú was not happy with those changes, he was unable to prevent them, as Maíra castrated him. The war between them

[...] esgotou todo o tempo da antiguidade em lutas sem fim e continua até hoje, sem trégua. Cada dia, cada noite é um batalha. Uma dura batalha em que Maíra enfrenta Mairahú para que o mundo fique como é. (185).

[...] wasted all of ancient times with ceaseless struggles and continues even today without respite. It is a hard battle in which Maíra confronts Mairahú so that the world may remain as it is. (153)

Ultimately, Maíra became Maíra-Coraci, the Sun, and Micura Micura-Iaci, the Moon, and the world ceased to live in darkness. Later on, the two brothers used to come down on earth to play like people, but principally to experience the world through the Mairum body and spirit.

The world of Mairum myths is further made tangible by descriptions of their enactments in important rituals and ceremonies. We see the whole tribe gathered in the Great House of Men at the summoning of the chief Anacã for his announcement that he is going to die that very night, the rituals that precede and follow his interment, the secondary burial of his bones after the flesh has decomposed, name-giving and initiation ceremonies,

wrestling and javelin-throwing games, the ritual hunt of anaconda, ritual dances, the presentation of the nubile girls after their first menstruation, Jaguar in jaguar hide celebrating a successful hunt, the oxim's sorceries involving bloodletting, rattles, cigar smoke and dried fish, purification of hunted game, couvade, and the tying up of penises in the new warriors' ceremony. In strongly poetic terms Ribeiro depicts the Mairums' everyday activities, their respect for the natural environment and their spontaneous and sensual living. The self-contained and spiritually rich Indian world is opposed to white civilization which is both materialistic and destructive. The wish for profit at any cost seems to be the main characteristic of Western society, as expressed in Juca's monologues and Nonato's reports, whereas for the Mairums enjoying everyday activities is the principal preoccupation: "Les Indiens ont l'art de jouir de tous les sens" (Raillard 30).

Avá and Alma, "um índio-santo e [...] uma jovem e ardente pecadora" 'an Indian-saint and [...] a young and ardent [female] sinner' (Ribeiro, Testemunho 18), can be considered the central characters in the book. Both of them, like the nameless protagonist of Los pasos perdidos and his dissolute girlfriend, embark on a journey to an indigenous community in the jungle which they hope will solve their existential malaise. Avá, a Mairum hereditary chief, has been taken from the tribe as a young boy by the Catholic missionaries, who gave him the name of Isaías, educated him and sent him to Rome to be ordained as a priest. In spite of his inner struggle to adapt, which goes so far that he even tries to eradicate the tribal signs from his face, at the end he decides he does not feel a vocation and prefers to return to his tribe in search of his roots:

Afinal, tudo está claro. Na verdade apenas representei e ainda represento aqui um papel, segundo aprendi. Não sou, nunca fui nem serei jamais Isaías. A única palavra

de Deus que sairá de mim, queimando a minha boca, é que eu sou Avá, o tuxauarã, e que só me devo a minha gente Jaguar da minha nação Mairum. (34)

At last, everything is clear. In truth I was only acting, am still acting a script that I have learned. I am not, I never was, never will be Isaías. The only word of God that can come from me, burning my mouth, is that I am Avá, heir to the chieftain, and that I am beholden only to the Jaguar people of my Mairum nation. (17)

In this way he disappoints his mentors at the missionary station, while at the same time being unable to overcome the schizophrenic division of his personality symbolized by his double name Avá-Isaías. Ravaged with self-doubt and trapped between two cultures and two mythologies, Avá does not belong fully to either of them: “Cada um que saia da aldeia vai ser como eu, ou seja, coisa nenhuma. Os que ficarem lá, só herdarão a amargura de serem índios” ‘Everyone who leaves the village will become someone like me; that is, nothing. Those who remain there will only inherit the bitterness of being Indian’ (31; 14). Avá longs to live the everyday life of his people and to cleanse himself of the “óleo de civilização e cristandade que me impregnou até o fundo” ‘oil of civilization and Christianity that has permeated me’ (172; 142). However, his spirit and soul seem to have been stolen by European “pajés-sacacas” ‘false sorcerers’ (270; 232), so he fails to readapt to tribal life and to fulfill his function as a successor to his uncle as a warrior chief.

The dialectic of the principal conflict in the novel — that between two distinct worlds, between the Indians and mainstream Brazilian culture — is reciprocated inside his consciousness. Avá’s is a split personality, composed of two mutually exclusive cultures: Indian/white, pagan/Christian, Mairum/Brazilian, and as such, he embodies at the level of the individual the drama of his people. Ironically, Ribeiro describes his going back to the

Mairum village in Campbell's terms of the return of the savior-hero (193-243) who is to rebuild his dwindling tribe and redeem it from destruction. The discrepancy between such expectations and his ultimate failure is reflected in the unsuitability of his Christian name. In the Old Testament, the book of Isaiah contains admonishment before the imminent disaster of Assyrian invasion. Isaiah the prophet preached the doctrine of Messianism and predicted the coming of a savior-king who would bring about a reign of peace and prosperity: "And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning" (Isa. 1.26). Avá-Isaiah, however, fails to do anything that might help his people survive. He lacks aggressiveness, initiative and confidence to fulfill such a mission, and proves himself incapable of either assuming the leadership of the tribe or taking young Inimá for a wife and thus confirming his place within the tribal order. A chapter recounting his inability even to catch fish is ironically juxtaposed to that about Maíra's mythic deeds. Avá's long stay in Europe has distanced him from the culture of his ancestors. Thus, for example, his plan to introduce his people into an economy based on production and profit betrays his falling away from the paradisiacal economy of spending and excess, characteristic for tribal societies. He complains that the Mairums waste too much energy on useless activities, instead of working hard, and deplores the informal way with which they treat sacred lore. When the oxim, the sorcerer, wishes to prepare him for his ritualistic transfiguration, Avá is unable to give himself over, because he can neither free himself nor fully believe in the oxim's vision. He has been alienated from the spiritual life of his people for too long and the return is not possible, so he becomes marginalized, lonely and

unhappy. At the same time, he is in love with Alma, but does not dare to tell her, being thus one of the very few people in the village who does not sleep with her.

Avá's incompetence in tribal affairs, sexual impotence, and lack of self-confidence are contrasted with the abilities of his nephew Jaguar who is at peace with himself, the life force of nature and the ancient mythologies of his people. Brave, assertive, confident and full of life, he hunts jaguars and anacondas, excels in sporting competitions, leads other young men on their trips into the jungle, and sleeps with many women of the tribe. Although, after the announcement of his inevitable succession by the guide of souls, Jaguar at first refuses the position of chief and asserts Avá's precedence, in the end he becomes the new chief and marries Inimá instead of his uncle. Depicted as an ideal Mairum, Jaguar is one of the most interesting representations of the Noble Savage in recent literature:

Jaguar: isto sim é um corpo mairum como deve ser. O mundo para ele é esplêndido, maravilhoso. Assim ele o vê, magnífico, debaixo da minha luz: technicolor, cintilante, luminoso. [...] O corpo todo está aceso, pronto, de alcatéia. A cabeça erguida, ameaçante, vigilante, sobre a torre do pescoço. O tronco gira livre sobre as pernas, os braços se abrem com gosto. [...] Ó meu jovem Jaguar, assim é bom viver. (297)

Jaguar: his is certainly a Mairum body as it should be. For him, the world is splendid, marvelous. That is how he sees it, magnificent under my light: technicolor, sparkling, luminous. [...] The body is all aglow, well prepared, ready to attack. The head erect, intimidating, watchful on a towerlike neck. The torso swings freely on the legs, the arms open with pleasure. [...] Oh, my young Jaguar, this is the way to live. (258-59)

Alma ("soul" in Portuguese) is a dissolute woman from Rio de Janeiro who, tired of the materialism of civilization and unable to find any solace in modern life, education, free

love, drugs, or psychoanalysis, hopes to join a mission in the jungle and rebuild herself in the new environment. When Father Ludgero refuses to accept her, she goes to the Mairum village with Avá, whom she met on the trip to the mission, and stays there. Representing the 'lost soul' of the contemporary consumer society in need of redemption, Alma is looking for a new beginning and for a refuge from the unbearable loneliness of modern existence. Her instinctual life, desperate need of others, and hunger to be contained by a natural world of which she is an inseparable part, find comfort not in the ways of the church or contemporary institutions, but in the timeless rituals of a tribal people. The first scene of the novel, in which her body is found on the bank of Iparanã, is reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," where a dead leopard is found high on the mountain slope, far from its natural habitat. Alma too ventured far from the big city in which she grew up in her search for a meaningful identity. Tribal society has become her utopia, in spite of its own crises and dramas which are anything but idyllic.

Alma believes that she has found lost innocence and religious vocation in becoming a tribal whore; however, as both her status and her behavior are very ambiguous, she is only living her own truth, not that of her hosts, so she remains incapable of integrating into the community. Although the Mairums have the institution of *mirixorã*, "a priestess of love," who, since she belongs sexually to no one, belongs to everybody, it is not possible for Alma to take over that role both because she does not belong to the tribal genealogy, and because she lacks sufficient understanding of their traditions. On the mythical level, the nickname Canindejub, the "yellow macaw," given to Alma by the Mairums is very significant; had she perused Lévi-Strauss' From Honey to Ashes before venturing into the forest, she would

have known that those birds are inevitably eaten by jaguars (36). Like the nameless protagonist of D. H. Lawrence's "The Woman Who Rode Away," who was sacrificed in the wilderness of Sierra Madre to a phallic divinity, Alma happily accepts her marginal position in the village, unaware of its ambiguity, but at the end pays for her delusion with her life. Her death on giving birth to the twins whose father is Jaguar, her favorite lover, can be interpreted in different ways: on the mythic level, the reader may suppose that mother and children had to perish because there was no man from the tribe to stand in *couvade* for them; on the anthropological level, their death seems to stress the impossibility of any union between two diverse societies; on the practical level, the police may conclude that Alma herself lost confidence in the tribe and sought Western medicine when the delivery began.

The second narrative thread, which follows the investigation into the circumstances of Alma's death, reveals the threats facing the stability of Mairum society from without. Nonato, the emissary of the military government, dismisses from his post Elias Pantaleão, the FUNAI official in charge of the Mairums, because of the latter's refusal to try to integrate Indians into the work force:

Pelo que vejo a coisa está muito bem urdida e justificada para que os índios fiquem na aldeia como índios e os agentes nos Postos como seus remotos tutores. O resultado é que eles jamais se integrarão nos usos e costumes da civilização. Mas é também que os funcionários da FUNAI não perderão seus empregos de burocratas-afazendados à custa da fazenda nacional. (93)

From what I can see, the thing is well contrived and justified purely so that the Indians remain in the village as Indians and the agents in the posts as their remote tutors. The result is that the Indians will never assimilate or appropriate the uses and

the customs of civilization. But also that the officials of FUNAI will not lose their employment as bureaucratic-landholders milking the national treasury. (69)

Nonato's report is highly ironic, since both Pantaleão's salary and the funding for Indians are extremely low. Pantaleão's dismissal closes a period of relatively peaceful coexistence between two cultures. It is understood that the new appointee will be someone less sensitive to the tribal peoples and more amenable to the economic interests of the military government and rich landowners. At the same time, an agricultural conglomerate, "A Companhia Colonizadora do Iparanã" 'Iparanã Colonization Company,' headed by the Senator Andorinha who never appears in the novel in person, has managed to circumvent the laws protecting Indian lands and is already mapping out the area for 'development.'

Several other chapters of this fragmented novel, constantly shifting back and forth in chronological time, present a multiplicity of events, both past and present, providing a background for the main narrative threads. They introduce other characters representing social and economic forces at play, such as Juca the renegade, Xisto the preacher, and the missionaries. Juca, son of a Mairum mother and a white father, is a bush trader, completely alienated from his indigenous roots, who, in his desire to make a place for himself in mainstream society, becomes the worst racist and the most unscrupulous exploiter both of remaining native communities and of *caboclos*, "acculturated Indians of pure blood," living in villages and small cities outside of Indian land. Dreaming of becoming rich and important, of going to São Paulo and spending "um dia naqueles hotéis paid'égua, cheios de putas bonitas" 'a day in one of those fancy hotels full of beautiful whores' (148; 119), he is enraged by Mairum lack of appreciation for the worthless goods he is trying to trick them

into buying, and by their unwillingness to work for profit; he complains that “esses idiotas têm o costume de enterrar com o morto tudo o que era dele” ‘these idiots have the custom of burying with the dead everything that belongs to them’ (146; 117). He tries to force the Indians into debt by giving them ‘gifts,’ and hopes to obtain an important land holding once the whole region is open to ‘development,’ “com ajuda de Deus e do senador Andorinha” ‘with the help of God and Senator Andorinha’ (38; 20). Juca embodies the myth of Eldorado in its most barbarous form, but is himself only a pawn in the game of more powerful individuals. When he gets killed by a tribe of hostile Indians, he is immediately replaced by his former servant Manelão, who inherits not only Juca’s job and the plot of land, but his wife as well.

Xisto, a fanatical black Protestant minister, preaches in the small, backward and poor town of Corrutela not far from the Mairum settlement. Obsessed by the ideas of sin, the Devil and the apocalypse, he raves about the coming of the Son of God, which he believes is drawing near, bringing in its wake a lasting peace, land and cattle redistribution, and plenty for all. In his zeal he managed to rid the town of prostitutes and alcohol vendors, and to entice almost all the inhabitants to abandon Catholicism and become “believers.” If he had his way, no one would work at all, but only pray and sing Gospel songs. Xisto is sponsored by North American evangelist Bob and his wife Gertrude, the Protestant missionaries, who live in a ridiculous, totally self-sufficient house built on an isolated spot in the jungle, which looks like a fortress in the shape of a flying-saucer. They believe that the Day of Judgment is imminent and that the New Messiah might come from one of the Indian nations of Brazil. The Catholic fathers at the Mission continue to follow their

established routine, which long ago grew into a dreary monotony, in spite of their admittance to themselves that their mission is a failure.

A further and a very important division of the novel is its quadripartite structure: MR has the form of a requiem mass in four parts, entitled “Antífona [Antiphony],” “Homilia [Homily],” “Canon [Gospel],” and “Corpus [Corpus]” respectively. It is a requiem for a vanishing way of life. Both Avá’s adversities and the misfortunes of the tribe as a collective threatened by its practically inevitable disappearance are dramatized by their story being projected into the sacral space of a Christian service. On the one hand, such structure runs parallel to the exposition of Mairum mythology, while, on the other, the four parts of a requiem are given new meaning according to the narrated events (Silverman 234). The first part — “Antífona [Antiphony]” — covers the beginning of the story, generating all the while a clearly hostile atmosphere; the alternating voices do not sound harmoniously — as they should in the context of a Catholic mass — but rather strident and ominous, announcing the confrontation between mainstream Brazilian and indigenous ideologies. The interaction between different voices sounds like “um diálogo babélico” ‘a Babylonian dialogue’ (Graça 94) in which speakers do not understand each other; the first sentence of the text sets the tone: “Ninguém entende este gringo” ‘Nobody understands that gringo’ (19; 3). In the “Antífona [Antiphony]” we learn about the discovery of Alma’s death, the organization of the investigation mission, and the decisions made separately by Avá and Alma to embark on a search for his/her lost identity in the wilderness. More importantly, it also describes the events in the Mairum village from the (physical) death of Anacã and his primary burial, to his secondary burial in the Lagoon of the Death which announces his

rebirth in the spiritual world. This leaves the tribe in limbo, as it also needs to embark upon a new cycle in order to be reborn. However, as Anacã's successor is not there and as the young warriors have not yet been promoted to adulthood, the Mairums are not allowed to perform the key rituals — such as the Coraci-Iaci dance — which would ensure the smooth transition to the next cycle of life.

The second part — “Homilia [Homily]” — offers, contrary to the meaning of the word (“sermon”), an unfruitful exchange between discordant voices. Only the exposition of Mairum myths about the creation of the world and the Mairum people corresponds to the meaning of the word. Ribeiro consciously makes an analogy between the Mairum Genesis and the Biblical one, putting forward the independence and richness of indigenous mythical thought. In the “Homily” we follow the events in the Catholic Mission, Juca's actions, Xisto's preaching, and the journey of the two protagonists by plane and by boat from São Paulo to Mairum Village. Avá's return is described through chapter titles (“O Beiço [The Lips],” “A Boca [The Mouth],” “A Língua [The Tongue],” “A Goela [The Gullet],” “O Goto [The Throat],” “O Bucho [The Stomach],” and “O Vômito [The Vomit]”) as a passage of aliments through the human body and the throwing up of what is indigestible. Instead of the expected reintegration into the native world, the forest and thus, by implication, the indigenous culture, refuse to accept his new ideas and indeed vomit them out.

In the context of the Christian church, ‘Gospel’ signifies the exaltation by redemption and the remembrance of the sacramental sacrifice. On the contrary, “Canon [Gospel]” as the third part of MR evokes “con sus rupturas e irregularidades ya la visión del éxodo inminente” ‘with its ruptures and irregularities a vision of an imminent exodus’

(Klengel 209). The serenity and beauty of native life is more and more endangered. The action takes place mainly in the Mairum settlement. We follow everyday life in the village, rituals and ceremonies, Alma's misunderstandings and her delight with becoming a *mirixorã*, as well as Avá's inability to live like an Indian, his slow fall into disgrace and mounting loneliness. Both the ominous comments in Nonato's final report and Juca's exaltation at the prospect of obtaining a significant land property foreshadow an inevitable "development" organized by rich landowners which threatens to swallow the remains of the tribe.

"Corpus," the final part, does not impart spiritual grace and the promise of salvation as it is expected to, but, on the contrary, invokes the spirit of the apocalypse. Death and imminent disaster are lurking on all levels; the hope for a new beginning is lost. To the frustration of his sponsors, Xisto commits the ritual murder of a young girl who is, in his view, possessed by the Devil, after first pulling out her tongue to save her from demonic attacks. Unable to find any motivation to go forward, Avá disappoints the oxim by his indecisiveness and prays to God in vain for Alma's love. He finally agrees to render the Bible into the Mairum language for the protestant missionaries, but his work is constantly encumbered by Gertrude, who insists that the translation must be literal, in spite of Avá's repeated explanation that in that manner it will be incomprehensible to the members of the tribe. The Catholic priests admit to each other that their mission is a failure, since it is not possible to convert Indians and thus make them a part of the 'white' world. The oxim unsuccessfully tries to save a child bitten by a poisonous snake, and, as a result, is torn to pieces because his magic does not work any longer. Alma and the twins die, and even

Máira doubts his own immortality and the perpetuation of his people. "Indez [Coda]" is the concluding chapter in which various scenes are rapidly juxtaposed, creating a panoramic sense of immediacy. Without any formal division we hear the voices of practically all the main characters speaking at the same time and cutting into each other. What remains in the end is the threat of economic penetration into the Indian territory and a dark perspective for the future. The only positive signs expressing a hope for survival are, on the one hand, Jaguar's love affair with Inimá, and, on the other, his appointment as the chief of the tribe followed by the performance of the new warriors' ceremony, which renews the cycle of Mairum life cut short by Anacã's death.

In spite of the realistic depiction of Mairum problems, tensions, hardships and tragedies, there is little doubt that their life is portrayed as a stylized earthly paradise. It is obvious that for Ribeiro the Garden of Eden is still there, only modern humans choose to neglect it. Indians represent its last remnants, living in harmony with the environment and their own nature, in a society where there are no masters, no slaves, and no division between the elite and the masses: "Descubro que me encantava nos índios, primordialmente, sua dignidade inalcançável para nós, de gente que não passou pela mó de estratificação social" 'I realized that what enchanted me most about Indians is their dignity which is beyond our reach, the dignity of a people that did not pass through the grind of social stratification' (Ribeiro, *Confissões* 157-58). The Mairum village is thus a mythic enclave, a living utopia (Lidmilová 323), whose collective spirit and lack of envy, hypocrisy, profiteerism or sexual inhibitions is highly praised by Alma:

Pra mim esses mairuns já fizeram a revolução-em-liberdade. Não há ricos, nem pobres; quando a natureza está sovina, todos emagrecem; quando está dadivosa,

todos engordam. Ninguém explora ninguém. Ninguém manda em ninguém. Não tem preço essa liberdade de trabalhar ou folgar ao gosto de cada um. Depois, a vida é variada, ninguém é burro, nem metido à besta. Pra mim a Terra sem Males está aqui mesmo, agora. (267-68)

As far as I am concerned the Mairums have already made a revolution achieving liberty. Among them no one is rich or poor; when nature is unkind, everyone gets thin; when it's generous, everyone gets fat. No one exploits anyone. No one orders anyone about. Their liberty to work or play as the spirit moves them is priceless. And what's more, life is varied; no one is a drudge, a beast of burden. For me, the Land without Evil is here and now. (231)

This image of the Garden of Eden is further enhanced by the joy of living typical of Indians. Catholic priests, who want to replace it with ascetic living and the unceasing service of God, are unable to understand that the Mairums not only prefer this world to heaven,<sup>42</sup> but, even more so, that Indian mythology teaches them how to enjoy life:

É bom viver como ensinou Maíra. Às vezes pensamos que ele gosta mais dos caraíbas, mas a culpa bem pode ser nossa. Como nós só queremos rede e bubuia, ele deu a outros a obrigação de trabalhar duro, sem sossego, fazendo coisas. Nós não fomos feitos para isso. Somos bons é para namorar carinhoso e sururucar demorado. Também somos bons para a companheirada, porque nos vexa muito guardar as coisas com sovinice: gostamos de dar. E não nos afobamos. Mulher está aí mesmo para a gente namorar quando quiser. Amigos também há muitos para conversar, para jogar, para lutar. Comida, que é bom, nunca há de faltar. As roças todo ano dão bastante mandioca e o peixe e a caça não hão de acabar.

O melhor das criações de Maíra é que sempre nascem crianças para a gente com elas brincar, rir e criar com amor e paciência. É bom demais também pintar o

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<sup>42</sup> Catholic missionaries in Canada had a similar problem; for example, in the nineteenth century father Blanchet complained that his native subjects "were surprised and provoked when I explained to them the blessedness of heaven; they appeared to like better the sojourn on this earth than to go away to enjoy celestial bliss" (Landerholm 166).

corpo bonito de cores, passear, nadar, dançar, beber cauim, cantar e dar risada. É assim que gostamos de viver. É assim que Maíra gosta de nos ver. Até trabalhar moles devagarinho, não é ruim, sobretudo se não for na hora do sol quente. (216)

It is good to live the way Maíra taught. At times, we think that he likes the Europeans best, but the blame may well be ours. As we prefer to lounge in a hammock or drift with the current, he obligated the others to work hard, without repose, and make things. We were not created for that purpose. We are best at gentle loving and slow fucking. Also we are good for companionship in general as we are not driven by avarice, not given to hanging on to property. We like to give. And we don't overtax ourselves. Women are there for a man to make love to if he wants to. Friends are there to converse, play, and wrestle with. Good food is never missing. Every year the fields yield enough manioc, and there is no end of fish and game.

The best of Maíra's invention is that children are always being born for people to play with, laugh with, and bring up with love and patience. It is also very good to paint the body with beautiful colors, to stroll about, swim, dance, drink cassava beer, sing, and make people laugh. This is how we like to live. This is how Maíra likes to see us. As for work, it's not too bad provided it is slow and easy and the sun is not too hot. (182-83)

The natural environment, sacred to Indians, as expressed in their mythology (see p. 111 above), is an indivisible part of such an earthly paradise. Ribeiro's nature myth glorifies its spectacular beauty teeming with life as the last refuge from the onslaught of globalization, albeit already imperiled by plans for deforestation and spread of cattle-breeding farms. In *MR*, the jungle is compared — like the mountain forests in Aitmatov's novel — to a temple in which natural cycles of life have the function of divine service:

A minha mata é um mundo de troncos altos, esguios, brotando do chão limpo, subindo e subindo para só se esfolharem lá em cima, no alto. [...] O natural dela é uma penumbra verde, sombria, como uma catedral romana. Também ali só duas

vezes ao dia há bulício: ao amanhecer e ao anoitecer. Então as capelas de macacos guaribas saltam nos galhos e urram desenreados e todo bicho de pena canta ou arrulha esvoaçante com medo da noite que evém ou com a alegria da antemanhã. Estas são as duas missas cantadas da floresta virgem: a da manhã e a da tarde. (63)

My forest is a world of tall slender tree trunks, growing out of the clear ground, rising and rising to create foliage only up there at the summit. [...] Its natural light is a green penumbra, as somber as in a Roman cathedral. Only twice a day is there noise: at sunrise and at sunset. Then the chorus of howling monkeys leaps from branch to branch, making an unreserved uproar, and all the feathered creatures sing or coo and flap their wings either from fear of the night to come or from early morning joyfulness. These are the two masses sung in the virgin forest: that of the morning and that of the evening. (43)

The journeys of the two protagonists of the novel represent a new version of the quest-myth. For both Avá and Alma, the little Mairum village lost in the wilderness in the immensity of Brazilian interior becomes the goal of the pilgrimage they embark upon, expecting to renew their lives and to forget defeats, anxieties and alienation. The trip is for each of them a rite of passage lived as a quest. He abandons his religion in the hope of recovering his roots, while she is looking for the first time for a comprehensive set of values. Their personalities are diametrically opposite: she is open-minded, extrovert and practical, whereas he is introspective, withdrawn and philosophical. However, restoring the lost paradise fails in both cases and their pilgrimages turn out to be futile: at the end, they are just as marginalized as they were in the beginning. Alma dies, after deluding herself about her social position and acceptance, while Avá loses all the respect and status he once had, without being able to win her love. Caught in no man's land between two incompatible worlds, they are unable to find a place for themselves in either.

Several binary oppositions lie in the base of the novel's structure: village/jungle, mythic/real world, life/death, Indians/the Western world, Mairum mythology/Christianity. Furthermore, both Mairum beliefs and their social system are also organized around sets of opposites: while in their mythology, this world and the counter-world of the dead contrast with each other, as do the worlds of Mairahú and of Maíra (see p. 117 above), the Mairum village itself is divided into two halves, the band of the Setting Sun and the band of the Rising Sun, in such a manner that each clan in one band corresponds to one in the opposite band. All members of one clan are considered to be brothers and sisters, and are expected to marry a person from the opposite clan. The village as a whole is contrasted to the surrounding jungle, inhabited not only by animals, but also by curupiras, the soul-eaters, and other demonic beings, which is why Indians stay overnight in the bush only when necessary. Mairum myths underline their everyday life to a large degree, but they are never elevated to the status of dogma, as is the case in Christianity. On the contrary, Indians are able to keep a ludic distance from their myths, laughing at and playing with them, while at the same time recognizing their meaningfulness. The dead ancestors are present in the lives of the living members of the tribe; they visit the village regularly, swarming around the Great House of Men in its center during important events, but only the guide of souls is able to see them and to communicate with them.

The opposition between whites and Indians is seen as an unbridgeable split. The self-sufficient world of the Mairums is contrasted to the Western one, which can only exist by means of ceaseless 'growth' and expansion. Europeans are thus characterized as "um formigueiro incabável, que ocupam a terra toda, que enxameiam o mundo inteiro" 'an

inexhaustible anthill, occupying the entire earth, insatiably swarming all over the globe' (187; 154). This opposition is reflected in the world of myth as well: unlike the living mythology of the Indians, modern humans have "to fill their voids by crude, extemporized, fragmentary myths" (Wellek and Warren 181). Mairum mythology is a happy one; it encourages people to look for beautiful things in life, and they enjoy retelling it. Christian beliefs, on the contrary, promote a way of life which is boring and sad:

Secas vidas de cinzas, sem doce nem sal. Vidas duras, de carinhos segadas, de desejos podadas. Sofrido povo de Deus, proibido de si. Enlutados, poque não morrem. (165)

Dry ashes of lives, without honey or salt. Hard lives, with blind affections and clipped desires. Suffering servants of God, forbidden to be themselves, dressed in mourning because they cannot die. (135)

The Indian mythology of joy-in-life is thus contrasted to a mythology of death-in-life. When the old Mairum women at the Catholic Mission, wailing and lamenting, complain to Avá that the young Indian girls educated there will wither away without access to men and normal sexual life, Alma concludes that: "As velhas têm toda razão. [...] Doentes somos nós. Doentes de indecência, de repressão ao humano, de repulsa ao que é natural" "The old women are right. [...] We are the sick ones, sick from indecency, from our repression of our humanity, from our rejection of what is natural' (241; 206).<sup>43</sup> Avá himself is a victim of such an upbringing, which alienated him from his own people and made him impotent. Furthermore, most persons associated with Christianity in the novel, such as Xisto, the Catholic fathers, or Bob and Gertrude, are either corrupt or morally blind.

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<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in Vargas Llosa's *La casa verde* [*The Green House*], "young Indian girls are rounded up to be educated by nuns, becoming despoiled of their own tradition and fit only to be maids or prostitutes" (Pope 237).

The contact between Western civilization and the Amerindian world is thus seen as totally destructive. Unlike Alencar's and Andrade's views, hybridity between two mutually exclusive cultures is, according to Ribeiro, unlikely to work. Avá explains that the Indians know "que o que [...] todos os brancos nos podem dar de melhor é não se meterem na nossa vida. É nos deixar em paz" 'that the best thing that [...] all the whites can do for us is to stay out of our lives. To leave us in peace' (173; 143-44), because they have understood "que não há lugar para nós no mundo caraíba, senão lugares que nem bichos suportariam" 'that there is no place for us in the European world, except places where not even animals could subsist' (188; 155). Accordingly, Alma dies with her twins, whose father is one of the Indians, most probably Jaguar; her fate symbolizes both the impossibility of any union between two diverse societies — "el mestizaje significa la muerte" 'miscegenation means death' (Fleischmann 104) — and the impenetrability of the frontier between history and utopia.

Ribeiro turns upside down and challenges many concepts which characterized fictional accounts of Brazilian interior and indigenous populations. The jungle in his work is no longer represented as an area of barbarism, but rather as a center of a very interesting culture, by no means primitive or unsophisticated, but simply different (Morino 155). Instead of a male hero who penetrates into the wilderness and seduces an Indian princess, as happens in Caramuru or Iracema, in MR it is a heroine who travels into the forest and seduces most of the men of the tribe. However, she does not succeed in becoming an important person there, since her status remains ambiguous till the very end. Her encounter with natives is not nearly as pure as that of the white maiden in O Guarani [The Guarani

Indian]; in fact, the chastity of the only chaste person, Avá, is portrayed not as a virtue, but as a failure which came as a result of his mental castration in the Catholic seminary. Instead of well-wishing white 'civilizers' coming to educate the natives, most Westerners we meet in MR are detrimental for the Mairums: not only people like Juca, Xisto, or Nonato, portrayed as the real barbarians, but also the missionaries. The noble Indian hero, Jaguar in this case, does not support the colonizers' cause, as his counterpart does in O Uruguai [The Uruguay], but works exclusively for the benefit of his tribe. Unlike Western texts which are full of descriptions of the 'pacification' of the 'savages,' Mairum stories extol the deeds of their hero Aruá who managed "amansar os brancos" 'to tame the whites' (186; 154). Finally, the end of the novel with the deaths of Alma and her twins contrasts with the optimistic closure of Iracema.

The plot of MR focuses on the transition period between two cycles of both Mairum culture and human civilization in general. A whole cycle of native life is partly sketched through flashbacks and through descriptions of life in the village, which is organized around different Mairum rituals and measured by their sequence. This does not mean that Ribeiro is freezing the Indian culture in an essentialist time warp, but rather that their cyclical concept of time enables the Mairums to operate in a world of certainties and simple human pleasures. Their cyclical time is disrupted by several sequences of linear time-histories: those of the investigation, of missionary activity, and of modern industrial and agricultural development. This other time, being historical and unilinear, Ribeiro seems to suggest, leads inevitably towards an apocalyptic end, whereas the Indian notion of time, cyclical and based on myths, guarantees continuity. The action of the novel begins with two

deaths, Anacã's and Alma's, which create a gap, leaving us wondering when and if the next cycle will begin. The myth of the divine twins prefigures the birth of the new twins by Alma. However, in contrast to ritualistic re-enactments of the original events which, in Eliade's terms (Myth and Reality 6-8), ensure the opening of a new life cycle, the twins are here stillborn, implying the death of Maíra and Micura and the termination of Mairum culture. Nonetheless, the end of the novel is left open: while, on the one hand, the death of Alma and her twins seems to indicate that the rebirth will not take place, on the other, it is possible to think that the life of the Mairums might go back to normal, as Jaguar becomes the new chief and marries Inimá, upon which all the Mairum women menstruate, enacting a ritual which symbolizes the renewal of life. Although the Indians are determined to continue to live within their own culture for as long as they are left in peace, the fact that, at the same time, Manelão ominously opens a new cycle of exploitation and oppression, does not leave much space for optimism.

MR is a novel which employs myth, on the one hand, to depict the mental structures that typify Indian thought and to reveal the mythic dimensions of their culture, while, on the other, its role is to stress the contrast between the indigenous world and the one which encircles them. Like Mayan traditions in Hombres de maíz, Mairum mythology provides essential clues and the basic reference system for understanding the novel's multiple layers. The dynamism of myths in it functions as the *modus operandi* which creates a density of symbolic meaning and permits reading on more than one level. Mythic and realistic modes of narration are intermingled, contrasted and put into an intratextual dialogue. The author combines the serious with the ludic, and native traditions with European and Brazilian

myths, to create a rich and rewarding novel whose polyhedral structure opens new vistas on many important questions.

Ribeiro clearly expresses his conviction that myth is as important in the modern world as it was in previous historical periods, and that imaginative experience cannot be replaced by religious dogma or any practical or scientific worldview. His work seems to imply that to replace or destroy the myths of a people is a form of spiritual genocide, and that the cultural survival of the indigenous people is directly dependent on the preservation of their mythopoeic sensibilities. The Indians who leave their communities and forget their traditions become *caboclos*, the poorest and the most exploited social group in Brazilian society. Having replaced their communal spirit and rich mythology by a spirit of individualism and mutual distrust, they are an easy prey for Xistos and Jucas. Ribeiro contrasts the Mairums as a people who have kept their ancestral traditions with the “abominável homens novos” ‘abominable new men,’ who are “produtos de uma sequencia milenar de vicissitudes que os conformaram, especialisaram” ‘a product of millennial vicissitudes which made them conformist and overspecialized’ (*Teoria* 26). At the same time, he finds in myth “i germi dell’opposizione al potere e della lotta di liberazione” ‘germs of opposition to power and of struggle for liberation’ (*Benso* 105). Such an attitude is very similar to those expressed by Aitmatov, Kateb and Harris, who all see in creative use of traditional myths a useful tool for dealing with the vicissitudes of the contemporary world.

However, unlike Soyinka, who believes that the mythical traditions of marginalized peoples can be renewed and successfully employed in an attempt to restore their cultural

identity, Ribeiro is much more pessimistic, maintaining that the disappearance of many indigenous communities and their cultures is inevitable, in spite of all efforts to reverse the process. Although the end of IN is just as ambiguous as that of MR, and although somber and ominous tones equally color the final parts of both novels, any positive outcome seems to be much less likely in the Brazilian author's construct. Whereas the Nigerian writer combines Yoruba and Christian mythologies and accepts their cross-fertilization as being constructive, Ribeiro believes that Indian mythology can survive only if left alone by the expansion of cultural globalization. While both novels concentrate on the transition from one cycle of life to the next, in Ribeiro's case gods are about to die and are aware of it, whereas in Soyinka's they appear to be regaining strength.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **WOLE SOYINKA'S THE INTERPRETERS: MYTHICAL ESSENCES AND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD**

Je dis des choses connues, si anciennes que l'humanité les a  
oubliées depuis longtemps.

Stanislaw Jerzy Lec (116)

There is no such thing as 'only literature.' Every line commits  
you.

Edward Baugh (107)

I shall turn the great river at its source.

Manas (107)

Nigerian author Oluwole Akinwande Soyinka (1934- ) is one the most famous Sub-Saharan writers and the only Black African to date to receive the Nobel Prize for literature (1986). A tireless experimenter with new forms and modes of writing, Soyinka has never been afraid to explore more popular media, such as radio, television, sound recordings and film, in order to reach a wider audience (Macebub 28). Although his preferred genre is drama, which accounts for both the greater part of his literary production and the most highly praised one, Soyinka's reputation is equally that of a poet and fiction-writer. To these achievements might be added his other activities — those of an essayist, literary critic, biographer, translator, editor, political activist, recording artist, and actor and director on stage and in film (Maduakor, "Soyinka" 266). His contribution to fiction consists of a number of short stories, two novels: The Interpreters and Season of Anomy, a book of prison notes: The Man Died, a fictionalized autobiography: Aké: The Years of Childhood, and a fictionalized biography of his father: Isara: A Voyage around "Essay."

Apart from his literary pursuits, this "most eclectic and syncretic of writers" (Wright 5), who refused to ignore "any source of knowledge: Oriental, European, African,

Polynesian, or whatever” (Soyinka, Six xv), also taught at different universities both in Nigeria and abroad, and organized and led several theatrical companies, occasionally even improvising performances in marketplaces and truck parks (Wright 3). Those activities went hand in hand with his political involvement. As a result of his participation in human rights organizations, his fight for social justice and individual freedom, and his denunciations of widespread corruption,<sup>44</sup> election frauds, and a series of coups — military and otherwise — he was receiving threats at times, was harassed by the SSS (State Security Service of Nigeria [Bande-Thomas 142]), was arrested on a few occasions, and was twice forced into exile (1970-75 and 1994-present). During performances of some of his satirical plays, such as The (New) Republican and Before the Blackout, the actors were forced to guard stage doors against thugs hired by local politicians (Gibbs, Introduction 10). In 1965 Soyinka was detained for holding up the radio station in Ibadan, in protest against rigged elections, and transmitting his own tape parodying the intended victory speech of Chief Akintola (Gibbs, “Wole” 463). When the civil war in Nigeria broke out in 1967, he tried to stop the supply of arms to both sides through his international contacts, but his efforts were futile, and he was imprisoned from August 1967 to October 1969 (Zell and Silver 192). In May 1989 he publicly expressed support for Salman Rushdie and, as a result, received death threats from Muslim fundamentalists (Lurdos 14). The military government which ruled the country from 1983 to 1999 and which ordered the execution of another famous writer and activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, in 1995, sentenced Soyinka to death *in absentia* in

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<sup>44</sup> Transparency International rated Nigeria in its annual report for 2002 as the second most corrupt country in the world, after Bangladesh.

1997 (Msiska xii). Luckily, he had left the country earlier and moved to the U.S., where he currently lives and teaches (Crace 12).

Like many other modern African authors who write in the languages of their former colonizers, Soyinka uses English as medium of expression, rather than Yoruba, which is his mother tongue. In contrast to writers such as Aitmatov or Kateb, who compose their works in both their own language and the dominant one in the region — or translate them from one to the other — Soyinka writes exclusively in English, although he, too, is perfectly bilingual.<sup>45</sup> This is even more notable in view of the fact that Yorubas,<sup>46</sup> famous for their traditional urban life, arts and music, are one of the largest ethnic groups in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bascom, *Yoruba* 1).<sup>47</sup> Using a foreign idiom means that Soyinka has to express the totality of Yoruba experience in a language with a completely different cultural background, and to translate “the thoughts and expressions of people,” amongst whom many “never learned or spoke English, into standard or, at least, broken/pidgin English” (Abodunrin 156). In spite of this fact, his language — when compared to that of most other West African authors, e.g., to Chinua Achebe’s, which is articulated through development of stylistic innovations reflecting “the rhetorical genius of his people” and “their native

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<sup>45</sup> Several of Soyinka’s works have been rendered into Yoruba by Akinwunmi Isola, himself an important writer (Omotoso 165).

<sup>46</sup> Yorubas occupy most of southwestern Nigeria, where their population in the early nineties was estimated at twenty million, as well as parts of the two countries which lie to the west of it, Benin and Togo (Barnes 391).

<sup>47</sup> Such a situation is all the more remarkable if we bear in mind that more than two thirds of European nations use languages which have fewer speakers than Yoruba does, and yet no one in any of them would even think of creating a national literature in a foreign idiom.

Igbo civilization" (Echeruo 152)<sup>48</sup> — is remarkably non-specific and can be described most appropriately as "world standard English" (Adejare 188), since it is not significantly determined either by its Nigerian variants or by his mother tongue (Appiah 11-12). Although Soyinka included in some of his dramas, for example in Kongi's Harvest, songs in Yoruba and variations on Yoruba verse forms (Gibbs, Introduction 4), and inserted into several of his works a number of Yoruba words, expressions and proverbs,<sup>49</sup> the structure of his English is not influenced by that of Yoruba in any important way.<sup>50</sup>

Soyinka's literary works are best described as "artistic hybrids of mixed Yoruba and European parentage" (Wright 5). Although in his younger years, as a result of his education at the local Mission School in the city of Abeokuta, "Christianity was a primary and Yoruba religion a secondary influence," Soyinka's interests in the culture and literature of his people were very early aroused. He "gave up Christianity at the first opportunity" (Gulledge 511), and undertook a firsthand study both of indigenous ritual, religious, and dramatic forms, and of their oral traditions. During his later studies at the Universities of Ibadan, Nigeria, and Leeds, U.K., he became acquainted with modern world literatures, whose different techniques and styles had a major impact on his writing. This means that

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<sup>48</sup> Many other African authors also consciously change European languages, adapting them for their purposes, as, for example, Gabriel Okara (Nigeria) does with English, and Ahmadou Kourouma (Ivory Coast) with French (Zabus 181).

<sup>49</sup> Soyinka employs a number of proverbs in IN; for example, chief Winsala uses one of them to veil the indecency of his demand for a bribe: "*Se wa s'omo fun wa?*" 'Will you act as a dutiful son should?' (84), and several others in an attempt to find a way out when caught red-handed: "*Agba n't'ara...* it is no matter for rejoicing when a child sees his father naked. [...] The wise eunuch keeps from women; the hungry clerk dons coat over his narrow belt and who will say his belly is flat?" (91).

<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, dialogues of Soyinka's personages display a whole gamut of different social dialects and subvarieties of Nigerian English, often betraying Yoruba interference (Adejare 187-92). In such a manner, language in his works "becomes a major signal of character" (Ogunba 11).

Soyinka's roots are primarily Yoruba, not only through his being born and brought up within their culture, but also through his research into his people's history and traditions, both of which provided him with a "base of ideas from which his works flow" (Jones 4), but that, at the same time, his art cannot be characterized as "pure Yoruba," but rather as "Yoruba-based eclecticism" (Wright 6), since influences of western literatures were decisive in his formation as a writer. Like Aitmatov, Soyinka is bent on preserving and promulgating the culture of his people,<sup>51</sup> endangered by swift changes in the twentieth century, but, unlike the Kyrgyz author, he is almost exclusively focused on the present.

Since, until comparatively recently, Sub-Saharan literatures were almost without exception oral, it is hardly surprising that throughout the twentieth century various traditions of folk poetics and storytelling have played a significant role in the growth and development of modern African literatures (Sackey 389). Soyinka, although a self-consciously literary and allusive author, faced the same problem as many other African writers, namely how to establish a connection between a rich heritage of traditional culture and the contemporary world. Claiming that "two principal enemies of [African peoples'] authentic traditions and their will to cultural identity" are "European imperialism" and "Arab-Islamic penetration and domination" (*Art* 179), he insists that contemporary writing can bear the mark of African experience only if it integrates the African cultural substratum. According to him, it is totally unacceptable to renounce in the name of contemporary ideologies any part of the metaphysical, ritual, and — above all — mythical conceptions which serve to structure an African vision of the world; a writer must reject

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<sup>51</sup> For example, during the late seventies and early eighties Soyinka was at the head of the movement at the University of Ife to build a place of communion with Yoruba deities (Omotoso 52).

any apriorism and confront simultaneously past metaphysical conceptions and today's social problems. At the same time, he refuses obsession with history: "The African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past" (Art 19), and criticizes those who idealize African societies before the onslaught of colonialism, deeming such an attitude to be harmful for solving actual problems. Accordingly, Soyinka uses African, mainly Yoruba oral traditions "as a solid base for the action of his novels and demonstrates his constant dependence on the collective memory of his people as the background to the creation of meaning in his works" (Aminigo 51-2), while, at the same time, employing "conceptual structures drawn from [Yoruba] tradition" principally to "integrate the cultural life of the past with the post-independence, Westernized reality" (Boehmer 202).

However, Soyinka was not influenced only by folklore, but also by Yoruba written literature, above all by works of D. O. Fagunwa (1903-1963), the most important author in the language. Fagunwa was both a pioneer of Yoruba letters and its greatest classic, who converted oral traditions into written literature, expanded folk tale into full-fledged novel form, and established a school of Yoruba fiction-writing. His main medium was the "mythic novel" (Irele, "Tradition" 7), whose principal narrative pattern consists of the quest of a wandering hero (generally a hunter) who encounters a number of adventures in a forest full of supernatural beings and happenings (Bamgboṣe 5). Soyinka highly praised Fagunwa's imagination, sense of drama, and exploration of Yoruba idiom (Translator's 3-4), and rendered his best known novel, The Forest of a Thousand Daemons, into English, the first translation of any of his works into a European language. Soyinka's works share some of the qualities Fagunwa is famous for, such as his blend of humor and seriousness,

his fusion of actual and mythic realms into a comprehensive whole, and his virtuosity with language (Irele, "Tradition" 18-19). Another important Yoruba fiction-writer is Amos Tutuola, who wrote in his own version of English shaped on the mould of Yoruba, and whose works, such as The Palm-Wine Drinkard and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, consist of reworking of Yoruba folk tales into "thronged, grisly" stories famous for their "lunatic imagination," "improbable exaggerations" and "discontinuous narrative" (Nkosi 56). Soyinka admitted Tutuola's influence and praised him as a "storyteller in the best Yoruba tradition, pushing the bounds of credibility higher and higher and sustaining it by sheer adroitness, by a juxtaposition of analogous experience from the familiar" (Soyinka, "From" 391). As for contemporary Yoruba literature, which appeared in the fifties and the sixties, breaking away from the Fagunwa school, i.e., at the same time as modern Nigerian literature in English, it is among the most developed ones in native African languages (Ogunşina 165-69). Modern Yoruba novels display many similarities with Soyinka's: they are also influenced by both their oral tradition and Western literary attitudes, frequently use flashbacks, and show a preference for dramatized novelistic technique, i.e., for showing and dialogues rather than description and telling (Ogunşina 110-63).

Soyinka's *oeuvre* belongs to the rich and varied contemporary African mythopoeic writing. Many Sub-Saharan authors compose their works in that manner. Some of them want to preserve important traditional stories by retelling them in context or by describing ancestral ways of life, while others prefer to use elements, motifs and subjects drawn from oral narratives for mythic substructures and symbolic frameworks of their novels with contemporary plots. Thus, for example, in Paul Lomami-Tshibamba's (DR Congo) novel

Ngando (le crocodile) (1948), whose imagery is based on Tshiluba mythology, the link between two worlds, the ordinary one and the mythic, which lies at the bottom of the river Congo, is lost because of the neglect of traditional knowledge brought about by mounting influence of Western technology; consequently, all protagonists, including the crocodile, find a tragic end. Amadou Hampaté Bâ (Mali) offers in Kaïdara (1968) a personal version of a Fulani initiation tale, open to several levels of interpretation, in which two of the three protagonists-searchers die in the process, and only one attains the goal. Amamu, the hero of Kofi Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother (1972), disgusted by alienation and materialism in latter-day Ghana, tries to find a solution by rediscovering the ancient myths of his people and achieves epiphany through mystic communion with Mammy Water, a sea deity, on the beach close by the tree at whose foot his umbilical cord was buried. Although, as a result, he is forced into a mental hospital where he commits suicide, his ordeal is represented as an ascent to spiritual life and his role as that of a traditional scapegoat sacrificed on the altar of modern greed and aggressiveness. In such a way, he is in the end, paradoxically, both redeemed and a redeemer. Myths and traditional beliefs are present on almost every page of many basically realistic novels such as Things Fall Apart (1958) by Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), The River Between (1965) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya), or Les Soleils des indépendances (1968) by Ahmadou Kourouma (Ivory Coast), whose plots are deeply rooted in traditional worlds of, respectively, Igbo, Gikuyu, and Malinke peoples. Historical narratives like Two Thousand Seasons (1973) by Ayi Kwei Armah from Ghana, or

Emperor Shaka the Great (1979) by the Zulu writer Mazisi Kunene from South Africa, also employ myth as their main structural device.<sup>52</sup>

“The importance of Yoruba myths to Soyinka is so great that it is hardly possible to overestimate it” (Larsen 8). However, unlike Aitmatov and Ribeiro, he does not explicitly retell traditional stories: “rather, they are cumulatively elaborated in hieratic action, emblematic mime, an epiphanic image, passages of incantatory speech or prose description” (Jeyifo, Introduction xii). In such a way, he “has made a deeper use of African mythology than any other African writer” (Ogunbesan 175). Soyinka argued that, just as European culture is deeply immersed in Greco-Latin mythology, so African writers should turn their attention to the mythological world of their own people, and bring out those elements that are likely to generate a new vision of things and beings. His approach to and understanding of myth closely parallels its importance in traditional African cultures, which are characterized — just as is Mairum society in Ribeiro’s novel — by a close link between the mythic and the actual.

In Yoruba mythology there are, according to different sources, 400, 401, 600, or 601 *òrìṣàs*, “gods” or “deities,” who are believed to have lived on earth in the distant past, but, instead of dying, became divinities (Bascom, Yoruba 77). The only exception is the supreme god Olorun (or Olodumare), the omnipotent and unchanging creator of everything, including the *òrìṣàs* (Idowu 37), who lives in Heaven as the supreme manifestation of *ashè*, “the vital force” (Verger, “Yoruba” 2181). Being unapproachable and not listening to

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<sup>52</sup> Many other mythopoeic works in African literatures are worthy of attention, for example The Great Ponds (1969) by Elechi Amadi (Nigeria), Le Fils du fétiche (1971) by David Ananou (Togo), L’Initié (1979) by Olympe Bhêly-Quénou (Benin), L’Assemblée des djinns (1985) by Massa Makan Diabaté (Mali), Orphée-Dafric (1981) by Werewere Liking (Cameroon), and The Strange Bride (1989) by Grace Ogot (Kenya).

prayers, he has no cult and little importance in religious life. In primordial times, however, when Heaven and Earth were connected by a chain, it was possible to climb up, so holy men used to visit him (Idowu 21-22). The link was later broken because of some human transgression, while Olorun withdrew beyond reach (Hallgren 85-86). On the other hand, the *òrìṣàs*, stationed between the supreme god and humans, are actively involved in the affairs of this world. Their different cults constitute the core of Yoruba religion. As there is no generally accepted pantheon, their mythology is not homogeneous, but rather expressed through varying and contradictory systems in different Yoruba groups (Hallgren 25). Such pluralism is accompanied by “un parfait esprit de tolérance” (Verger, “Yoruba” 2181-82), in which myths change and migrate, while *òrìṣàs* evolve or are deposed as stories about them are altered to rationalize or even influence historical processes. The power of *òrìṣàs* depends on humans (Maupoil 96), as is expressed in the proverb: “*Bi s’enia, imale o si*” ‘If humanity were not, the gods would not be’ (Soyinka, *Myth* 10); without worship and sacrifices even the name of an *òrìṣà* would be forgotten. This means that Soyinka was acting in the spirit of his people’s beliefs when he made a new version of the pantheon, giving his own interpretation of several deities. At the same time, his approach to contemporary difficulties is also similar to the traditional one, as “le message religieux Yoruba ne part ni d’une angoisse ni de la ‘peur des dieux’; il est plutôt une tentative de réponse aux problèmes de l’homme à partir de son environnement physique et social” (Verger, “Yoruba” 2181).

The Interpreters, “the first modernist novel published [...] by a West African writer” (Maduakor, *Wole* 81), is an intricate work with multiple facets, each of them significant in

its own right, but also subtly interconnected with other aspects of the narrative through a complex criss-cross of correspondences and echoes. Its formal characteristics such as “the manipulation of chronology, the seeming absence of plot, the variation of style, the co-presence of very different kinds of imagination, the unequal development of characters, and the sudden concentration on new characters in Part Two” (Kinkead-Weekes, “Interpreters” 219), puzzled some readers and critics, who described it as “an undisciplined and overcrowded canvas, containing enough material for four or five novels” (Wright 122), or as a “loose string of impressions and episodes” characterized by “tedious formlessness” (Palmer, Introduction xiv). The narrative flow of IN focuses on the preoccupations of the main characters, follows their experiences and reactions, and consists of numerous “independent episodes [...] which are thematically and symbolically rather than causally and logically linked together” (Palmer, Growth 244). The richness of the novel lies as much in its texture as in its structure, since the complexity of its syntax and imagery, impressionistic, richly evocative language, numerous elliptic and hermetic expressions, cryptic and convoluted style, all contribute to its extraordinary density and betray the hand of an accomplished poet. It is no surprise that Soyinka’s writing has been compared to “a juggling act” in which he is able to “keep any number of plates — and valuable plates, at that — spinning in the air all at the same time” (Laurence 11).

Soyinka’s novelistic technique was undoubtedly formed under the influence of modernist writers like James Joyce and William Faulkner, as is shown by such procedures as experiments with time, nonlinear narrative development, frequent interruptions of the story line, representation of events as seen from inside the characters’ consciousnesses, and

the employment of symbols “as centering nodes upon which meaning could condense” (Friedman 414-15). In IN Soyinka makes a very effective use of ‘spatial form’ (see pp. 56-57 above), which Donald Ackley explains as follows:

Spatial form is in many ways more suited to Soyinka’s view of contemporary African life than is the traditional narrative form which traces events sequentially and naturalistically, implying an order and system which Soyinka does not believe to exist. Similarly, the use of a core of characters participating in a wide and seemingly unrelated series of events is more suited to the theme which Soyinka wishes to develop than is the traditional focus on a single central character and single plot line. [...] Only in the totality of the many characters’ experiences can Soyinka reflect [...] a world that lacks direction and common purpose, a world that can be absurdly funny or pathetically sad, a world that can be cruel and frightening, a world, in short, that is chaotic. (52)

Influences of existentialist writings are also present in the novel. The position of the main characters facing the meaningless and absurd world which surrounds them, their bitter disillusionment and frustration are not unsimilar to those of the protagonists of such existential novels as Jean-Paul Sartre’s La Nausée, or of such theatre of the absurd plays as Samuel Beckett’s En attendant Godot (Msiska 35).

On the other hand, many stylistic characteristics of IN are directly copied from traditional African narratives. For example, jarring modal switches in this novel, notably from satiric vignette to evocation of myth, and from lyric memories to dramatic conflict, follow the style of several Yoruba oral genres, which employ similar changes in tone. A case in point are the *oriki*, Yoruba praise-poems, which address a person, living or dead, a lineage, a township, a deity, or even an object, animal, plant, or a natural phenomenon.

Constructed as collections of discrete and disparate epithets belonging to or attributed to their subject (Barber 16), and expressed in a brief, condensed and cryptic style full of extended metaphors and allusions (Tonkin 63), the *oriki* are fluid and in a sense endless. They contain fragments from different periods, composed by different people, which can be augmented in the course of time. A performance of the *oriki* — involving sentences which are “tour à tour respectueux, plaisant, ironique, poétique, gaillard, héroïque ou sentencieux” (Verger, “Oriki” 239) — “is a rapid passage from one allusion to another; each allusion is to a different narrative hinterland, sometimes quite extensive and detailed” (Tonkin 92). In such a manner the *oriki* represent not only a mixture of styles like IN, but also a way in which the past can be reintegrated into the present (Barber 14), which is one of Soyinka’s main goals.<sup>53</sup>

Trickster narratives, very important in most African oral literatures, are still alive today, reformulated in a new disguise as contemporary urban legends, in which, instead of Tortoise, the traditional trickster-protagonist of Yoruba tales, “the characters are full-blooded human beings who are fully involved in an easily identifiable social reality” (Sekoni 94-96). In IN Soyinka takes from those narratives “the hegemonic view of the trickster as a psychopath and transforms it into a new image of the trickster as a well connected and favored exploiter,” who uses his influence and position in society to profit “at the expense of other characters,” thus becoming “a source of social or moral satire” (107-8). Personages like Sir Derinola and Chief Winsala are portrayed in the novel in that manner. However, in modern urban legends, apart from ‘negative’ tricksters, there is also

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<sup>53</sup> The *oriki* are mentioned in the novel itself, as many of Simi’s admirers pay professional singers to perform praise-songs for her (51).

another, 'positive' variety of trickster figure; the schemes of the former are often thwarted by the latter. Unfortunately, those 'good' tricksters are often "so deformed or incapacitated that they rarely constitute effective counter-tricksters and thus symbolic emancipators" (116). The futility of the actions and attitudes of some of the main characters in Soyinka's novel, above all those of Sagoe, can be understood in precisely such a way. Another type of oral narrative which had an impact on the structure of IN are traditional African dilemma tales. This popular folk genre consists of a story which puts its characters in a certain relationship, and then ends abruptly, without either an explanation or a conclusion (Bascom, African 15). Sometimes it provides an explicit question as an epilogue, sometimes not, but it always generates considerable debate. Like some of Soyinka's plays, which have a purpose "to set a riddle, not to tell a story" (Adedeji 105), his novel, too, ends leaving many questions unanswered. However, unlike riddles, neither dilemma tales, nor Soyinka's works can have a simple explanation.

According to the author, IN "was an attempt to capture a particular moment in the life of a generation which was trying to find its feet after independence" (Six xiv). The protagonists are a group of young intellectuals, close friends who went to school together in Nigeria. After studying overseas, they are now back home, so they regularly meet again. Clever and socially privileged, they represent "the new generation of interpreters" (IN 178) in the sense that they try to understand and explain, from their different angles, both the society and themselves in their new and altered circumstances. They hope to be able to connect the old with the new, the real with the potential, and to make some positive change. Since some of them live in Lagos, and others in Ibadan, the action takes place alternatively

in each city. There are five of them: Egbo, a civil servant at the Foreign Office, Sagoe, a journalist, Sekoni, an engineer, Kola, a painter, and Bandele, a university lecturer. The sixth member of their group, Lasunwon, a lawyer, plays only a small role in the novel. Among female characters, which are less developed, the most important are Dehinwa, Sagoe's girlfriend and future wife who works as a secretary; Simi, Egbo's lover, a "notorious, international courtesan" famous for her beauty (247); a young unnamed undergraduate student at Ibadan who has an affair with Egbo; and Monica Faseyi, an English woman who by the end of the novel drifts away from her husband and begins a relationship with Kola. Three important characters who do not belong to the circle of the interpreters but play major roles later in the novel are Joe Golder, Barabbas-Noah and Lazarus.

Although the five interpreters dislike the situation in their country and are seemingly well placed to transform and improve it, it turns out in practice that they are excluded from all positions of power, so all they can do in their disillusionment and frustration is to criticize both the sterile social conditions and the "crass materialism which is eroding traditional values" (Moore 71). The representatives of the newly established elite of black "*oyinbos*" ("whites"; IN 21) stand as antithesis to the principles represented by the protagonists of the novel. Thus Dr. Lumoye performs abortions only for patients who grant him sexual favors and publicly denounces those who refuse to comply, revealing their confidential medical information at evening parties without any regard for professional ethics. Ayo Faseyi, although intelligent and talented, displays, on account of his "lack of a cohesive cultural base," "an uneasy mixture of mimicry and self-contempt" (Maja-Pearce 52). As a consequence, he is pathologically anxious to establish himself as a member of the

elite, seeing his university post as “just a stepping stone” to “politics, corporations,” or, even better, to a lucrative job in one of multinational companies which are “always looking for Nigerian directors” (202-3). He is proud to have managed to marry an Englishwoman, emphasizing that she is not “a bush girl from some London slum,” but an “educated” person who “has moved in society” (43). Pseudo-intellectual Professor Oguazor, described by Sagoe as a “bell-boy in tuxedo” (140), goes to great lengths to ape an already obsolete, supposedly upper-class English way of life. His snobbery and grotesque mannerisms expose the decadence and sterility of the ruling elite in post-independence Nigeria. Oguazor’s affected quasi-Oxonian accent creates strange effects, as when he invites his wife to join the other women at a party: “Ceroline der, the ledies herv been wetting for you” (142). He scolds the “meral terptitude” of the younger generation while hiding abroad his own illegitimate five-year-old daughter he had “by the housemaid” (148-49). Sir Derinola, a respected judge and a chairman of several companies, seemingly incorruptible and a paragon of morality, is actually involved in bribe-taking. Greedy and lustful Chief Winsala, “a noted lecher and a genial rogue who is always drunk” (Palmer, *Growth* 260), is much less circumspect in his advances, sending all secretaries and maids ducking for cover and openly asking for graft. As the plot unfolds, the friends are more and more conscious that the society to which they have returned is rotten to the core; any hope of standing above it is not only unrealistic, but quite dangerous, so they show a growing tendency to retire into private preoccupations. Kola devotes himself wholly to his art, Sagoe seeks refuge in his drunkenness and quasi-philosophy of “voidancy,” Egbo retreats into esoteric religious mysticism in his private riverside sanctuary, while Sekoni suffers a mental collapse. Only

Bandele, with his strength of character, is able to face not only the shortcomings of the society, but also those of his friends.

Two dominant modes are interwoven in the fabric of IN: the satiric and the tragic. The novel consists of two parts; the first is more overtly satiric, giving a pessimistic picture of the early years of national independence, and targeting both the social ineffectuality of the old traditions and the evils of modern ways of life. At the outset of Part One the friends are in a nightclub, during one of their regular meetings, while a storm and rain outside signal the beginning of the rainy season which will follow the story line to its end. After the initial scene, the plot immediately shifts to a flashback in which Egbo remembers visiting his home town. Part One is thus constructed of two types of dynamically juxtaposed narratives: on the one hand, there are flashbacks — and flashbacks within flashbacks — in which the plot unfolds within the consciousness of characters, and, on the other, the development of the narrative present, showing external events which are expressed chiefly through dialogues. In such a manner, the passages which cut back and forth across the lives of the protagonists are contrasted to and “linked by passages offered by Soyinka from a certain narrative distance” (Attwell 62). The interpreters forage in their past to find the roots of present events and use their present knowledge to try to understand their past. However, the flashbacks are reserved mainly for Egbo, Sagoe and Sekoni; Kola is given only a couple of them, and Bandele none at all. Soyinka’s “technique of broken chronology particularly enhances this deepening and widening of the scope of the novel as the author dives below the tip of the iceberg and goes under and around it” (Jones 155). It also accentuates the friends’ feeling of alienation by establishing a contrast between the boring

and repulsive present, and the “violent undertows” and “dark vitality” (IN 12) of the potentially meaningful past.

The last chapter of Part One, which amounts to its comic climax, consists of the description of Professor Oguazor’s party. As in a final act of a theater play, all the main characters are present. The party itself is the ultimate show of pretentiousness and spiritual emptiness of the contemporary Nigerian society, as is made manifest not only by ridiculous behavior and the ludicrous conversations of many guests — activities in which the professor’s wife, who manages to leave even Sagoe speechless, excels — but also by the absurd way their house is decorated:

From the ceiling hung citrous clusters on invisible wires. A glaze for the warmth of life and succulence told the story, they were the same as the artificial apples. There were fancy beach-hat flowerpots on the wall, ivy clung from these along a picture rail. All plastic, and the ceiling was covered in plastic lichen. Sagoe has passed, he now noticed, under a special exhibition group of one orange, two pears, and a fan of bananas straight from European wax-works. (140)

The beginning of Part Two marks the end of the interplay between the past and the present, as the story now moves consistently forward with only two short flashbacks. The tone is more somber and tragic, while the interpreters are depicted through a pattern of references to Yoruba mythology. As in Part One, the first scene takes place in a nightclub, but now the friends have lost much of their vigor and vivacity; they are listless, weary and dejected. The rainy season is almost at its peak, when suddenly a tragedy strikes their circle: Sekoni is killed in a road accident. The mode of narration acquires a ritual dimension:

The rains of May become in July slit arteries of the sacrificial bull, a million bleeding punctures of the sky-bull hidden in convulsive cloud humps, black, overfed for this one event, nourished on horizon tops of endless choice grazing, distant beyond giraffe reach. Some competition there is below, as bridges yield right of way to lorries packed to the running-board, and the wet tar spins mirages of unspeed-limits to heroic cars and their cargoes find a haven below the precipice. The blood of earth-dwellers mingles with blanched streams of the mocking bull, and flows into currents eternally below earth. The Dome cracked above Sekoni's short-sighted head one messy night. Too late he saw the insanity of a lorry parked right in his path, a swerve turned into a skid and cruel arabesques of tyres. A futile heap of metal, and Sekoni's body lay surprised across the open door, showers of laminated glass around him, his beard one fastness of blood and wet earth. (155)

The remainder of the novel is structured around the interpreters' reaction to his death. They meet several times with Lazarus and listen to his stories, as some of them are under the impression that he is somehow Sekoni's reincarnation. In order to honor the memory of their friend, they organize a musical evening and an exhibition at the University of Ibadan, where both Sekoni's sculpture and Kola's painting are displayed. The last scene, as in Part One, takes place at the reception after the recital where all the important characters assemble and where the interpreters again confront their opponents, only this time the atmosphere is tragic rather than farcical, ending with Bandele's curse upon this debased and unfeeling society as a whole: "I hope you all live to bury your daughters" (251).

It is obvious that the characters (and their development) are the key to the novel. They constantly define one another and comment by words and deeds on the main themes, while their conflicts channel the unfolding of the plot (Bestman 39). Soyinka's novelistic art thus evolves from his skill as a playwright, as is revealed by witty and lucid dialogues,

the vividness of the episodes, and the different levels of language ascribed to different personalities. Although all the main characters are well developed and rounded, they can also be seen both as embodying various aspects of the author himself (Houbein 101),<sup>54</sup> and symbolically as “masks or voices in an adventure of ideation” (Heywood 130). Their correspondence with Yoruba deities is a technique the author has already used in his dramas, for example in the play A Dance of the Forest. Each of the friends represents one of the *òrìṣàs*, both in his inner meaning in the novel, and in Kola’s painting entitled “The Pantheon.” The painting itself is a *mise en abyme* reflecting all the relations and connections of the story, whereas Kola is the writer’s double put into the stream of the narrative. In such a manner, “The Pantheon” serves as a structural device which binds the interpreters and their story into a single whole, and which facilitates the transposition of traditional Yoruba myths into a contemporary plot, thus not only “subverting the accepted or ordinary way of looking at reality” (Priebe 79), but also creating a bridge between traditional beliefs and modern conditions.

Egbo, whose parents drowned when he was still a child, was brought up by a pious aunt, whose efforts to raise him as a Christian were unsuccessful, since he “was always drawn to his pagan past, especially the [sacred] grove of Oshun where he would often go and lie by the bank of the river” Ogun<sup>55</sup> (Priebe 84). He found later an even better place for communion with gods further downstream beneath the railway bridge connecting Ibadan and Lagos, where the waters flow over a rocky bed between the boulders which he construed as the toes of Olumo, the spirit of rock associated with durability and fertility

<sup>54</sup> According to that interpretation, Sagoe stands for the writer, Egbo for the impulsive liver, and Kola for the introvert artist.

<sup>55</sup> The names of the river *Ògùn* and of the god *Ògun* are two different words in Yoruba.

(Awolalu 48). After his first sexual experience with Simi, Egbo went to that place, which afterwards became his personal center of pilgrimage, and had a mystical experience patterned as an initiation rite. "For the first time since his childhood" he ascended "into the gods' domain" (IN 126), took off his clothes, bathed in the dark, and laid on the rock, feeling as if he was being broken apart and then rebuilt. After a sleep – a symbolic death – he woke up as a new man looking "around him, bathing and wondering at life, for it seemed to him that he was born again" (127). He set off from the sanctuary with a definitive sense of being richer with new and important insights:

He left with a gift that he could not define upon his body, for what traveller beards the gods in their den and departs without a divine boon. Knowledge he called it, a power for beauty often, an awareness that led him dangerously towards a rocksalt psyche, a predator on Nature. (127)

However, both his renewal and his newly acquired understanding take place and have value only inwardly, on a purely personal level, as neither brings about any change in his conduct in practical life.

Egbo is in a longstanding relationship with Simi, an excessively beautiful, almost legendary courtesan, so dangerous for men that those who got involved with her "lost hope of salvation," "bluster emptied, pocket drained, manhood disgraced" (50-51). Not surprisingly, she is compared to a "Queen Bee," who destroys the drones attracted to her (51), and to "Mammy Watta," a class of water-spirits of the Niger Delta and the adjoining coast. Yoruba mythtellers relate that the latter live in magnificent submerged cities and that some brave men "have gone under water for a number of days" and "lived among the water-creatures" before returning home (Awolalu 47). Accordingly, Egbo's first encounter

with her is described as a meeting between “the creek man” and “his Mammy Watta” (52). Associated with water, Simi symbolizes “the deep waters of the past” (Larsen 153) which attract Egbo so much. On the other hand, she represents for him another possibility — apart from his riverside meditations — to achieve fulfillment, reach for the absolute and obtain total mastery of life. Although Simi too sits for Kola, we are never told which *òrìṣà* will appear in her image in the painting; we only know that it is a beautiful goddess. Most likely, she is portrayed either as Oya, the goddess of hurricane and the river Niger, who is — like Simi — both attractive and destructive (Larsen 156), or as Oshun, the Yoruba Venus, promiscuous and beautiful, who married the god Ogun (Bascom, Yoruba 88).

Egbo’s other girlfriend is an undergraduate student with whom he spends one casual evening in his secret riverside shrine. He learns about her pregnancy, which came as a result of their intimacy, only when it becomes the talk of the campus. In her message to him she insists that he is under no obligation and that she wants him to look for her only after having made a clear decision what he wants to do. Although the girl is not represented in “The Pantheon,” she has an important place in the structure of the novel, where she stands in opposition to Simi. Independent, honest, modern and educated, the girl symbolizes a potential future, imperiled by forces of corruption and falsity.

Another dilemma Egbo is caught in regards his career options. Being the heir to the throne of the small chiefdom of Osa, he was sent overseas by his community to study in the hope that when he graduates they would have an educated leader. After his return, however, he accepts a position in the Foreign Office instead, notwithstanding the tedious routine of the paper-pushing job he is assigned there. In spite of the facts that the throne seems to

provide him with an escape to a simpler and more wholesome existence, and that he is fond of traditional culture and disgusted with modern life, Egbo cannot bring himself to go back to live in his native village in the Niger delta, ruled by his old grandfather and described in the Eliotic terms of the Waste Land scenario. It appears that in his view the evolution of mankind is a purely linear movement from the old towards the new, that the past and the present are completely separated, and that to accept one of them necessarily means to reject the other. In the first flashback of the novel he takes his friends by boat to Osa, but stops the paddlers right at the place where ocean tides and river flow meet. While he hesitates and meditates, watching the magic scenery of his childhood, the flow is replaced by the ebb-tide and it is no longer safe to continue their journey. Consequently, when one of his friends asks whether he has made up his mind which way he — and all of them — are to go with their boat, he replies simply: “With the tide” (14), which both sums up much of the life of all the interpreters and anticipates the actions of the novel, specifically those pertinent to his own indecisiveness.

On Kola’s painting, Egbo is ironically portrayed as Ogun; ironically, because he lacks the “mythical omniscience” (IN 12) that would enable him to lead the Osa chieftdom from its old traditional ways across the chasm that separates it from the modern society. Ogun is the *òrìṣà* of war and iron, and the guardian divinity of hunters, butchers, barbers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, wood-carvers, engineers, mechanics, and all workers in iron and steel (Parrinder 34). “He came into the world from a volcano as it was erupting and brought with him the ability to forge weapons and tools” (Turner and Coulter 360). In primeval times, after the earth was created and *òrìṣàs* first descended to inhabit it, they encountered

on their way a thicket no one could penetrate except Ogun, who cut a path through with his machete. He refused the crown of the holy city of Ife offered to him in appreciation, preferring the free life of a hunter. It happened that he once met a group of people at an *Ajọ Òrìkì* ceremony where it is forbidden to greet anyone. Surprised and angry that no one noticed him and that all the kegs of palm-wine were empty, Ogun in his fury beheaded many of those present before realizing what he was doing. In the aftermath he sank into the depths of the earth and decided to stay there, as he does to this day (Awolalu 31-32). Both a builder and a destroyer, Ogun is also associated with lawfulness and is called on to witness covenants (Scheub 199). Although capricious and dangerous, he demands justice, fair play and rectitude (Idowu 89), while, as the 'path-opener,' he assists humans in clearing the way to wealth, health and prosperity.

Egbo's personality, at the same time "astonishingly daring, and surprisingly weak and uncertain" (Gurnah 75), reflects the ambivalence of Ogun's nature. Like his god, he prefers to remain alone and free, to withdraw into his own domain, rather than accept any personal commitment. Kola's painting emphasizes the god's destructive aspect, as Egbo himself notes: "Look at that thing he has made of me for instance, a damned bloodthirsty maniac from some maximum security zoo. Is that supposed to be me? Or even Ogun, which I presume it represents?" (233). In fact, Egbo's identification with Ogun implies that he has within him both the *òrìṣà*'s aggressiveness and the power to transform his society and conduct it into the new cycle. However, his creative energy comes to the fore only in the loneliness of his sanctuary; at other times it is blocked, since he is not able to make up his

mind, but merely vacillates between different possibilities of leadership, and between the present and the past.

Sagoe, the journalist, is an unconventional and irreverent character, whose presence in the novel “provides the much-desired relief from the sustained tension” (Melamu 32). Cynical and humorous — although at times depressed and even hysterical — he is a Dionysian figure of “the irrepressible and often drunk reveler” (Morrison 212). Sagoe’s first disillusionment comes immediately upon his return to Nigeria when he applies for a job in the ironically entitled newspaper Independent Viewpoint and discovers that the only way to get it is to bribe the members of the Board of Interview. He soon finds out that his new position offers very little space for self-expression and real journalism. When he tries to write an article about how the corrupted authorities treated his friend Sekoni (see pp. 166-67 below), Sir Derinola, the chairman of the newspaper board, forbids its printing, using the material Sagoe collected to blackmail a political opponent. As the editor-in-chief explains, such conduct is routine in the newspaper business, so any indignation is both useless and unreasonable.

In “The Pantheon,” Sagoe lends his features to the divine trickster and messenger Esu (or Eshu). When Obatala (see p. 169 below) came down to earth to create humans, Esu tricked him by tempting him with a keg of palm-wine. Obatala got drunk, fell asleep, and his equipment was stolen by Oduduwa, another *òrìṣà*. As a result, Obatala became so angry that he withdrew from the earth and moved to heaven. Henceforth Esu became the messenger between heaven and earth charged with bringing to Obatala regular reports from this world, but also with carrying messages between other *òrìṣàs*. Not always as trustworthy

as we might expect, Esu continued to play his tricks from time to time, so that once he “got the sun and moon so mad at each other that they quit their assigned orbits” (Hyde 126). Esu is capable of changing form at will, and is said to have two hundred names, which indicates that he is a many-sided, diverse personality (Scheub 48). He likes to disturb people, provoke them, and test their true character (Turner and Coulter 172). He is irascible, crafty, witty, sometimes vulgar (Verger, “Yoruba” 2194), associated with disorder, delighted in flouting taboos, and a master of words and verbal power (Hallgren 32); all of these traits characterize Sagoe too.

As a typical trickster figure, Sagoe enjoys playing practical jokes. Thus, for example, he steals a wreath from Sir Derinola’s mile-long funeral procession to give it to the cortège of a poor man who has only eleven mourners. Upon discovering that he has forgotten his wallet, he tricks a taxi driver by pretending to be a police officer and thus avoids paying the fare. On another occasion, he leads Chief Koyomi into making a fool of himself by proposing in the parliament that human excrement in the South of the country should be collected and sent by special trains to the North to be traded for donkeys and used for fertilizing less productive land. At Professor Oguazor’s party, disgusted by the hosts’ absurd mimicry of European etiquette, Sagoe, under the influence of drink, protests by plucking the plastic apples and throwing them through the window. The most extraordinary example of his cynicism is his “Book of Enlightenment,” containing the scatological philosophy of “voidancy” which elevates the physical act of emptying the bowels to the rank of metaphysics. As an expression of his discontent, his treatise describes the current state of affairs in the following terms: “Next to death [...] shit is the most vernacular

atmosphere of our beloved country” (108). Sagoe is thus an unsuccessful countertrickster (see pp. 152-53 above), who is able only to ridicule the selfishness, vulgarity, hypocrisy and unscrupulousness of the ruling elite, but not to reform the society. As a consequence, by the close of IN he withdraws into private life, deciding to marry Dehinwa and promising her to burn his “Book of Enlightenment” before the wedding.

Sekoni, an idealist and the most serious of the interpreters, is a talented civil engineer who hopes to bring prosperity to his nation by employing new scientific and technological methods. He was disowned by his Muslim family on account of his marriage to a Christian girl. His father was so enraged by that “sin, so heinous, so unfilial and blasphemous,” that he “stood at the door of the Marriage Registry and implored the wrath of hurricanoes on the treachery of his blood,” and then made a vow: “I will never, never open my mouth to speak to you. May Allah in his might strike me dead if I speak another word to you!” (98). Sekoni’s isolation, excepting his circle of friends, is also a consequence of his terrible stutter, which seriously impedes him in social intercourse. His dreams about being useful to his fellow-countrymen are soon thwarted, because — instead of doing the work he is employed for — he spends days in his office signing vouchers and bicycle advances. When he complains to his board of directors, they send him to a remote village of Ijioha, where he builds a small experimental power station. His superiors then hire an expatriate ‘expert’ to condemn the plant as hazardous. “It is clear that they are doing it to spite Sekoni for daring to be different from the other employees” (Msiska 34). More importantly, the write-off power station is more profitable than a working one, as the directors can claim a large amount of money for compensation from the government. The

people in the village are also led to believe that the plant is harmful, so they call the police when Sekoni tries to resurrect his project. He suffers a nervous breakdown as a result and is sent to a mental hospital. After being discharged he takes to wood-carving and creates, just before the tragic road accident, "The Wrestler," a sculpture symbolizing struggle and indomitable stubbornness.

In the painting, Sekoni represents Sango (or Shango), the god of thunder and lightning, who was originally a king of the city of Oyo and the discoverer of magical procedures which enabled him to call forth violent thunderstorms. Once when he used his charm, the lightning — instead of pulverizing the enemy — destroyed his own palace and killed most of his wives and children, which grieved him so much that he hanged himself. However, his devotees claim that he did not die, but ascended to heaven on the wings of a storm and became a god. Sango supports justice and fairness, and punishes liars, thieves, troublemakers and those who use bad medicine to harm others (Bascom, Yoruba 84). Sekoni's plans, too ambitious for the current situation in which liars and thieves have the upper hand, backfire — just like Sango's — harming both himself and his family. He is a somewhat ironic Promethean figure, since he is punished even though his efforts came to naught. Sekoni also represents a scapegoat, the 'carrier' figure in Yoruba sacrificial rites, as indicated by Sagoe's words, "people like Sekoni end up on the pyre anyway" (98). His death during the cleansing period of flood rains is described as a sacrificial offering, through language full of ritual resonances and fertility symbols.

Kola is an Apollonian figure, a dedicated creative artist constantly tormented by self-criticism and by awareness of limitations — his own and those of his art. Although at

times as cynical as Sagoe, for example when he draws a caricature of the huge female dancer in the club, he is in fact constantly engaged in a search for faces and figures which might help him to integrate his vision, find correspondences between mythic figures and their present-day manifestations, and finish "The Pantheon." As a consequence, he is mostly interested in people who can model for him, which leaves the impression that his conduct in everyday life is selfish, inconsistent with his ideals (Emejulu 137). However, realizing that continuity is essential and that, in that sense, the past is indispensable for the present, Kola feels the need to bridge "the transitional gulf" (Soyinka, Myth 150) and yearns to overcome his "intense fear of fulfillment" (IN 218). Accordingly, he tries to attain a state of detachment in which he could be totally devoted to his art:

If only we were, if only we were and we felt nothing of the enslaving cords, to drop from impersonal holes in the void and owe neither dead nor living nothing of our selves, and we should grow towards this, neither acknowledging nor weakening our will by understanding, so that when the present breaks over our heads we quickly find a new law for living. (244-45)

For fifteen months he immerses himself in the creation of the enormous painting, which for him is both a means for seeking truth and a kind of escapism. In his loneliness as an artist, Kola discovers a kindred spirit in Monica Faseyi, who reassures him in his moments of doubt. As a result, he not only finishes the canvas, but also learns that there are other important things in life such as love. His pursuit of self-fulfillment thus unfolds in two parallel movements: on the one hand, he produces a work of unquestionable creative insight, while, on the other, his relationship with Monica develops rapidly.

Although we learn less about Bandele than about the other interpreters, he is nonetheless the central character of the novel (Maugham-Brown 56), carrying, more than anyone else, its thematic weight (Priebe 93). Although quiet and reserved, he is quick to act when faced with an emergency, as he does during the fight in the Mayomi club when he effectively ties up the thug Okonje. Bandele's main quality is his readiness to offer a positive contribution to the world around him and to help others: Egbo's pregnant girlfriend, Simi when it seems that Egbo is about to leave her, Joe Golder after he accidentally causes Noah's death. He tries to protect people like Ayo Faseyi from their own follies, rather than encouraging them to make even greater fools of themselves, as Kola and Sagoe tend to do. His response to Sekoni's death is essentially different from that of his friends: while Egbo hides in his private shrine, Sagoe locks himself "in beer and vomit for a week," and Kola paints maniacally "in spasms of grief and unbelieving" (155-56), only Bandele has the courage to face his friend's father.

In "The Pantheon" Bandele stands for the creator god Obatala, the deputy of Olorun on earth (Idowu 71) and "the most intelligent and even-tempered of the *òrìṣàs*" (Karade 24). In the beginning, Obatala, sent by Olorun, created the earth and then set out to make humans too, when, tricked by Esu, he got drunk and could not finish his task. He retired from the earth in anger and continued to make human bodies out of clay in the hereafter, while Olorun breathed life into them. When Obatala got drunk one more time, he made albinos, hunchbacks, the blind and all kinds of cripples, all of whom are dedicated to him (Verger, "Yoruba" 2183). Characterized by ritual and ethical purity, "wise passiveness and access to the secret springs of knowledge" (Moore 84), Obatala is charged with the

avenging of wrongs and the curing of illnesses (Karade 25). His ambiguity and inscrutability, as well as his calm, wisdom, impartiality and “patience brought to bear against darkness and hate” (Robert Farris Thompson, qtd. in Priebe 92), are all reflected in Bandele’s personality. Just as Obatala watches over human beings, Bandele, the most tolerant and the most compassionate among the interpreters, serves his friends “as a prod for their consciences” (Jones 159). His importance is made clear in the final part of the novel where he is described as “the staff of Ogboni,<sup>56</sup> rigid in single casting,” and compared to “a timeless image brooding over lesser beings” (244). When he pronounces the curse on the Oguazor clique, he is seen as being as “old and immutable as the royal mothers of Benin throne, old and cruel as the *ogboni* in conclave pronouncing the Word” (250-51). Bandele “epitomizes Yoruba morality” which is “concerned more with the preservation of communal harmony than with categorical good and evil” (Priebe 94). His presence is a key one for any attempt to reestablish lost wholeness, as he creates links between different people and disparate states of existence, while being perfectly aware of our shortcomings as human beings and of the fact that the world cannot be changed overnight.

Lasunwon the lawyer, who belongs to the elite to whom only money and physical comfort matter, “seems to exist mainly for the purpose of making extremely fatuous utterances which throw into bold relief the more urgent search of the ‘interpreters’” (Melamu 30). It is not quite clear if he is represented in the painting or not; there are some indications that he sits for the *òrìṣà* of smallpox Sopona (Moore 79). Joe Golder, American singer and lecturer in history at the University of Ibadan, is homosexual and “one quarter

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<sup>56</sup> A conclave of elders.

black" (101). He tortures himself in the tropical sun trying to darken his light complexion, since he feels that he really is an African, while, at the same time, suffering from internal torment in an unpermissive society in which homosexuality is either discouraged or openly condemned. He is thus a liminal character squeezed between established categories, alienated and not truly belonging anywhere. In Kola's "Pantheon" he is represented as Erinle, a bisexual animal spirit, who is male six months of the year, when he lives in the jungle and sustains himself by hunting, and female the other six months, when he lives in a river and eats fish.

Barabbas is a rootless and futureless street youth driven to crime by poverty. When a lynching crowd chases him through the streets of Lagos for shop-lifting he supposedly committed,<sup>57</sup> he is saved by Lazarus, who takes him to his church, rebaptizes him Noah, assigns him to the position of an apostle in his sect, and tries to transform him into an offering to God, "because we fear that Lord may have forgotten his covenant with earth" (173). The boy's personality is described as empty, "neutral" and "vaporous" (227, 178), so that other characters interpret him in different ways. Kola first wants to paint him as Christ, though "not on the Cross or any such waste of time," but — in transposition into Yoruba mythology — as Esumare the rainbow, the "Ambiguous Covenant" between gods and humans (178), because Noah's vacuity symbolizes the apparent unsubstantiality of the feeble link which connects the world with the divine, rendered even more insignificant by the failure of all the interpreters' attempts to renew it. Kola later perceives that such an

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<sup>57</sup> The predicament of Barabbas pursued by a rapidly growing mob is described in a similar way as that of the hunter Kako in Fagunwa's famous novel: "Like sand -elves in *Ogboju Ode* [*The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*], the mob materialized with every step and every sting of a stone or the passing breath of a near miss made him begin to wish for a merciful release" (IN 115).

“overdose of cynicism” (227) limits his vision, since it disclaims the dynamic relationship between different spheres of existence which is so important in Yoruba religion. He then paints Lazarus as Esumare, whereas Noah sits for Atunda, Obatala’s treacherous servant. According to Yoruba myths, when Obatala came down to earth on Olorun’s orders, he bought a slave named Atunda and gave him a piece of land on a mountain slope. Atunda rolled a large boulder down on his unsuspecting master and smashed him to pieces. Half of the fragments were put together to create Orisha-nla (“the chief *òrìṣà*”), the new Obatala, while from the remaining hundreds of them other *òrìṣàs* originated (Beier 6-7). As a result, many of our concepts, such as those of self and time, have been fragmented ever since. Most other characters of the novel, except for Bandele, exploit Noah, each for his own ends: the painting (Kola), news feature (Sagoe), or religious obsession (Lazarus). When Egbo leaves him in Kola’s apartment alone with Joe Golder, he is accidentally killed as he falls from a balcony, frightened by the latter’s homosexual advances. His death is represented as yet another sacrifice carrying a promise of regeneration.

Lazarus, the albino, claims — in tune with his Biblical name — that he had died and then returned to life just as his fellow villagers were lowering his coffin into the grave, and that during the time he was dead his skin changed from black to albino. He then organizes his own syncretic sect which combines elements of Christianity with traditional Yoruba religion. The interpreters, who come in contact with him shortly after Sekoni’s death, are involuntarily attracted to him. On the one hand, he is similar to their dead friend in that he also finds meaning in life through continuous endeavors to help the community, while, on the other, the story of his physical resurrection serves as a very effective parallel to the idea

of the regeneration of a dead society that the interpreters would like to bring about. Soyinka uses “the idea of regeneration and renewal [...] overtly and daringly in the Lazarus story, around which the second part of novel is built” (David 653). In “The Pantheon,” Lazarus is represented as Esumare, the *òrìṣà* of the rainbow, spanning the gulf between heaven and earth. It is no surprise that an albino is given the function of standing at the liminal threshold of the transitional abyss, since the motif of the albino as a transitional figure able to overcome contradictions and to act as an agent of transformation is well known in Yoruba folklore. As an ambiguous personage, Lazarus provokes conflicting views: while some critics see him as a “bogus prophet” (Rajeshwar 48), others believe that his sincerity cannot be questioned (Fioupou 195). Soyinka undoubtedly portrays Lazarus and his church with irony, as, for example, when he shows us his preaching about how Christ won a victory over death:

He [Christ] wrestled with death and he knocked him down. Death said, let us try *gidigbo*<sup>58</sup> and Christ held him by the neck, he squeezed that neck until Death bleated for mercy. But Death never learns his lesson, he went and brought boxing gloves. When Christ gave him an uppercut like Dick Tiger<sup>59</sup> all his teeth were scattered from Kaduna to Aiyetoro. (165)

The inevitable irony of Lazarus’ situation — in which his aspirations to overcome the limitations of a mortal man and to accomplish the potential for transformation that links the human self to the conception of divinity are impossible to realize — reflects some of the key issues of the novel itself.

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<sup>58</sup> *Gidigbo* is a Nigerian form of wrestling.

<sup>59</sup> Dick Tiger was a Nigerian boxer, once the middleweight champion of the world (Owusu 192).

“The completion of Kola’s ‘Pantheon’ forms the climax of the novel” (Gakwandi 84). It is interesting to note that Kola does not appear on his canvas at all. However, his name, which sounds like the *kola* nuts that serve as offerings to the gods and in divination rituals (Beier 59), tells us that his painting — and, perhaps, Soyinka’s novel as well — can be understood as an offering, with the purpose of recreating the lost wholeness. In that respect, the cultural evening where “The Pantheon” is displayed for the first time is more important than a simple exhibition. Early in the evening, Egbo slaughters a spotless black ram, which, together with the availability of palm-wine, indispensable at all festive occasions in Yorubaland, provides the event with a special resonance, suggestive of traditional festivals and sacrificial rites. The painting itself recreates a Yoruba pantheon combining the Yoruba myth of creation and the Biblical myth of re peopling of the earth after the Deluge. Kola only manages to finish it during the last night before the exhibition, when he finally realizes that the link between the world of God and that of man is necessary for the picture. He paints that link as Esumare with Lazarus’ features, because in the albino he sees most clearly the eternal need and eternal frustration of human beings, their desire to bridge the gulf and the inevitable comedy which results from their attempts.

Although the theme of regeneration seemingly closes the novel, as emphasized both by the final version of “The Pantheon” and by the organization of the cultural evening, its end remains very ambiguous, with no clearly positive sign in sight. Even the group of friends appears to be falling apart, as Kola notices during the reception: “it is a night of severance, every man is going his way” (245). Seeing their efforts thwarted by so much corruption and dishonesty, the interpreters have mostly lost the will to act, falling into

“existential apathy” (Msiska 35) and retreating from public involvement. Unable to decide what to do, Egbo continues to fluctuate between two women and two career prospects. Kola realizes that art cannot be a cure to every problem and finds a haven in his love affair with Monica. Sagoe also sees the only possibility for happiness in founding a family with Dehinwa. Only Bandele remains preoccupied by social and ethical issues. He seems to be drifting away from his friends, whose aimlessness, self-centeredness and cynicism he cannot accept, but even his curse of the entire society in the final scene sounds hollow and impotent.

Soyinka’s mythopoeia is characterized by hybridity and eclecticism, as he combines in his works Yoruba myths with those from other sources, such as other African cultures, Christianity, Greek mythology, and Hinduism.<sup>60</sup> Although today a great majority of Nigerian Yorubas — about eighty percent — profess affiliation with Christianity, and a small minority that of Islam (Courlander 3), ancient beliefs and traditions are still much more important than the tenets of the revealed religions. Soyinka has on several occasions expressed the view that both Christianity and Islam are alien to African cultures because of their “dogmatic finality” (*Myth* 54). In *IN*, Islam is represented in exactly that way, as Sekoni becomes an outcast from his family because he married a Christian woman. Conversely, Biblical myths are numerous in the novel, functioning on different levels of narration. Some of them are used metaphorically, enriching the fabric of the text: a traffic policeman turning a blind eye is thus called “Pontius Pilate” continuing “to wash his hands in the stream of traffic” (114; Matt. 27.24); Joe Golder, dissatisfied with his light

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<sup>60</sup> For example, motifs from Hindu mythology are employed in *Season of Anomy* (David 654), while Ancient Greek tales are incorporated in several of Soyinka’s works, e.g., in *The Bacchae* (Radhamani Gopalakrishnan 116-20).

complexion, feels “like Esau cheated of his birthright” (102; Gen. 27.36); Dehinwa is likened to Jael when she deliberately makes noise to aggravate Sagoe’s already splitting headache (67; Judg. 4.21), and to Delilah when she makes him promise to burn his “Book of Enlightenment” after they spend a night together (240; Judg. 16.4-20). Personages of Barabbas-Noah and Lazarus, as well as their names loaded with mythic resonances, are very important in the construction of the second part of the novel. However, Noah’s fate undermines Christian myth, as he fails to escape like the Biblical Barabbas; he is not convincing in the role of his namesake charged with establishing a new link between heaven and earth, nor is he a willing victim like Christ. Lazarus, on the other hand, embodies the convergence of Yoruba and Christian mythologies (Owusu 192), both in the organization and rituals of his sect, and in his representation in Kola’s picture. Unlike Aitmatov and Ribeiro, Soyinka accepts cultural hybridity, which is expressed in IN through the combination of African and Western myths lying at the base of the novel’s structure. It is obvious, though, that for him the indigenous world view is the one which matters most. Just as he feels free to change Yoruba myths and invent new versions of them, he adapts and reinterprets Christian stories to accord with both a general African outlook and the contemporary situation he describes. Lazarus thus becomes Esumare in “The Pantheon,” whereas narratives of the Deluge and the Waste Land are blended with tales about Yoruba *òrìṣàs* into a single whole.

Circular time is important not only in the structure of the novel, but also in the traditional Yoruba worldview, which does not see time as an abstract straight line connecting the past and the future, but as “the crucible where the three worlds of the living,

the dead, and the unborn meet" (Quayson 207). In other words, those three states are understood to exist synchronically, rather than diachronically (Soyinka, Myth 143-4). Such an "unbroken life-death cycle" is represented by "the figure of the snake eternally eating its tail" which is "worn around the neck of Ogun worshipers" (Wright 11). Narrative cycles in IN unfold in more than one way. Its plot develops "on a cyclic and almost static framework of revelation and reaffirmation" (Okonkwo 110), while each of the main characters goes through a self-quest trying to come to terms with himself. Similarly to RA, the whole novel represents the last segment of one cycle of history facing a critical passage to the next one. The hope of the interpreters is to bridge "the historical disconnection between their African heritage and their modern experience" (Irele, "Tradition" 4). This transitional gulf, which constitutes the main issue of the novel, can be understood to exist on different levels: between a primordial state of wholeness and the fragmented contemporary world, between heaven and earth, between different states of existence, or between the past and the present. The image of the bridge thus becomes central in Kola's painting, and in the novel itself. It is also very important in the Yoruba metaphysical world, as expressed by Sekoni's words: "The b-b-bridge is the d-d-dome of rreligion and b-b-bridges d-d-don't jjjjust g-g-go from hhhere to ththere; a bridge also faces backwards" (9).

The first two scenes in the novel introduce the two mythologems which signal the approaching end of the cycle: those of the Deluge and of the Waste Land. The chiefdom of Osa, lagging behind and invaded by hordes of smugglers, represents the latter-day Waste Land. Its old, blind and tired chief, unable to continue to rule, is portrayed as the Fisher King, whose realm suffers as a consequence of his incapacity. He is waiting for a young

man, a potential savior, who could renew the chiefdom and release him from his affliction. The Waste Land myth is also a wider metaphor for corrupt and spiritually arid modern Nigeria, ruled by unseeing and incompetent rulers, which has become “no man’s land of transition” (Crehan 27). However, neither does Egbo manage to find a way to regenerate the ancient principality, nor do the other interpreters bring any enhancement to their native country. Even the efforts of those among them who are pure and innocent as required by the myth, i.e., Bandele and Sekoni, remain futile.

The rains, which start at the very beginning of the novel, achieve their diluvian stage only in Chapter Fifteen (out of eighteen):

The rain had begun early in the afternoon, washing out every landmark and submerging huts and the smaller market stalls. In settlements around the lagoon, the water rises quickly, blotting vegetation from sight and fouling raised stores of clean water, even on high shelves among the rafters. [...] it was as if the jealous sea had burst from the underbowels of earth, sweeping off the offerings for lesser gods and clean-picked reeds of sleeping mats... (220)

The peak of the rainy season is thus described in sinister tones, with the rising waters flooding whole regions and destroying Lazarus’ church. It symbolizes the approaching end of the world as we know it, and the uncertainty about the continuation of history. The Deluge motif is also employed in “The Pantheon,” presenting the threat of an apocalyptic outcome, as well as in the last scene of the novel in which the protagonists are metaphorically drowning in the snobbishness, artificiality and insensibility of their social surrounding.

The interpreters' efforts to bridge the transitional gulf are individual, as each of them has a different, albeit equally inefficient approach: Kola chooses the Apollonian way of art, Sagoe acts as an unsuccessful trickster, Sekoni invokes the powers which burn only himself, while Bandele's discreet ethical attitude is not leading anywhere. Egbo unfortunately lacks Ogun's "combative will within the cosmic embrace" (Soyinka, Myth 150), as that seems to be the only viable *modus operandi*. Seen on the mythic level, the other gods — Esu, Sango and Obatala — are once again waiting for Ogun to carve a pathway for them, but he is reluctant to act. As a result, the second part of the novel is repeatedly marked by the theme of sacrifice. It appears that is the only way to assure the transition to the next cycle, since the critical "gulf is what must be constantly diminished by the sacrifices, the rituals, the ceremonies of appeasement" (Soyinka, Myth 144). In Yoruba religion, the sacrificial rite is the kernel of worship (Hallgren 58). It involves a 'carrier' figure that bears the burden of the sins and transgressions of the community (Roy and Kirpal 525-26). Being innocent and pure-hearted, Sekoni is the ideal sacrificial victim. His death thus symbolically represents an offering "to those cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf" (Soyinka, Myth 144). The accidental killing of Barabas-Noah is understood as another sacrifice, as is the virginal blood of Egbo's unnamed girlfriend spilled "on the toes of the god" (IN 134). All those offerings, together with that of the black ram during the cultural evening, evoke a strong sacramental atmosphere, but the narrative ends before we have a chance to find out whether they will be productive.

The ambiguous end of Soyinka's novel is not as pessimistic as those of WS and MR. Kola's painting in particular, described by Egbo as "an optimist's delusion of

continuity" (233), presents a vision in which Yoruba Genesis and the Deluge are followed by the repopulating of the earth by humans, and by establishing a link, in the form of Esumare, spanning the transitional gulf. It suggests that transformation and renewal of this debased society is not only imaginable, but also feasible. On the other hand, the situation in the realistic plot is neither as certain, nor as positive; its closure offers no clear resolution of conflicts, leaving most questions open. One of the stories in the Bascom collection of African dilemma tales ends with the following sentence: "They are still discussing this subject, and still have not been able to decide" (African 227). The same can be said about critical responses to IN, as it has provoked many contradictory views; for example, Kola's painting in the novel is understood by some commentators as a total failure (Morrison 213), and by others as a complete fulfillment of the artist (Gakwandi 82-84; Maduakor, Wole 93). Obviously, it is a task of every reader to fill the gaps and actualize potential meanings for him/herself.

Soyinka created in IN a new mythic structure, adapting ancient myths for his aesthetic purposes, in accordance with his belief that human beings are the measure of the divine, and not the other way round: "[W]hen I use myth it is necessary for me to bend it to my own requirements. I don't believe in carbon-copies in any art form. You have to select what you want from traditional sources and distort it if necessary" (qtd. in Wilmer 16). All the main characters in the novel, who struggle with actual problems of modern life, "are in large measure supported by the qualities of mythic figures for whom they are really present-day manifestations" (Okpewho 188). Yoruba mythology thus "forms an active matrix that

holds the action together" (Obiechina 114), whereas the plot acquires its tragic density only through its mythic substratum.

For Soyinka, "the inward eye of mythic essence [...] probes more deeply into the springs of a people's cultural life" than any other literary approach (Okpewho 242), and is, consequently, the most appropriate for those efforts which attempt to reestablish the lost balance. He reinterprets Yoruba mythology through "a free play of imagination in a continual productive engagement with the cultural matrix" (Quayson 213). This, however, does not imply any unchanging identity and singularity of that matrix, since traditional Yoruba culture is not a static entity simply definable through its rituals and myths. Soyinka is well aware that there are always several sets of contradictory myths present in a culture, so he explores the collective resource of the archaic imagination of his people in order to connect its relevant insights with contemporary processes and thus "derive a new relation to the world" (Irele, *African* 61). In *IN*, he investigates the presence of such 'mythic essences' in contemporary experience in an attempt to uncover the sources of the present crisis of Nigerian society.

Furthermore, irony is very important in Soyinka's mythopoeia; the Nigerian writer is in that way similar to Tournier. In *IN* too, the significance of "irony, of the Yoruba gods who appear in the painting of Kola [...] and of the theme of ritual sacrifice, is manifest" (Early 162-63). Identification of each of the friends with a Yoruba *òrìṣà* is rather discordant, since they personify the gods' failings to a larger degree than their advantageous qualities. Egbo's evocation of traditional values is not very convincing, nor are Sagoe's tricks, Sekoni's support of justice, or Bandele's curse. The choice of a highly ambiguous

character, Lazarus, as the model for Esumare, the rainbow which spans heaven and earth, is inconsistent with any compelling connection between the divine and the temporal. Soyinka implies that the role of the *òrìṣàs* remains problematic, both in the lives of the interpreters and in contemporary Nigerian society. However, the ironic attitude of the author only strengthens the importance of gods and mythology, since he employs "myth [...]" as the perfect paradigm for the artistic exploration of that which in human experience and natural phenomena is [...] ultimately resistant to domination and control by man" (Jeyifo, "Wole" 122). Myth thus occupies the central place in his fictional system, not only as a means of channeling the power of his people's traditions into constructive courses, or as a source of valuable social insights, but, above all, as a key narrative tool which can operate on more than one level.

In such a manner, Soyinka uses myths to uncover the hidden patterns of the present situation, and as a sustaining metaphor for the spiritual factor in human consciousness. In his novel, as in Kateb's, "la polyphonie romanesque rejoint l'ambivalence de la grille mythique qui les fonde" (Bonn, Kateb 74). Although the complex ways in which myths are interweaved into the modernist structures of IN and ND give an impression of being completely removed from traditional narratives, the multidimensionality of the novels actually corresponds to the fact that traditional myths are at all times in a process of perpetual transformation. In both works mythic overtones are thus more important than realistic or psychological dimensions. Stylistic variations, tonal shifts and fragmented time sequences, as well as numerous contradictions and loose ends, create multiple layers of meaning, leading to ambiguities that leave ample room for readers' imagination. Consisting

of networks of alternatives and incertitudes, the novels can not be understood as finished products, but rather as ongoing productions which demand readers' participation to resolve them. Another characteristic shared by IN and ND is a perpetual intrusion of the past into the present, intrusion which different characters understand in different ways. Both Soyinka and Kateb stress the importance of traditional cultural roots, since alienation from them inevitably leads to acculturation and sterility. However, the values of the past are seen as potentially important for contemporary life only if adjusted to the new imperatives. At the same time, the mythic symbolism, derived respectively from Yoruba and Algerian cultures, is put at the service of an interpretation of the destiny of the humankind in general.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **KATEB YACINE'S NEDJMA: THE POLYPHONY OF MYTH, HISTORY AND FICTION**

Two birds, companions and friends,  
nestle on the very same tree.  
One of them eats a tasty fig;  
the other, not eating, looks on.

Mundaka Upaniṣad (Upaniṣads 274)

How should it be sown, how should it dawn?

Popol Vuh (73)

Although Kateb Yacine<sup>61</sup> (1929-1989), Algerian poet, novelist, playwright and journalist, is perhaps not as well known as the other writers dealt with in this study, his originality, visionary creations of polyvalent and pluralistic texts, and re-actualization of ancient myths and legends in his works make his mythopoeic opus among the most interesting ones in the period I investigated. One of the key players in the founding of mature Maghrebian literature in French which developed in the fifties — and to which “the years 1910-1950,” when it first emerged, “served only as a preface” (Monego 21) — Kateb had a “profound instinct for innovation” and a “revolutionary sense of cultural renewal” (Aresu, Counterhegemonic 5), which led him to constant exploration of form and language. Unlike other important Maghrebian writers of his generation such as Mouloud Feraoun, Mouloud Mammeri, Driss Chraïbi or Mohammed Dib, who tended to write ethnographic, historic or realistic novels (Khatibi 43), he produced experimental, difficult and sometimes

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<sup>61</sup> It should be noted that Kateb is the author's last name and Yacine his first; he decided to keep the reversed sequence in order to perpetuate the memory of the administrative practice current in the French schools he attended. This seems to have confused some critics; thus, for example, in The Cambridge Companion to the French novel (Unwin), the Algerian writer is listed in the Index (281) under ‘Y,’ as if Yacine was his surname. Furthermore, *kateb* in Arabic is a nomen agentis meaning “the one who writes,” so the author's full name, Kateb Yacine, can be understood as “Yacine the Scribe.”

hermetic works defying easy description and flouting the boundaries between genres. He is thus often described not only as “iconoclaste, impertinent et perturbateur” (Déjeux 223), but also as a “terroriste, faisant sauter les cadres et les barrières par la force explosive de la poésie et de l’humour” (Arnaud, Cas 153). As Kateb did not adhere to any specific literary school, his achievements in the domain of fiction are best described as “l’avant-garde du roman international” (Bonn, Kateb 23).

Growing up in a colonial regime, he witnessed violence very early. Two events that had a lasting impact on him and his literary work took place in 1945. On the 8th of May, while the European population celebrated the Allied victory in Europe, riots broke out in the Arab quarters of several cities in Algeria, where people — much to the surprise of colonial authorities — were demanding freedom for their country too. The French were clearly less than impressed. The most violent demonstrations, which took place in Sétif and nearby Kherrata and Guelma, were brutally put down, with police firing on civilians bearing nationalist banners. Days of terror followed in which thousands of people were killed (Tamba 13). Kateb, who was sixteen at the time and still attending French *lycée* in Sétif, took part in the insurrection, was arrested, interrogated, told that he would be executed at dawn, then interned in a military camp instead, kept there for three months and expelled from school. Several members of his extended family were killed, while his mother became insane and had to be confined to a psychiatric hospital. As a result, Kateb became an ardent nationalist militant and a member of numerous short-lived organizations that preceded the emergence of the FLN (Front de Liberation National). Later in the same year he fell passionately in love with an older, already married cousin named Nedjma, who

grew to be a major inspiration of his writing. He thus became “amoureux d’une femme et amoureux en même temps de la révolution” (Hennebelle 3).

From 1951 the nomadic period of his life, for which he was later nicknamed “le Maghrébin errant” (Déjeux 217), began.<sup>62</sup> He first went to France, where he worked as a farmhand, construction worker, docker, as well as on other manual jobs. He was forced to leave it in 1954, when the Algerian War of Liberation broke out, and to spend time in Italy, Tunisia, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Yugoslavia and Egypt. Returning to his country after it won independence in 1962, he very soon encountered new problems caused by ideological as well as linguistic intolerance and censorship, as not only French, but also colloquial Arabic and, especially, Berber<sup>63</sup> dialects were suppressed in favor of classical Arabic imposed by Ben Bella’s revolutionary socialist government. Compelled once again to follow a peripatetic destiny, he lived during the next several years in France, Germany, Italy, Vietnam, China, Lebanon and the USSR (Tamba 17-22). In 1971 at last he managed to go back to Algeria and to organize a popular touring theater, as he had long planned, which proved to be a great success both in Maghrebian countries and abroad. His fortunes were again on the wane in the eighties after his involvement both in “the Berber spring” (1980) — a movement which demanded more freedom for Imazighen culture — and in the fight against a family code inspired by Islamic law restricting women’s liberties (1981-

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<sup>62</sup> Kateb was fascinated by the adventures and writings of the most famous Maghrebian traveler, Ibn Batuta (1304-1377), about whom he wrote a series of articles entitled “Le Maghrébin errant” (Arnaud, “Cas” 149).

<sup>63</sup> The Berbers are the autochthonous population of North-West Africa, who inhabited it before the Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs, and other invaders came. They constitute today approximately 25% of 31 million Algerians, and live also in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Most of their communities have preserved — or had until recently — tribal social organization. As the name ‘Berber’ comes from the same root as ‘barbarian,’ they prefer to call themselves the Imazighen, and their language Tamazight (Galand-Pernet 5-11).

1983). Kateb died of leukemia in 1989 in Switzerland, and was buried in Algiers (Bekri 40). His funeral was attended not only by men, but also — against Muslim tradition — by many women too, including Nedjma, his cousin whom he had seen last in 1946 (Salhi 19). As a result of his political involvement, “beaucoup de mosquées ont lancé des *fatwas* contre lui” during his lifetime (Laredj 200), while immediately after his death, Mufti Mohamed el Ghazali, the president of the Islamic Council at the University of Constantine and the spiritual advisor of the Algerian president, issued a proclamation stating that “[Kateb] ne mérite pas d’être enterré en Algérie! Mécréant, il ne doit pas l’être dans un cimetière musulman!” (Mediene 8).

Kateb’s literary activity falls into two distinct periods. During the first one (1945-1971), when all the works he is internationally famous for were produced, he wrote in French, i.e., like Aitmatov and Soyinka, in a foreign language. He published an early poetry collection: Soliloque, two novels: Nedjma and Le Polygone étoilé, and several theater pieces, the most important of which are a dramatic cycle: Le Cercle des représailles, consisting of three shorter plays (Le Cadavre encerclé, La Poudre d’intelligence, Les Ancêtres redoublent de férocité), and a longer work for the stage: L’Homme aux sandales de caoutchouc. Kateb explained that he wrote in French “parce que la France a envahi mon pays et qu’elle s’y est taillé une position de force telle qu’il fallait écrire en français pour survivre,” but that “en écrivant français, j’ai mes racines arabes ou berbères qui sont encore vivantes,” i.e., “j’exprime en français quelque chose qui n’est pas français” (qtd. in Aurbakken 209). In point of fact, he chose to use the colonizer’s language for two main reasons: on the one hand, he was unable to write correctly in any other language after

attending French schools, which were aimed at creating “a class of well-educated gallicized” Maghrebians (Monego 7), and whose curriculum was entirely in French; on the other, Kateb disliked classical Arabic, which he never learned, and which he considered a dead language comparable to Latin or Ancient Greek (Gafaiti 57). In his view, “la littérature arabe classique en Algérie, n’est plus qu’une littérature d’outre-tombe” (“Situation” 108), whose clichés, stereotypes, pomposity, and verbal acrobatics he found unbearable.<sup>64</sup> He argued that people should be allowed to express themselves in their spoken language, and that writers should “prendre au sérieux la langue populaire, langue dans laquelle s’exprime le génie du peuple, et qui n’a rien à voir avec cet arabe (littéraire) administratif naphtalinisé, si cher aux esprits desséchés” (Déjeux 226). Since a majority of Algerians do not understand classical Arabic (Lippert 160), in his second creative period (1971-1989) Kateb decided to write in colloquial Maghrebian Arabic, becoming thus a pioneering figure in giving it literary status. At the same time, he was against all forms of cultural and linguistic imperialism, and supported plurilingualism, i.e., the use of all three languages: colloquial Arabic, Tamazight, and French as legitimate vehicles of expression (Bernier 178). His efforts encountered many problems, not only because such attempts were discouraged by the educated elite, Islamic scholars and consecutive Algerian governments, but also because no regular orthography had been developed for spoken Maghrebian. As a result, most of his works in the colloquial language have not been published to this day. Believing that he would be able to reach the illiterate majority of his compatriots more easily through dramatic art, Kateb’s later work is devoted wholly to popular theater pieces

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<sup>64</sup> In the novel, Kateb’s stance is echoed by Rachid’s: “Si Mokhtar, en se retournant dans sa couche, prononça un grand discours en arabe classique des Ulémas. Je n’y comprenais rien. Quand je voulus l’éveiller, croyant qu’il s’agissait d’un cauchemar, il me fit signe sévèrement de me taire” (143).

based on Algerian folk traditions. From 1971 he wrote and produced a number of plays, some of which were also staged in Tamazight, such as Mohammed, Take Your Suitcase, The War of 2000 Years and The King of the West. Kateb often modified the scripts to respond to current events, included songs and music, and gave a free hand to the performers to improvise, so that some pieces were significantly changed, becoming a product of collective creation (Alessandra 7).

Set amid three different cultures: popular Maghrebian, classical Islamic, and modern Western, Kateb's works in French constitute an original mixture of their traits, conceived in a very personal way. His approach to literature was determined above all by the popular oral culture in which he grew up, and by modernist and avant-garde movements. Surrounded by Arabic and Berber folklore from early childhood, Kateb imbibed popular songs and tales from different sources: his mother was a gifted storyteller (Bisiaux and Jajolet 377), members of his family often improvised poetry for their own pleasure (Hennebelle 3), while "les conteurs de place ou de marché" retold old legends for all who wanted to listen (Raybaud 95). Kateb also learned about ancient, half-forgotten rites such as "la *nechra* de Constantine," in which women who suffered from possession by *jinn*s were exorcised by Black African musicians and magicians (Déjeux 232-33). He was especially fascinated by oral poetry, claiming that Si M'hand, an illiterate poet-rebel and mountaineer, was the greatest Algerian poet (Aresu, Counterhegemonic 20). Obviously, like Aitmatov, Kateb preferred tribal and oral culture of his people to the written Islamic one. In his late play Kahena,<sup>65</sup> he postulates that Imazighen traditions and social ideas were more

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<sup>65</sup> Kahena, a famous soothsayer, was the Imazighen queen who fought against the invading Muslim Arab armies in the mid-seventh century (Salhi 5).

progressive than classical Islam: "The only God we know, / One we can see and touch, / Is the free land of Amazigh<sup>66</sup>!" (qtd. in Salhi 283-84). This, however, does not mean that Kateb was completely rejecting his Muslim heritage: "Bien qu'athée, je ne méconnaiss pas la grandeur de l'Islam dont je suis imprégné" (qtd. in Déjeux 222).

Like Soyinka, Kateb was not attracted by the past for its own sake, but was more preoccupied with the actual situation in his country. His quest for authenticity and his hope to find roots in the primitive purity of the pre-Islamic era were primarily directed at accomplishing a cultural renewal of Algeria after liberation from colonialism, since he believed that folk traditions and ancient myths should be the base to which contemporary writers and artists could anchor their new creations. At the same time, he supported revolutionary changes in the society, wishing to get rid of petrified archaic values, to accomplish the liberation of women, and to introduce a more just social system. As a result of his travels, his close encounter with many different cultures, and his intellectual curiosity, Kateb became a cosmopolitan spirit, whose open-minded views are evident in his writing.<sup>67</sup> He rejected any kind of dogmatism or didacticism, emphasizing that it is necessary to get rid of all the superfluous constraints of literature in any attempt to bring forth new and meaningful works pertinent for the contemporary world. Kateb began his literary career as a poet, and poetry permeates his entire opus. Accordingly, he "peut être considéré comme principalement un poète qui n'emploie les formes romanesques et théâtrales que pour les détruire" (Khatibi 102), whereas his style in fiction can be defined as "réalisme poétique" (Glissant, Introduction 10). Unlike the writers discussed so far in this

<sup>66</sup> Amazigh is the singular of Imazighen (Galland-Pernet 7).

<sup>67</sup> For example, the Vietnamese popular folk opera *Tchéo* had an important influence on the form of Kateb's theater plays in the vernacular (Kateb, *Poète* 160-61).

study, whose works belong to rich mythopoeic streams in ex-USSR, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa, Kateb's approach is unique in the part of world he comes from, since both the traditional Islamic world-view and the exigencies of the contemporary socio-political situation in the Arab world are inimical to mythic stories.

Nedjma is by far Kateb's most important and best known work. He is often described as "l'homme d'un seul livre" (Benabdessadok 48), which was "endlessly reworked in a variety of genres and dispersed in manuscripts and scattered fragments" (Bonn, "Kateb" 61). In fact, almost half of his opus in French belongs to that cycle, which began with the poem "Nedjma ou le poème ou le couteau," published in 1948 in Mercur  
de France. The novel itself was long in germination, as it was several time rejected by publishers and then reworked by the author (Gontard 13). Its last version had 400 pages, which was considered too long, so Kateb had to cut it down to 256 pages before it was finally approved (Aurbakken 205). Beginning where ND ends, two of his plays (Le Cadavre encerclé and Les Ancêtres redoublent de férocité) are based on the same myths and follow the same characters through the subsequent period, i.e., through the Algerian War. Le Polygone étoilé (1966), containing pages cut from the original version of the first novel, as well as some later written materials, "reprend et achève ce qu'il faut bien appeler désormais, la 'geste' de Nedjma" (Gontard 14). A short theatre piece, La Femme sauvage, retells a myth about Keblout not mentioned in the novel.

The unique form of ND has been defined as "un roman-poème" (Arnaud, Cas 157), a "narrative poem" (Gresset 377), or "a long prose poem" (Joyaux 38), and its chapters as separate poetic texts (Arnaud, Cas 257). The author tells "us the story in bits and pieces"

(Murrel 205), through “un jeu de miroir à la fois déformants et redoublants” (Carcaud-Macaire 73), dropping narrative threads only to pick them up later, constantly changing the focus, disregarding chronology, and “subverting conformist approaches to character and narrative” (Salhi 23). The circular unfolding of the novel, “continuellement perturbé par le délire poétique” (Gaha 293), mingles future and past in the eternity of the moment, creating an artful discontinuity between narrative content and textual progression. As a “mosaic of scenes, fragmented time sequences, flashbacks, dreams, [and] hallucinations” (Mortimer, “Kateb” 279), “in which meaning incessantly expands, generates, and regenerates itself” (Aresu, Counterhegemonic 167-68), ND poetically explodes the plot which lacks any kind of narrative finality, thus making serious demands on any reader intent on establishing its coherence. Such a structure of the novel, on the one hand, corresponds to its alienated characters and deracinated society, while, on the other, enables the author to surpass the limits of classical realistic fiction.

Among Western literary influences which were decisive for the shape of ND, the most important is that of William Faulkner. Like the author of The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom!, Kateb employs multiple narrators, interior monologues and several points of view, breaks linear temporality, introduces strongly oneiric episodes, and leaves the key events — rape, incest, murder — which polarize the whole novel, undescribed and unclear. Narrative techniques which another American modernist, John Dos Passos, developed in such novels as Manhattan Transfer, also affected those of the Algerian author, who presents simultaneously the actions of several characters, and uses “certaines similitudes de lieu et de temps, pour fondre dans un même plan, des épisodes qu’aucune

logique interne ne relie” (Gontard 102). Spatial form is as important for the construction of ND as it is for IN and PP, since Kateb’s novel, in which “le temps est senti et utilisé comme une quatrième dimension spatiale” (Serreau 484), “fonctionne et son histoire progresse le long d’une suite d’espaces qui se substituent à la suite chronologique des événements” (Pease 87). Furthermore, ND shares some of the features of the French *nouveau roman* (which emerged during the very years when Kateb was writing his masterpiece, i.e., in the early fifties) such as impersonal narration, detailed description of objects, fragmented structure in which plot and action have a secondary role, lack of psychological motivation of characters, and presentation of the story in gestation rather than as a developed plot (Le Sage 12-41). However, unlike *le nouveau roman*, in which narration constantly returns to an initial imaginary situation to offer new interpretations of it in an intellectual game of formal virtuosity, the content of ND is firmly anchored in the living reality of Maghrebian society in the forties and fifties. Although not “un roman engagé,” its meaning is inseparable from the actual historical situation in colonized Algeria (Moura 151). Kateb’s poetic style, full of contradictions, paradoxes and alogical constructs, betrays similarities with surrealism.<sup>68</sup> The search for Nedjma’s true identity is reminiscent of André Breton’s Nadja, in which the writer encounters in the streets of Paris “a young woman who treads the fringes of insanity” (Balakian 1235), and then follows her trying to solve her secret. In both novels reality, dreams, and hallucinations mingle, while central female characters acquire the magical quality of supernatural beings (Abdel-Jaouad 15-29). Just as Nadja enables Breton to glimpse hitherto unknown landscapes of the mind, the pursuit of Nedjma leads

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<sup>68</sup> Some such examples are “midi endort autant qu’un temple” (70) and “savane de chloroforme” (73).

the protagonists of Kateb's novel towards deeper understanding of themselves and their country's history.

Although Kateb denies any direct Islamic influence on his work (Arnaud, Cas 314), it certainly exists, even if Algerian folk traditions are far more significant for his formation as a writer. Bernard Aresu saw in the structure of ND an echo of classical Arabic visual art, characterized by a tendency toward stasis, abstraction and stylization, and expressed in such geometrically organized ornamental compositions as arabesque and calligraphy ("Polygonal" 144-46). The title of Kateb's second novel, Le Polygone étoilé [The Star-Shaped Polygon], suggests both such spatial organization of the narrative and the name of Nedjma<sup>69</sup>:

Kateb's narrative techniques in ND do for fiction what the Islamic criterion of nonfiguration does for visual art, by precluding direct representation of reality. Presentation of facts and events reaches the reader in a doubly indirect fashion: it is truncated, digressive, unsequentially arranged — in one word: a highly stylized presentation. Furthermore, at many significant points, reality is often made to converge with an arcane system of narrative references, the system of myth. [...]

By making past and present overlap, by often esoterically superimposing legend and history, myth and romance in discontinuous progression through the consciousness of various characters, Kateb creates an effect of ceaseless and, more significantly, timeless coequality. (Aresu, "Polygonal" 147-48)<sup>70</sup>

Among contemporary writers from the Islamic world, our writer was especially impressed by the Iranian Sadiq Hidayat and his phantasmagoric novel The Blind Owl, whose

<sup>69</sup> The word *nedjma* means "star" in Arabic (Hayat 54).

<sup>70</sup> Conversely, a Maghrebian critic thought that the composition of ND can be explained in terms of baroque art: "Si le baroque est un art figuré par des obsessions thématiques, sous-entendues ou suggérées, mais dont les images se multiplient dans une profusion anarchique pour déchiffrer, forcer ces obsessions, jouer avec elles, ND mérite d'être appelé roman baroque" (Khatibi 106).

unfolding, haunted by death, evolves in a dreamlike atmosphere around a demonic central female character (Arnaud, Cas 149).

From Algerian folklore Kateb drew traditional motifs — including pre-Islamic and pagan ones (e.g., the ogress, the trickster), legends from the Algerian past (e.g., about Abd el-Kader's cavalcade, about the Keblouti tribe), totemic symbols, and beliefs about 'sacred places' (e.g., certain caves). The form of the novel was influenced by such features of Arab oral narratives as "la multiplication des aventures, l'imbroglia des situations, le va-et-vient de ces situations, [...] lecture des situations actuelles dans la situation ancienne, [et] forme circulaire du temps [...]" (Raubaud 99). Kateb uses both legends extolling the deeds of the ancestors and humorous tales ironizing their glories to obtain a multifaceted perspective on the past by juxtaposing them. Furthermore, the narrative discourse of ND internally duplicates the process of oral transmission. Aware of the absence of the written history, Rachid, one of the main characters, establishes links to folk tradition: "Car l'histoire de notre tribu n'est écrite nulle part, mais aucun fil n'est jamais rompu pour qui recherche ses origines" (146). Si Mokhtar, an old man, acts as a tribal storyteller by recounting to Rachid the history of the Keblouti tribe as told to him by his own father: "Tout ce que je sais, je le tiens de mon père, qui le tient de son père, et ainsi de suite" (124). Rachid commits it to memory, then passes it on to his friend Mourad, and finally to a public scribe. Orality is thus clearly established in the novel as an important link to personal and collective history. It reflects Kateb's ambition, similar to Aitmatov's, to communicate the folk traditions of his people through his works: "il se veut le *Kateb*, l'écrivain public, destiné à donner forme aux sentiments, aux aspirations du peuple analphabète" (Arnaud, Cas 158). The complex

structure of ND is thus achieved by integration of contemporary literary tendencies with orality, which is one of the main factors of the novel's avant-gardism.

ND relies on the narrative hinges of a number of primarily fictional events embedded in the broader framework of a historical consciousness that reaches as far back as the Numidia of Jugurtha, who fought against Roman invaders (112-105 BC), Kahena's resistance to the Arabs, Abd el-Kader's war against the French (1830-47), and the dismantling of the Keblouti tribe (1850-90). Unfolding against the background of colonial domination and oppression, the plot follows the actions of four friends, living in the Eastern Algerian cities of Bône and Constantine, who are obsessed by their common attraction to the same woman, Nedjma, the wife of Kamel, and wish, each in his own way, to possess her. They all belong to the Keblouti tribe, as did Kateb himself; two of them, Mourad and Lakhdar, are brothers, and the other two, Rachid and Mustapha, their cousins. The events of the story extend over some ten years, from the demonstration in Sétif on May 8, 1945, to Rachid's final stay in the hashish den in 1954, after his release from prison, just before the beginning of the Algerian revolution.<sup>71</sup> Retold in flashbacks, childhood memories of Mourad, Rachid and Mustapha stretch back to the late twenties and early thirties. Nedjma is the unifying center of the novel, whose organization is compared to a solar system by Maurice Nadeau:

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<sup>71</sup> The complexity of Kateb's achronological composition is such that even the critics who devoted special studies to his novel rarely agree about the exact sequence of episodes, or about the length of the time frame. Thus, for example, the fictional time of the novel, according to Marc Gontard, covers the period from 1943-56 (38), while, according to Jacquelin Arnaud, it is much shorter, extending from 1943-52 (Cas 320-25). In my opinion, 1952 is too early and 1956 too late for Rachid's second return to Constantine.

[Kateb] a construit un univers stellaire. En son centre, il a disposé un soleil: Nedjma, autour duquel gravitent un certain nombre d'étoiles grandes et petites, pourvues elles-mêmes de satellites. Si le soleil est fixe et brille à peu près toujours avec la même intensité, nous ne la connaissons que par ses reflets sur les astres qui l'entourent et dont le mouvement régulier les approche ou les éloigne périodiquement de sa lumière [...]. Et comme ces astres sont prisonniers du même mouvement qui, à intervalles fixes, les rend également présents, il s'ensuit dans une espèce de retour éternel, une confusion complète du passé, du présent et de l'avenir. (13)

The novel is divided in two ways: into six parts, and into sections containing twelve chapters each. Parts one, two, and five comprise one such section, whereas parts three, four and six are made up of two of them. The whole novel thus contains nine duodecimal sections, i.e., a total of one hundred and eight chapters. They are different in length, ranging from eight pages (Chapter Eight, Part Four, first section), to only half of a line (Chapter Nine, Part Six, second section). According to Kateb, the duodecimal sections represent the twelve hours on a clock, and the rotation of chapters the movements of its hands. Such organization gives a definite rhythm to the unfolding of the narrative, furnishing the reader with landmarks which only just suffice to keep him/her from getting dizzy. Conversely, it can also add extra puzzlement by creating an illusory order, since the sections do not correspond to events or episodes, but are instead assigned in an arbitrary fashion.

The chapters in ND, which belong to different literary genres (epic, lyric, dramatic, burlesque, memoirs) and modes (comic, ironic, satiric, elegiac, mythic), connect in an associative manner, achieving, in spite of their heterogeneity, a remarkable synthesis within an open-ended construction. Tonal shifts between them create, even more than in Soyinka's

novel, a dynamic of considerable narrative tension. For example, picaresque narration about Si Mokhtar in Part Three is immediately followed by a lyrical episode in which Rachid remembers his encounter with Nedjma at the clinic and conjures up her spellbinding beauty; in Part Four, a realistic dialogue expressing bitter psychological conflict provides a similar contrast to the subsequent evocation of tribal myth. Kateb employs five narrative voices: those of the four protagonists and of an omniscient neutral narrator. While the discourse of the latter can be described as an impersonal reportage, told in condensed, laconic prose, the former, which make up the bulk of the book, are expressed, for the most part, in different forms of first-person narration: interior monologue, poetic composition, journal. Multiple points of view enable the author to illuminate the same events from different angles and to exploit contradictions between them to strengthen the ambiguity and polyvalence of the novel. For example, the events in Sétif are seen through Lakhdar's eyes in Part Two, and through Mustapha's in Part Five. We learn about Rachid's account twice: first from Mourad, who tries to reconstruct in his prison cell the story as he heard it from his friend, and then from Rachid himself as he tells it to the public scribe, while both of them are under the influence of hashish.

The polyphony of the novel is further enhanced by discourses of similitudes, equivocation and dubitation, which strategically hinder or postpone the narrative clarification seemingly about to take place. A number of episodes echo each other; for example, Rachid's wandering in Bône after his return from the pilgrimage is similar to Lakhdar's after his release from prison. The twelfth chapter of Part Three, first section, narrates in the third person the same events which the following one (Chapter One, Part

Three, second section) relates in the first person. The unreliability of narrators is disclosed by expressions of uncertainty, such as “sans doute,” “autant qu’on s’en souviennne,” “ceci sera assez plausible si” (96-99), or by their physical state, as when the public scribe notes Rachid’s mental confusion: “Rachid ne distinguait plus ce qu’il pensait de ce qu’il disait. Peut-être parlait-il trop? Peut-être n’exprimait-il que l’écume de ses pensées, le front pressé contre la rampe humide et glacée, comme pour contenir la cataracte” (174); consequently, it is impossible to distinguish what he recalls from what he invents. As in Hidayat’s novel, dreams and hallucinations make a part of the narration, adding to its ambiguity. The protagonists, like the readers, are often struggling to understand what exactly has happened. When, for example, Mustapha attempts to reconstruct the history of Mourad’s and Nédjma’s relationship, he uses several dates to establish the chronology of events, but in spite of that, speculation soon creeps into his journal:

Ici s’offrent bien des hypothèses... On comprend que Mourad ait quitté la villa, depuis que sa cousine est mariée: simple question de bienséance; mais un voisin de Mourad, fondant son témoignage sur la rumeur publique, a fait devant un écrivain (lui aussi public et peu affirmatif) le récit d’un épisode fort obscur... Selon ce voisin, Mourad aurait quitté le lycée sur les injonctions de sa cousine; elle lui aurait promis sa main s’il avait le courage de la conduire secrètement à Alger. (83-84)

The novel opens *in medias res* with Lakhdar escaping from prison to join his friends. The four of them are working for Monsieur Ernest, a French colonizer, in a quarry, where on the previous day, after a dispute, Lakhdar knocked out his arrogant boss. Another Frenchman, Monsieur Ricard, the richest settler in the community, marries Suzy, Monsieur Ernest’s daughter. Their wedding party degenerates into an orgy, during which drunken

European guests force a Muslim maid to drink half a bottle of rum, while the bridegroom beats her with a horsewhip. Enraged by the scene, Mourad, who came to interpose on Lakhdar's behalf, physically attacks Monsieur Ricard and inadvertently kills him. While the police take him away, the other three friends secretly flee from the village: Rachid goes to Constantine, Lakhdar to Bône, while Mustapha "prend un autre chemin" (34). Three years later, after a street fight, Rachid is arrested and put in prison, where he encounters Mourad and knifes him in a brawl. Mourad pretends that his wounds are a result of a suicide attempt, wishing to cover up for Rachid, who is still, in spite of everything, his friend..

In Part Two Lakhdar's interior monologue takes us back to his first imprisonment after the demonstrations in Sétif, when he was tortured in jail, released four months later, and expelled from school. Not knowing what to do, he takes a train to Bône, where his paternal aunt, Lella Fatma lives, but, unable to make up his mind to visit her, he spends seven and a half months just roaming the city. What he does not know is that his elder brother, Mourad, lives in her villa, as he was raised since the age of six by this same aunt. Their father, Sidi Ahmed, a notorious *bon vivant*, who repudiated their mother and wasted his considerable fortune on prostitutes, was killed in a car accident. Mourad thus grew up with Nedjma, Lella Fatma's only daughter, to whom he was secretly engaged, and with whom he is still in love. However, Nedjma was forced to marry Kamel; we learn about her disdain for him and their unhappy life together, described as "la guerre froide" (68). Rachid, Mourad's old friend, is also in Bône, as is Mustapha, who took part in the Sétif insurrection with Lakhdar. The latter is finally recognized by his brother, so the four friends, who stay together in Mourad's room, are now united around Nedjma.

In such a manner, the first two parts of the novel introduce the main characters, themes and entanglements. Parts Three and Four are more retrospective and meditative, containing both the climax of the action and the myths about Keblout. Sentenced to twenty years, Mourad in his prison cell remembers Rachid coming twice to Bône, first with Si Mokhtar, a mysterious elderly gentleman, when they attended Nedjma's wedding, and a second time, after a long absence, when he was alone and desperately poor. In a state of malarial fever, Rachid recounted to his friend the stories of Si Mokhtar, revealing some of the mysteries which shroud Nedjma's origin and conception. Adopted in infancy by Lella Fatma, Nedjma is actually the daughter of a French Jewish woman, a wife of a notary from Marseilles, who was abducted and ravished three times in a row: first by Sidi Ahmed, then by his rival known as the Puritan, and finally by Si Mokhtar and Rachid's father acting jointly. Since all of them are close relatives, she has thus defiled the pure blood of the Keblouti tribe and instigated rivalry in the heretofore cohesive group. Si Mokhtar is a noted lecher whose main interest in life used to be "les nuits d'ivresse et de fornication; les nuits de viol, d'effractions, de corps à corps de ville en ville; dans les couloirs et sur les terrasses; aux salons des entremetteuses"; no one knows "combien de fils, combien de veuves il a derrière lui, sans pour autant se renier" (97-98). He seduced even the Puritan's wife and fathered Kamel, officially a legitimate son of the Puritan. Si Mokhtar and Rachid's father carried off the French women to a cave in the gully of the Rhummel, in the Constantine outskirts, in which the tragic events took place, although it is not clear exactly what happened.<sup>72</sup> All we know is that Rachid's father was found dead the next day, shot in the

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<sup>72</sup> Kateb uses here two motifs from Algerian folklore: caves as sacred places where extraordinary things happen, and the so-called "la nuit de l'erreur" (Gandon 21). A number of caves in

back by his own rifle, and that his murderer was never found. In the meanwhile, Si Mokhtar and "la Française" went to Marseille; upon his return home, Si Mokhtar brought to sterile Lella Fatma little Nedjma, who is thus either Si Mokhtar's or Rachid's father's daughter, as well as Lakhdar's, Mourad's and Mustapha's cousin, and almost certainly Kamel's half-sister. Although Si Mokhtar believes himself to be her father, he could not prevent Nedjma's incestuous marriage without revealing the secrets of both her birth and Kamel's.

Narration about the past continues through Rachid's recollections of his meeting Nedjma for the first time, just after her marriage, and falling in love with her, as well as of his abortive pilgrimage to Mecca with Si Mokhtar. Although they never reach their destination, the voyage gives Si Mokhtar the opportunity to tell the story of the tribe they all belong to, and of Keblout, its eponymous ancestor. The tribe, which prospered in the previous historical periods, was decimated by colonization. Si Mokhtar explains their defensive regrouping in a virtually inaccessible mountain region situated in the triangle between Constantine, Bône, and Guelma:

La situation du Nadhor est déjà un indice. C'est une position retranchée qui permet de tenir un territoire gardé à vue depuis longtemps par les conquérants. [...] Les habitants du Nadhor étaient restés insoumis. Ils n'attaquaient pas, mais s'enforçaient dans la forêt, affectant d'ignorer les nouveaux conquérants; les décades passaient sans que les Français aient pu éteindre leur influence. C'est alors que la tribu fut décimé. (125)

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Maghrebian countries have been associated with legends and used for worship and different rites since not only pre-Islamic, but also pre-Roman times. In some cases they are still venerated, usually with a sanctuary of a Muslim saint built nearby (Lacoste-Dujardin 1274). "La nuit de l'erreur" was a fertility rite performed in such caves, which involved sexual promiscuity and group sex (Basset 45).

In Part Four Rachid and Si Mokhtar decide to separate Nedjma from her incestuous marriage and take her to the Nadhor, where the remnants of their tribe still survive. It is the same region which was inhabited by the Numidians in antiquity, rich with legends, the heart of the country's resistance against its many invaders. It seems as if the two of them are looking for a source of the lost wholeness missing in the colonized Algeria. The first chapter evokes the Nadhor as a mythic territory haunted by the totemic eagle, while in the following one Keblout appears in Rachid's dream. However, once they reach the mountains, they are not accepted, but looked upon with suspicion by the last descendants of the tribe. A Black African, guardian of the Nadhor and protector of the tribal virgins, spies on the little hut in which they are staying. Believing that Si Mokhtar is living illicitly with Nedjma, he shoots him through the open door during a night thunderstorm, inflicting a wound from which the old man dies a few days later. In the meanwhile, unaware of the fact, Nedjma and Rachid go into the maquis, where, in a symbolic act of purification, Nedjma takes a bath in a copper cauldron, while Rachid watches from behind a fig tree. Their only contact with the invisible tribe is effectuated through three old men, messengers of the tribe's elders, who agree to bury Si Mokhtar in their cemetery, but also forcibly retain Nedjma in their sacred confine of virgins and chase Rachid away, because his father belonged to the branch which deserted the tribe in its time of trouble.

The story line then switches back to Rachid's return to Constantine after leaving the quarry. He spends time in the empty house of his mother who died recently, evoking his childhood, his years of study in a *madrasah* from which he was expelled for political activities, and his years of wandering when he tried his hand at different jobs. His musing

on the past continues in a local hashish den, where he becomes a regular customer. Another chronological shift takes us several years later. After the trip to the Nadhor, Rachid, back in Constantine, is now in charge of "la fumerie" which he rarely leaves (168-69). Sitting on a balcony overlooking the gully of the Rhummel, he confides to a public scribe his many failures: to retain the woman he loves, to elucidate his father's murder, to keep up anti-colonial struggle, to find his ancestral roots. His reflections are contrasted to Mustapha's, whose journal discloses the latter's thoughts about Nedjma, the Keblouti tribe, and incest. He is more optimistic than Rachid, believing that their suffering may bring a better future to their country.

After reaching its chronological limits in the previous sections, the pace of the narration quickens in Parts Five and Six, while the story line closes in itself, producing the circular structure of the novel. Part Five is devoted to reminiscences about Lakhdar's and Mustapha's childhood in an unnamed village. They first attend elementary French school in which they are exposed to acculturation, and then continue their college education in Sétif, where — in Part Six — they take part in the demonstrations. Upon his release from prison Mustapha goes to Bône to look for work; we are thus back where we were in Part Two. When Kamel leaves to see his dying mother in Constantine, and Lella Fatma takes her stepdaughter to visit a saint's tomb, Mourad, Lakhdar and Mustapha stay in the villa. Returning unexpectedly, Nedjma playfully draws Lakhdar into her bedroom. After their "étreinte [...] d'une intensité jamais atteinte" (244), he finds a photo of a young soldier fastened to her mirror. In his anger, he locks her in the room, first with Mustapha, and then with Mourad. What exactly happens between her and her suitors is never made clear.

After a long and unsuccessful job-hunt, Rachid finally finds work for the four of them in a village close to Bône. The denouement takes the reader back to the novel's opening, as it concludes in the same setting in which it began, giving the impression that nothing of any importance happened. We witness once again Lakhdar's escape from prison and the secret flight of the three friends from the village. Each of them is still obsessed by Nedjma's presence and constantly evokes it: Mourad in his prison cell, Lakhdar in his wanderings, Mustapha writing his diary, Rachid talking to a stranger on the banks of the Rhummel.

Since the four friends have similar experiences, at the same time parallel and divergent, their analogous fictional universes do not create confusion, but rather add more complexity to the multilayered narrative of the novel. The four of them can be understood as representing both different facets of the writer — in line with Kateb's definition of his novel as "*une autobiographie au pluriel*" (qtd. in Déjeux 216) — and various aspects of the generation which came of age in the forties, lost between the antiquated past, the colonized present and an uncertain future (Gallup 31). Their orphanhood is symbolized by the absence of fathers: Sidi Ahmed repudiated Mourad's and Lakhdar's mother in their early childhood, Rachid's father was killed before he was born, while Mustapha's, the only one present, is portrayed as distant and absent-minded: "*père dort: c'est sa nature: tout casser, et dormir*" (210-11). The estrangement from the tribal past began with the generation of their great-grandfathers who sold much of their ancestral land and left it "*pour travailler chez les Français*" (148). The alienation grew subsequently, reaching its peak in the generations of fathers, who are depicted as selfish, morally degraded losers whose dissatisfaction with

their marginal role in the society is compensated by "les fredaines de vaincus": "polygamie, folie des grandeurs, voyages à l'étranger, indiscipline, alcoolisme intermittent" (157). The four protagonists, who refuse to humiliate themselves before their conquerors, but instead strive to redefine their cultural tradition and establish a new nation, are thus separated from their roots, which are necessary for the fulfillment of their aspirations.

Rachid is the only one among them who looks at the past in a positive way. Since about a third of the text is narrated from his point of view, he is the central male character. His importance lies in the fact that, unlike his friends, he is inextricably bound to a more symbolic world expressed in ancient Algerian myths and legends. He follows Si Mokhtar everywhere, believing that the old man is his father's murderer, but, wishing to find out the truth about Nedjma and the Keblouti tribe, spares his life. In time, the two of them develop increasingly close ties of family sentiment and friendship, Si Mokhtar becoming something like Rachid's mentor, and Rachid almost an adopted son to him. The young man is haunted by the precolonial history of Algeria, its struggles against numerous invaders, and the former glory of its ancient cities such as Hippone (Bône, now Annaba) and Cirta (Constantine). Although his agenda in embarking upon the journey to the Nadhor is to escape with Nedjma to a remote paradise, the result of his association with Si Mokhtar is a cultural, historical, and political awakening. In spite of the fact that Rachid's fellow tribesmen do not accept him and take away Nedjma, the experience of having returned to the ancestral homeland binds the young man to his precolonial heritage. However, by the (chronological) end of the novel he appears to be locked in the past. Unlike his cousins, he does not join the struggle for independence, but remains in somber lethargy in his smoking-

room, reclaiming his own Garden of Eden only within hashish-inspired hallucinations. His insights, like Egbo's in IN (see p. 160 above), do not stir him to act in practical life.

Si Mokhtar, who initiated trips both to Mecca and the Nadhor, has a key role in Rachid's journey towards self-understanding. As the only one in the generation of fathers who did not lose connection with their tradition, he is "both sage and buffoon" (Frederick 234), "le dernier philosophe de la famille" (ND 148) and a dissolute rake. Described as "dépravé, retors, naïf, célèbre, mystérieux, pauvre, aristocratique, doctoral, paternel, brutal, fantaisiste" (106), his complex personality can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, he acts as an intercessor in oral narrative, a keeper of tribal history and ancestral secrets, transmitting traditional wisdom and heritage to new generations. On the other, he resembles Djoh'a, a humorous and cunning character of Algerian folklore, who takes advantage of the hypocrisy and foolishness of those in power to turn every situation to his profit (Mortimer, Journeys 94). Both generous and self-indulgent, imaginative and destructive, devious and resourceful, Si Mokhtar is a typical trickster figure, as is revealed especially during the unsuccessful pilgrimage to Mecca which involves stowaways, false identification papers and an imaginary stolen money box.

Mourad, Lakhdar and Mustapha are firmly anchored in the present. However, just as Rachid's vision remains fruitless because he is solely obsessed with the past, the efforts of the three other friends are wasted because of their alienation from their roots. Mourad's fate seems to indicate that random acts of violence do not lead anywhere. Lakhdar and Mustapha, on the other hand, who began their political activity in 1945, not only continue their involvement in the independence movement, but also — in Le Cadavre encerclé —

take part in the Algerian War. The ambiguity of their achievement persists even in those later parts of the 'Nedjma cycle,' as Kateb, like Aitmatov, suggests that only a balance between tradition and modernity — and between myth and reality — can provide a solid base for cultural renewal, essential for a new nation. The present situation in post-colonial Algeria seems to confirm his view.

Nedjma is the principal character in the novel and the pivot of both its cyclical organization and the main mythic structure. Desirable but forbidden, doubly alluring as the issue of both the cherished tribe and the seductive foreigner, she stands in the center of all actions, at the same time repelling and attracting other personages, as emphasized in Mustapha's diary: "Une seule femme nous occupe / Et son absence nous réunit / Et sa présence nous divise" (Kateb, *Polygone* 147). She is both "un astre impossible à piller dans sa fulgurante lumière" (107), and "l'ogresse au sang obscur," "notre perte, la mauvaise étoile de notre clan" (179, 188). Cloaked in shadows, she appears mainly in the memories and fantasies of other characters, remaining to the end "a question without an answer" (Salhi 37). Her participation in the action is minimal: her words, in the form of short conversations and interior monologues, form less than two pages of text in a 256-page book. Her silence stems from the silence imposed upon Algerian women, as "la femme algérienne à l'époque n'avait pas le droit à la parole." She emerges from the shadows only in *Le Cercle des représailles* to become a dynamic political presence. In *ND* she remains the prisoner of male obsession, which, in the context of the actual situation, means a prisoner of the imprisoned, since the experience of the four friends shows that any journey outward is

an illusion, as all such journeys in colonial Algeria lead only to prison.<sup>73</sup> However, it would be wrong to understand Nedjma as being merely passive; on the contrary, she is exerting a powerful influence over other characters, fighting against her position in the patriarchal Muslim society: "Ils m'ont isolée pour mieux me vaincre, isolée en me mariant... Puisqu'ils m'aiment, je les garde dans ma prison... À la longue, c'est la prisonnière qui décide" (67). She even goes out sometimes without a veil, something few Muslim women at the time did, and promises to marry Mourad if he runs off with her to Algiers, "où elle songeait à réaliser, loin de la rumeur publique, ses rêves de jeune fille 'évoluee'" (84).

As "une superposition de symboles" (Bonn, *Kateb* 110), the figure of Nedjma can be understood in a number of ways. On the one hand, it is the focal point in which different levels of narration — fictional, historical and mythical — meet and merge, while, on the other, it sustains the principal structure of the novel, described by Kristine Aurbakken as a spider's web, since all characters and events in it are mutually linked (12). As a modern reincarnation of the sacred Black Stone in the Kaaba shrine, Nedjma embodies one of the most important Islamic myths: "Autrefois, ils avaient adoré la pierre noire. À présent leur idole avait quitté le sanctuaire, déchiré le rideau et dispersé les prêtres" (Kateb, *Polygone* 144). Just as pious pilgrims circumambulate around the Black Stone hoping to touch and kiss it, so do the male heroes of the novel around Nedjma. She is also the unitive principle which stands for the Algerian nation, and "the underpinning of all human life and the force of continued social existence" (Accad 90). Furthermore, Nedjma represents beauty, both physical and spiritual, which attracts all those who are searching for a profound meaning in

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<sup>73</sup> In a similar way, the Arab prisoner freed by his host in Albert Camus' short story "L'Hôte," who can choose to escape northward, southward or eastward, sees that, in fact, all those roads lead only back to captivity.

life, freedom and truth. Since ambivalence is one of her main traits, she appears at times in her dark avatar as an ogress or femme fatale, "ravageant dans la nuit passionnelle tout ce qui nous restait de sang" (187). In such a manner, the "myth of Nedjma," characterized by complex structure and dense symbolic organization, functions as the main structural device of the novel. The motif of incest, recurrent in most mythologies, increases the mystery that surrounds her. Kateb took it from Maghrebian folklore, which is "plein de legendes d'incestes punis" (Arnaud, Cas 166), while marriages between first cousins are not his invention, but are in fact common both in most Arab countries and within the Keblouti tribe (Arnaud, "Mythe" 287).

The end of the novel leaves many questions unanswered: we never find out what happened between Rachid and Nedjma during their first encounter, nor who killed Rachid's father. If Si Mokhtar is really Nedjma's father, as is repeated several times, it is unclear why he tries to prevent Rachid's marriage with her during their trip to the Nadhor. The reason of Rachid's fight with Mourad in prison is never fully explained, nor are the attitudes of the remnants of the Keblouti tribe. Some other narrative threads left open in ND are resolved in later works. Thus, for example, the identity of the soldier whose picture Nedjma keeps is revealed in Le Polygone étoilé: it is Marc the Corsican, "le Français malgré lui" (151-52), who is also in love with her; in the same novel we learn how Ouarda, Mustapha's mother, lost her reason during the events in Sétif, and how she and her daughters found refuge in the Nadhor. At the upper chronological limit of ND, Rachid, sitting in his hashish den, has a vision of Nedjma, traveling time and again between Constantine and Bône, accompanied by the Black African guardian of tribal virgins. The

apparent aimlessness of her wanderings parallels the friends' unsuccessful quests, while her traditional black veil suggests the subjugation of her people: "Nedjma voilée n'est pas sans rappeler l'Algérie qui hésitait à s'affirmer" (Sbouai 165). In a similar way, the repetition of the prison motif — as each of the protagonists was jailed at some point — symbolizes the fettered country, whereas Lakhdar's escape, which opens and closes the narration, illustrates the friends' yearning for freedom, both on individual and national planes. However, no positive hero capable of bringing forth an improvement appears, so — as in Aitmatov's novel — it seems that the onus is on the readers to fathom the situation and effect the necessary change.

The circular form of ND is reminiscent of works like James Joyce's Finnegans Wake and Raymond Queneau Le Chiendent, in which the last sentence of the text continues at its beginning. In Kateb's novel the last-but-one chapter is the same as the first one, while the last one is the same as the second half of Chapter Eight, Part One. The circularity of the narrative is reinforced by the repetitive motifs of imprisonment, escape, meeting, dispersal, abduction, journeying and hiding. The story line returns repeatedly to the three central narrative knots: the demonstrations in Sétif, the meeting of friends in Bône a year later, and their employment as manual laborers in a nearby village in 1947. Furthermore, each of the friends, like most heroes of traditional tales, makes a circular journey in an attempt to achieve self-understanding. A cyclic conception of history is expressed in Rachid's meditations on Algerian past, which he interprets as a series of cycles succeeding one another, while the transition between any two of them was always accomplished by an active struggle against foreign intruders. The inception of the next cycle is necessary, since

staying in the same one would mean death-in-life, but the inability of the new generation to act puts the crossing of the critical passage in doubt. The end of the novel is ambiguous, as it remains unclear whether the protagonists will find the necessary “combative will” (Soyinka, *Myth* 150) to accomplish the transition and thus assume “their proper place in the natural and historical order” (Tremaine 36).

On the political plane of the novel, Nedjma “embodies Algeria’s repeated conquest, resistance, and cultural renewal [...] and fuels the male protagonists’ revolutionary activity” (Woodhull 50). Although raped and sullied by succeeding generations of conquerors, she is seen and dreamed of as a virgin (“vierge après chaque viol” [Kateb, *Polygone* 144]), symbolizing the hypothetical primitive purity of the tribal past. Just like Nedjma, who was born of mixed and uncertain parentage, the Algerian nation, too, is a hybrid of different races and a product of blending of cultures. Her parents stand for two distinct lines of descent, Arabo-Berber and Western, which characterize modern Algeria, while her four potential fathers represent successive dominant groups in the country’s history (i.e., Berbers, Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs). The fact that her mother is French emphasizes the importance of the acculturation and westernization which came as a result of colonialism. Nedjma is “une femme stérile et fatale” (188) because she cannot flourish and reproduce in such regime; she becomes fertile only after the struggle for freedom begins (in *Le Cadavre encerclé*).

The search for national origins is one of the main themes of the novel. Contrary to the classical Islamic concept of *‘umma*, “community of Muslims,” which postulates that all followers of Islam form a single coherent supranational group, Kateb insists on the local

and tribal origins of the Algerian people.<sup>74</sup> According to him, the true roots of his country lie in its remote and all-but-forgotten past, characterized by love of the land and of freedom, and expressed in traditional myths and legends. Kateb was seeking to evoke that lost paradise for new generations, and to remind his compatriots of their background: “[N]ous ne sommes que des tribus décimées. Ce n’est pas revenir en arrière que d’honorer notre tribu, le seul lien qui nous reste pour nous réunir et nous retrouver” (128). Only in the past can Algerians find clues for the future survival of their country, which has been dominated by foreigners for such a long time. Accordingly, he revives the legends of two of their great ancient cities:

Constantine et Bône, les deux cités qui dominaient l’ancienne Numidie, aujourd’hui réduite en département français... Deux âmes en lutte pour la puissance abdiquée des Numides. Constantine luttant pour Cirta et Bône pour Hippone comme si l’enjeu du passé, figé dans une partie apparemment perdue, constituait l’unique épreuve pour les champions à venir: il suffit de remettre en avant les Ancêtres pour découvrir la phase triomphale, la clé de la victoire refusée à Jugurtha, le germe indestructible de la nation écartelée entre deux continents, de la Sublime Porte à l’Arc de Triomphe, [...] la vieille Numidie dont les cavaliers ne sont jamais revenus de l’abattoir, pas plus que ne sont revenus les Corsaires qui barraient la route à Charles-Quint... Ni les Numides ni les Barbaresques n’ont enfanté en paix dans leur patrie. Ils nous la laissent vierge dans un désert ennemi, tandis que se succèdent les colonisateurs, les prétendants sans titre et sans amour...” (175)

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<sup>74</sup> He points out that Islam was imposed by brutal force on the native populations of Algeria, quoting Ibn Khaldoun’s (1332-1406) *Histoire des Berbères*, which relates how the Imazighen rebelled and apostatized from Islam no less than twelve times before being finally subdued ( *Poète* 108).

Although ancient cities cannot be reborn, new ones can rise from their ruins. The struggle for independence, connected with legendary figures from the past, thus acquires mythical tones as it is endlessly repeated.

The myth of Keblout, used to point out the survival of pagan beliefs, which Islam was unable to destroy, and to confront the ideology about “nos ancêtres les Gaulois” taught in French schools, is also — like the story of the Horned Deer-Mother in WS — a myth of national origins. Kateb employs it to assert the significance of the tribal past and the link with the ancestral land (Khadda 77). Oral narratives tell us that Keblout was the chief who, in ancient times, led the tribe in its migrations across North Africa all the way to the Nadhor, where they finally settled down (Bonn, Kateb 12). He appears in the Rachid’s dream<sup>75</sup> in a scene described as “la grande catharsis collective”:

Le vieux Keblout légendaire apparut une nuit dans la cellule, avec des moustaches et des yeux de tigre, une trique à la main; la tribu se rassembla peu à peu dans la cellule; on se serra au coude à coude, mais nul n’osait s’approcher de Keblout. Lui, l’ancêtre au visage de bête féroce, aux yeux sombres et malins, promenait son superbe regard sur sa tribu, la trique à portée de sa main; il racontait ironiquement par ce seul regard l’histoire de chacun, et il semblait à ses descendants que lui seul avait réellement vécu leur existence dans toute son étendue — lui seul s’étant frayé passage jusqu’au Nadhor où, subissant déjà la défaite, il n’en mourut pas moins à la tête de sa tribu. (134)

Keblout’s judgment is stressed since it is far more important and relevant than those of both the Muslim God, i.e., the *ulema*,<sup>76</sup> and French colonial authorities. The value of tribal

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<sup>75</sup> Keblouti tribesmen believe that in important situations their eponymous ancestor appears to them in dreams (Arnaud, “Mythe” 287-88).

<sup>76</sup> The social class of specialists in Muslim sacred law and theology.

traditions is thus emphasized as being essential for any attempt to revitalize Algerian culture. Keblout died and was reborn repeatedly through his direct descendants who bore the same name and ruled the tribe after him. Being an indestructible figure who has weathered the repeated invasions of his land, his survival anticipates the triumph of the nation, which, like him, will be reborn.

The male protagonists' endless pursuit of Nedjma is depicted as a combination of the quest-myth with that of the labyrinth. Each of the friends embarks upon a journey which supposedly leads to lucidity and results in a new level of understanding, but, instead, all of them end up disoriented in the reality of modern Algeria portrayed as an inextricable maze. Lakhdar is thus lost in his "indifferent and meaningless peregrinations" (Peyronie 719), Mourad is stuck in the dead-end, while Mustapha, confused and perplexed, ponders about the possible way out. Rachid's two trips, to Mecca and to the Nadhor, are somewhat different. The first one, the hajj which results in Rachid and Si Mokhtar returning home without setting foot in Mecca, is presented in a satirical vein, as Kateb "pokes fun at one of the basic tenets of Islam, the Muslim's duty to make at least one pilgrimage to the holy city in his lifetime" (Mortimer, "Kateb" 278). If Mecca is the highest symbol of Muslim religious identity, the author strongly suggests that it is not the one Algeria needs today. On the contrary, representatives of conservative Islam in the novel are characterized as collaborators with colonial authorities, whereas the pilgrimage itself, devoid of religious significance, is more akin to a commercial fair. Thus, when the two false pilgrims arrive in Jeddah, they do not even leave the boat. Instead, Si Mokhtar uses the time to initiate Rachid into the tribal oral tradition. In such a manner, the importance of their hajj is diametrically

opposite to the accustomed one: it functions as a catalyst, prompting the real pilgrimage, the journey to the ancestral homeland in the mountains of East Algeria.

The return to the tribal territory represents the end of Rachid's quest and the mythical summit of the narrative. As in Aitmatov's novel, where the main myth occupies the fourth out of seven chapters, in ND too the events in the Nadhor take place in the center of the text, i.e., in the fifth duodecimal section (out of nine). The episode is presented in a way which places it between dreams and reality, so it is difficult to ascertain whether it actually happens, or if it is just a vision (M'henni 152-53). Such impression is strengthened by Rachid's narrative stance, best described as "l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle" (Nerval 296), which blends the imaginary and the real. The events thus acquire a symbolic dimension, while mythic stories become believable. The journey of Nedjma, Rachid and Si Mokhtar is described as a necessary home-coming after years of alienation and decadence: "Il faut dire que nous étions tous les trois, enfin! dans la période de repos que nous avons toujours souhaité, depuis des années en perpétuel exil, de séparation, de dur labeur, ou d'inaction et de débauche; enfin nous retrouvions les derniers hectares de la tribu, la dernière chaumière" (135). The beauty of the remote mountain landscape is depicted as another version of the Garden of Eden — especially in the context of Nedjma's nakedness underneath a fig tree — in which the three of them are not accepted. Although life of the last descendants of the tribe is anything but idyllic — actually, they are barely able to survive in the unproductive highlands — the fact that they remained true to their traditions, refusing to submit to the colonial regime, gives their pristine, untarnished world an aura of wholeness.

Once in their ancestral land, Rachid, Si Mokhtar and Nedjma long to cleanse themselves of all traces of alienation, and to recuperate strength at the pure source. They need to establish connection with ancient traditions in order to be able to ensure the continuation of the authentic life of the nation: "Nous voulions, avant d'envisager l'avenir, connaître toutes les survivances de la tribu, vérifier nos origines pour dresser un bilan de faillite, ou tenter une réconciliation" (146). However, the return to the tribal paradise and the revival of the past are impossible to accomplish. All Rachid can do is to leave the mountains richer with new and important insights, having learned to value the tribe both as an important stage of historical development and as a cornerstone for the construction of the modern state. The death of Si Mokhtar and Rachid's expulsion from the Nadhor symbolically put an end to one cycle and indicate the necessity of a new beginning. As the political destiny of the country is now in the hands of Rachid's generation, his new understanding might enable them to come to grips with the present situation.

Totemism in the novel appears in the form of an eagle — or a vulture<sup>77</sup> — representing the reincarnation of the ancestor. Such pre-Islamic beliefs are preserved in the mountainous parts of Algeria inhabited by the Imazighen, where they form a very important part of popular beliefs.<sup>78</sup> Keblout is there venerated in the form of an eagle totem, symbolizing both the past and the present. The fact that the eagle is black and white illustrates the essential human contradiction, as well as the necessity of death for rebirth (Gontard 89). In a myth which comes from the folklore of the same region (Arnaud, Cas

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<sup>77</sup> In Algerian colloquial Arabic, the terms *nsar* and *egab* are used interchangeably for both eagle and vulture. Kateb follows such practice, using 'aigle' and 'vautour' to denote, respectively, the positive and negative aspects of the totemic animal. (Arnaud, Cas 169).

<sup>78</sup> Kateb's own mother had "les serres et le bec d'un vautour en guise d'amulettes" (Déjeux 233).

168), the totemic animal appears in its dark avatar as the vulture which bombards the shepherds with stones; it can be appeased — and the tribe released of its curse — only by a sacrifice of a virgin. Its other, beneficial aspect, associated with fertility, was celebrated every year during “la fête des vautours dans le ravin du Rhummel” (Déjeux 232-33). Accordingly, “le vieil oiseau,” which haunted the mountain village, “ne se montra plus” (134) after Mustapha’s two young sisters died while climbing the rocks in which it lived, whereas Nedjma, after her return from the Nadhor, becomes fertile (in Le Cadavre encerclé).

In ND Kateb created a new mythic structure (see p. 50 above) based on traditional myths and legends of Algeria, which reinvigorates its cultural heritage and identity, while, at the same time, corresponding to the situation in the contemporary world on which he is focusing. Believing, like Ribeiro and Soyinka, that the cultural survival of his people is directly dependent on the preservation of their mythopoeic sensibilities, he evokes the mythic dimension of their culture throughout his literary opus. Kateb’s main theme is, like Harris’, the search for origins, national and personal. Although traditional Maghrebien narratives are most important for his novel, the author also used in it myths from other traditions. The destructive Hindu goddess Kali was the model for the dark aspect of Nedjma’s character, whereas the totemic vulture bears some distinctive traits of ancient Egyptian vulture deities Mut and Nekhebet (Ions 90). Two central myths of the novel, those of Nedjma and Keblout, organize the narration through an associative process of thematic reverberations. The plot evolves simultaneously through three different narrative planes: fictional, historical, and mythical, thus corresponding to Tournier’s ideas of multilayered

mythic fiction (Vent 183). Working “with and under the spell of a grand mythic design, industriously weaving both within and from the production of his narratives a complex fabric of imaginal designs that poetically unite sociopolitical and metaphysical consciousness” (Aresu, Counterhegemonic xii), Kateb emphasizes the importance of imaginative experience, necessary for human self-realization. He also uses myth as a tool for contesting and opposing the state of affairs in the contemporary world: “myth for Kateb [...] is an aggressive, insidious act of counter-cunning that erodes the foundations of the metadiscourse from within” (Erickson 36).

The ambiguity of Kateb’s polyphonic fiction is enhanced by simultaneous presence of serious and ludic modes of narration, as his “lyrical prose ceaselessly fluctuates between the two poles of the sacred and the profane, of rhapsodical lyricism and corrosive irony” (Aresu, Counterhegemonic 25). It is similar in that respect to Tournier’s novel, in which the plot hovers between the mimetic and the ludic. The construction of both novels has a musical quality: whereas the French writer organized his work on the basis of J. S. Bach’s Art of the Fugue, the structure of ND was compared both to the *nouba* form of classical Arabo-Andalusian music and to Western counterpoint:

Autour de [Kateb] les chemins se ramifient sans qu’il accepte de renoncer à aucun. Faut-il parler de contrepoint? Il semble que cela échappe à toute loi autre que celle d’une nécessité intérieure dont le lecteur ne prendra conscience, globalement, qu’une fois arrivé au bout du livre. Un thème naît, disparaît, revient, s’affermit, se noue à un autre dans une nouvelle nuit foisonnante d’étoiles et d’éclairs, d’où s’élanceront vers d’autres nuits déchirées d’autres routes improbables. (Serrau 483-84)

Another characteristic shared by ND and RA is the use of the motif of labyrinth. Both the hero of the latter and the protagonists of the former, confused by misleading signs and unable to find a way out, explore numerous dead ends of the labyrinth of the modern world. Furthermore, Tournier's novel questions the role of fiction in life, as does Kateb's by presenting the story in germination, as it develops in the minds of the protagonists: "ND est donc [...] le roman de la quête du récit" (Bonn, Kateb 61). Both works examine the process of fiction-making, which is important because establishing control over narrative means finding identity; so much so, in fact, that life itself was defined by Paul Ricœur as "a quest for narrative identity" (Oneself 145).

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **MICHEL TOURNIER'S LE ROI DES AULNES: MULTIPLE STRATA OF MEANING IN MYTHOPOEIC FICTION**

Existen diez mil años de literatura detrás de cada cuento que se escribe.

Gabriel García Márquez  
(qtd. in Brunel, Mythocritique 72)

It's all part of a pattern; it is fate.

Mikhail Bulgakov (Black 25)

When the protagonist of Goethe's Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre enters the utopian "pedagogic province," he finds out that pupils there are not permitted to read or deliver already completed poems of the more ancient and modern poets, but that, instead, creative writing is taught by exposing young people to myths, traditions and legends — and then observing them to see what they will make out of them (524-31). Contemporary French writer Michel Tournier (1924- ) seems to have learned his literary lore in precisely such a way. A controversial author, thought by some to be "perverse, crypto-mystical, reactionary, and morally subversive" (Birkerts 39), for many years ignored on purpose by avant-garde critics (Shattuck 8)<sup>79</sup>, Tournier is now widely acclaimed as "l'écrivain le plus complexe et le plus original de sa génération" (Bosquet 86), and as "without doubt France's best-known living writer" (Anderson ix); furthermore, it has even been argued that "France has produced no writers of real importance in twenty years, except for Michel Tournier" (Raymond Sokolov, qtd. in Cloonan, Michel xi). Unlike Soyinka and Kateb, Tournier has had a peaceful life, devoted to philosophy, which is his greatest intellectual passion, and to literature. His unsuccessful attempts to follow an academic career forced Tournier to work

<sup>79</sup> In North America too, Tournier has not received as much critical attention as he deserves. Thus, for example, the 1158-page New History of French Literature (Hollier), first published in 1989, does not mention him at all.

as a translator, in a radio station, and in several publishing houses, before being awarded two major French literary prizes for his first two published novels — the Grand Prix of the French Academy and the Prix Goncourt (Cloonan, Michel 2-3) — which enabled him to make a living with his pen.

Although Tournier's literary output consists for the most part of fiction — novels and short stories — he also published essays (Le Vent Paraclet), literary criticism (Le Vol du vampire: notes de lecture) and travelogues (Journal de voyage au Canada). In Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique (1967), his first novel, Tournier gave his version of the myth of Robinson Crusoe, one of the most important ones to originate in the modern period. It was followed by Le Roi des aulnes (1970), which was long in germinating. Tournier began to write it several years earlier, before Vendredi, but was unable to reduce it to a manageable length and abandoned it twice, in 1958 and 1962. Then, after his first novel was acclaimed both by the critics and the public, and he himself fired by the publishing house *Plon* for joining a strike, Tournier found enough time to rewrite successfully the story that obsessed him for such a long time (Petit 25). His third novel, Les Météores (1975), is a tale about identical twins and their bizarre homosexual uncle, who, as the president of a refuse-collection company, investigates the deep symbolic secrets of garbage. In Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar (1980), “a devout yet parodic retelling of the Nativity story” (Shattuck 8), Tournier narrates in his manner the Biblical story about the journey of the Magi, refurbishing it completely with the addition of an apocryphal fourth traveler. Among his later works, the most important are Le Coq de bruyère, Gilles et Jeanne, La Goutte d'or, La Médianoche amoureux and Eléazar, ou, la source et le buisson.

The works of this very ambiguous author can be best described as re-readings and re-writings of European culture, since most of his novels and short stories involve the use of narratives and subjects drawn from the vast archive of what might be called “Western cultural mythology [...], which includes not only myths proper,” but also “legends, folktales, history and literature” (Roberts 4-5). Tournier is one of the best known and most ardent exponents of the ‘mythic method’ in contemporary fiction, a writer whose chief goal in writing is to revive and reactualize ancient stories, using them in his works for “construction et [...] structuration du texte” (Kyloušek 20). In such a manner, “l’appropriation et la transformation du mythe constituent sans aucun doute l’esthétique de base de Michel Tournier” (Bevan 67); “la dimension mythologique, loin d’être une contingence, représente un élément essentiel de son art de romancier” (Kyloušek 19-20). Myths — such as that of Robinson Crusoe, of Tristan and Isolde, of Don Juan, the Germanic myth of the Erl-King, the universal myth of twinship, or the Christian myth of the Wise Men — are always in the core of his novels. His ability to attack the most complex and most ambiguous problems, and to deal with them in a clear way, is based on mythic stories, which provide extra-textual infrastructure for ontological, epistemological, and cosmologic levels of meaning in his works.

Although mythopoeia in twentieth-century French literature has never had such a prominent position as it has, for example, in Latin America, a number of authors, belonging to different literary movements, created important mythopoeic works, such as Le Rivage des Syrtes (1951) by Julien Gracq (surrealist), La Peste (1947) by Albert Camus (existentialist), and La Modification (1957) by Michel Butor (*nouveau roman*). Tournier’s

interest in myth was aroused, like Aitmatov's and Ribeiro's, by ethnological research, albeit indirectly: he was influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss, his teacher at the *Musée de l'Homme*, to think about possible implications of traditional stories for contemporary narrative fiction:

Au moment où l'occident découvrait la spiritualité d'une humanité archaïque, les mythes proposaient des situations existentielles exemplaires, porteuses de significations philosophiques. L'ethnologie fournissait au philosophe un langage, celui des mythes, à la fois concret et transcendant, remontant à une époque où le savoir n'était pas cloisonné en disciplines. Elle lui permettait de devenir romancier. (Bouloumié, Michel 8)

Tournier underlines the importance of the mythic quality of his works and stresses the necessity for writers to keep ancient myths alive by renewing their emotional charge and altering their orientation to respond to changing cultural situations. For him, myth is, on the simplest level, a fundamental story, that is, a story that every human being already knows, which gives shape to human desires and ideals (Vent 183). Thus, to read a myth is actually to reread it, since the reader encounters on the page something he already possesses in some recess of his mind. Tournier's model of myth is Platonic, and his central example of it is Plato's myth of the cave. He compares myth to a building whose storeys correspond to different stories, or interpretation of stories, or increasing levels of abstraction on which it can be read:

Imaginons une caverne où sont retenus des prisonniers, attachés de telle sorte qu'ils ne puissent voir que le fond rocheux de la caverne. Derrière eux, un grand feu. Entre ce feu et eux défilent des personnages portant des objets. De ces personnages et de ces objets, les prisonniers ne voient que les ombres pour la seule réalité, et font sur elles des conjectures forcément partielles et erronées. Raconté de cette façon le mythe n'est qu'une histoire pour enfant, la description d'un guignol qui serait aussi

théâtre d'ombres chinoises. Mais à un niveau supérieur, c'est toute une théorie de la connaissance, à un étage plus élevé encore cela devient morale, puis métaphysique, puis ontologique, etc., sans cesser d'être la même histoire. (Vent 183)

Like Kateb and Harris, Tournier, who writes "outside any recognizable literary movement or school" (Ladimer 76), is a case apart. Contrary to the adherents of the *nouveau roman* and other movements who were adamant that the 'classic' form of novel is no longer adequate, Tournier thought that drastically altering the form would not bring any real change into the art of the novel. He did not subscribe to the fashionable poststructuralist rejection of "any appeal to systems of correspondences and analogies" either (Shattuck 9). Instead, he placed "weight on the 'depth' of good writing and the creation of richly detailed characters to whom readers can relate" (Gascoigne, "Michel" 65). However, in spite of the fact that he uses traditional themes and structures, Tournier's approach is best described as "new, and decidedly un-nineteenth-century literary realism" (Platten 214), lying between traditionalist and experimental writing. Although realistic on the surface, his fiction actually systematically subverts many aspects of traditional realistic narrative, exploring the limits of plausibility and fantasy, and turning "en dérision le principe de la cohérence du récit traditionnel" (Koopman-Thurlings 133). "The intricate design of his symbols, each linked to myriads of others, act like the calligraphic signs," which "both hide and reveal, and what they reveal depends on how much the reader is willing to read into them" (Sbiroli 123). At the same time, Tournier wanted to bridge the gap between "l'essai et le roman" (Vent 225), believing that a combination of the two would produce a new type of mimesis appropriate for the contemporary world:

Mon problème, c'était de trouver un passage entre la philosophie et le roman. Entre la vraie philosophie et le vrai roman (philosophie à la Hegel, roman à la Zola) en rejetant le 'roman philosophique' (Voltaire) qui est faux roman et fausse philosophie. J'y suis parvenu en me servant de grand mythes éternels et toujours vivant: Robinson Crusoe et Vendredi (Club Méditerranée d'une part, travailleurs immigrés d'autre part), L'Ogre (la guerre dévoreuse d'enfants), les jumeaux (le mythe du couple humain). (Tournier, qtd. in Tomé 245)

Le Roi des aulnes is, by common agreement, Tournier's best novel, usually characterized as "une synthèse intellectuelle où se s'entremêlent invention fictive et réalité historique" (Fauskevåg 3). Its title, literally meaning "the King of the Alders," is based on Goethe's famous poem "Der Erlkönig." It appears that an error in translation lies at the origin of the poem. Herder, who was popularizing Danish folklore in Germany, confused the word 'Eller' — the elves — with 'Erlen' — the alder trees, because in his home province of East Prussia the two words were pronounced identically. It seems that Goethe's imagination was aroused by the invocation of the alder, "l'arbre noir et maléfique des eaux mortes" (Tournier, Vent 116). On the other hand, in pre-Christian Europe alder trees were often centers of pagan worship. Such practices survived many centuries after the initial Christianization of the continent, and we find a number reports about worshipping elder trees or making offerings to them from the late Middle Ages and Renaissance periods. Interestingly, the inquisitors and confessors mention it most often in connection with women who were trying to restore to health their sick children. They used to "seek salvation by worshipping elder trees or making offerings to them," and to "take their children to these elder trees [...] in order that cure may be effected" (Schmitt 4). Goethe's poem features a sort of an ogre who acts like an angel of death trying to steal a young boy

from the arms of his father. The boy cries for help, but his father comforts him explaining that all he sees and hears are only mirages and figments of his imagination. However, by the time they arrive at their farm, the boy is dead. Tournier suggests that the poem indicates latent homosexual tendencies in the German poet (Vent 116), who supposedly understands the frightened boy as a temptation, but the precise nature of the temptation is not made clear.

Drawing “upon a variegated intertextual archive of epic, fantastic, fairy-tale, philosophical and historiographic elements” (Gratton 249), RA traces the career of one man, Abel Tiffauges, who is both a protagonist and a narrator. The novel consists of six parts, each representing a stage in a physical journey, as well as in a mythological quest. The writer alternatively uses diary, i.e., first-person narration, and omniscient relation in the past-tense. Part One, “Écrits sinistres d’Abel Tiffauges,” entirely written in diary form, recounts the events of 1938, the last year before the beginning of the Second World War, counterposing them to his memories of childhood, which are told in retrospective narrative and interposed in diary entries. The memoir-style of those reminiscences has “the effect of characterizing these earlier episodes as preliminary to, and in some sense preparatory of, the ‘main’ events” taking place during the war (Gascoigne, Michel 8). Abel does not record only events, but also his reflections, which suggest that the full import of recounted experiences would only become apparent much later. In such a way, the protagonist cultivates and projects a certain image of himself, his importance, evolution and destiny as he sees it.

Tiffauges is presented, from the very first sentence of the novel, both as an ordinary man, a gigantic and myopic Paris garage proprietor, who has many problems fitting into contemporary society and coping with daily life, and as an ogre, a being of mythic status:

Tu es un ogre, me disait parfois Rachel. Un Ogre? C'est-à-dire monstre féérique, émergeant de la nuit des temps? Je crois, oui, à ma nature féérique, je veux dire à cette connivence secrète qui mêle en profondeur mon aventure personnelle au cours des choses, et lui permet de l'incliner dans son sens.

Je crois aussi que je suis issu de la nuit des temps. [...] j'étais là déjà, il y a mille ans, il y a cent mille ans. Quand la terre n'était encore qu'une boule de feu tournoyant dans un ciel d'hélium, l'âme qui la faisait tourner, c'était la mienne. (13)

Abel's height, strength, short-sightedness — albeit compensated for by the extraordinary astuteness of his sense of taste, smell and touch — and his predilection for eating raw meat are all proofs that he indeed is an ogre in gestation. The narrative thereafter grows out of the tension between these two dimensions, the mythological and the realistic. In such a manner, Tournier combines “two modes of reference to a cultural text beyond the novel, one of which refers to timeless images evoking emotional responses, the other to a specific empirical reality located in historical time” (Worton, “Myth-Reference 299).

Abel's first initiations took place in the St. Christopher's boarding-school. At first he was there unhappy and marginal, often bullied by bigger children, especially by a boy named Pelsenaire, who not only used to ride Abel in the game of riders and mounts, but also forced him to eat grass and to clean his boots. Only after an older, robust boy named Nestor, who shared similar interests with Abel, befriended him, was Abel accepted by his school-mates. Nestor helped him discover the sensual pleasures of food, of ritual defecation, and of cycling. Under his influence Abel conceived his *idée fixe* about the

college in flames and his concept of the liberating force of 'sinister,' or left-handed, writing. When the explosion of a cigarette lighter during their play in church accidentally caused a big fire, Abel, afraid that he would be punished, ran home and spent the night tortured by nightmares of conflagration. Sent back by his father, he learned upon his return to St. Christopher's that Nestor had been killed in the blaze which destroyed the school. The shock of his friend's death provokes the beginning of a physical transformation in Abel. He starts to grow quickly, becoming big and strong, but suffering from failing eyesight. By the end of his adolescence he looks exactly as Nestor did when he last saw him.

Once grown up, Abel has a lot of problems both fitting into 'normal' everyday life, and establishing connections with women. His only attempt at an intimate adult heterosexual relationship (with Rachel) fails, so he turns his attention more and more to children. He especially enjoys what he calls "la phorie," which is the act of carrying a child on one's shoulders. Photography becomes his hobby, especially taking pictures of children. Such behavior arouses suspicions in the neighborhood, so when one little girl is kidnapped and raped, he is — although innocent — accused of being the perpetrator. Only the outbreak of the Second World War saves Abel from prison; and he is conscripted into the army.

Parts Two, Three, and Four ("Les Pigeons du Rhin," "Hyperborée," and "L'Ogre de Rominten"), which comprise the central section of the novel, are written in third-person chronological narrative. They depict the protagonist caught up in the eddies of the tide of war carrying him eastward, first as a soldier in Alsace, then as a prisoner of war, and finally

as warden in Göring's Rominten Heath Wildlife Reserve. His personal destiny thus unrolls against the background of the oddities and idiocies of war. During the brief "drôle de guerre" (192) before the armistice between France and Germany, Abel, not being capable of any combat duty, is assigned to the communications branch of the army, where he develops an expertise in dealing with carrier pigeons. He is captured by the enemy during the first day of actual fighting, and sent to a POW camp in northern Germany. Unlike his colleagues, Abel does not resent the conditions of the camp and refuses a chance to escape. Even the normally humiliating processes of disinfecting and delousing become for him a rite of purification. He likes Germany, "un pays noir et blanc" (226), which suits him better than his own country, where he felt "étranger par ses goûts, son tempérament et ses aspirations" (Korthals Altes, "Roi" 98). The manual work he is assigned leaves his mind free to contemplate his personal destiny. He manages to find a little cabin in the neighboring forest, which becomes his secret retreat. He calls it "Canada," remembering the mythological northern dreamland evoked by Nestor in his childhood. Abel identifies himself with Bram, the protagonist of James Oliver Curwood's novel The Golden Snare they used to read together. Big and strong, Bram lived alone in the wilderness, traveling over "les effroyables déserts glacés avec un équipage de loups" (55-56).

Very soon Abel wins the trust of German authorities and, as a consequence, receives a series of promotions. He even manages to work as a forester at Rominten, the hunting retreat of Göring, which gives him the opportunity not only to observe him close at hand, but also to become a servant and secret pupil of the second most important person in the Third Reich, who is an expert in phallology (the study of the meaning of antlers) and

coprology (the science of the decipherment of animal faeces). The latter reflects Tournier's ideas about the interconnection between scatology, reading, interpretation and the role of the reader (Pezechkian-Weinberg 20). However, Göring, 'the Ogre of Rominten' is only another stage on the way to the greatest ogre of all, 'the ogre of Rastenburg,' i.e. Adolf Hitler himself:

Lorsque Tiffauges reprit le chemin de Rominten, le grand veneur avec ses chasses et ses massacres, ses festins de venaison et sa science coprologique et phallologique était tombé à ses yeux au rang de petit ogre folklorique et fictif, échappé à quelque conte de grand-mère. Il était éclipsé par l'autre, l'ogre de Rastenburg, qui exigeait de ses sujets, pour son anniversaire, ce don exhaustif, cinq cent mille petites filles et cinq cent mille petits garçons de dix ans, en tenue sacrificielle, c'est à dire tous nus, avec lesquels il pétrissait sa chair à canon. (317)

One day, while on a commission, Abel's truck gets stuck in the mud, so that he only manages to return to the camp with a forty-eight hours delay. During that time, some German workers find in the nearby marshlands studded with alder trees a naturally embalmed body of a peat-bog man. The Germans at first think that the corpse is Abel's. An archeologist, Professor Keil, brought from Königsberg, discovers that it is actually two thousand years old. Shortly thereafter the workers find at the same place the equally ancient remains of what could be a child. The professor then dubs the adult corpse "le roi des aulnes," linking it to the legendary Erl-King. Basing his explanation on the apparent mortuary rites, he associates the peat-bog man with Christ, purporting that the excavations prove that a Nordic 'Last Supper' took place in the same historical period as the Biblical one, thus providing evidence of "une religion parallèle, strictement nordique et même germanique" (253). The professor thus "lends intellectual credibility to [Abel's] ogreish

vision" by maintaining "in his account of ancient Germans that the future is predicated on the rediscovery of the past" (Platten 93). Tiffauges is inclined to consider all changes in his life as parts of some profound pattern that he is struggling to decipher. For him "tout est signe" (15), and all the signs pertain directly to him. He takes the discovery that he can write with his left hand as well as his right as an immediate proof that he is provided with two types of writing, one "adroite," reflecting the person he pretends to be for society's eyes, and the other "sinistre." "What would have been for a less enthusiastic interpreter the simple indication that a personality has its public and private side, becomes for Abel a revelation with vast and somber implications" (Cloonan, "Artist" 194).

Parts Five and Six ("L'Ogre de Kaltenborn," and "L'Astrophore") are written in mixed mode, in rapid alternations of the diary entries with the third-person narrative, thus integrating autobiographical and historical focuses. The final section of the novel questions the relationship between the individual and the collective story, between the defeats and disasters which overtake the nation and the paradoxical apotheosis of an individual. Abel is transferred to Kaltenborn, a gigantic fortress in northern Prussia which has been converted into a Napola (nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalten), that is, a school that prepares boys for eventual service in the SS. It is a place where he reaches his final destination. He meets there another ogre, Sturmbannführer Professor Doktor Otto Blättchen, the director of the Kaltenborn Raciological Center, who conducts research on the skulls of captured Jews and Russians in order to demonstrate that the Israelites and the Bolsheviks are indeed inferior to 'Aryan' race. In his laboratory, he keeps "cent cinquante bocaux de verre numérotés de un à cent cinquante et étiquetés *Homo Judaeus Bolchevicus*. Dans chacun d'eux, une tête

humaine en parfait état de conservation flottait dans un bain d'aldéhyde formique" (333). Tiffauges also meets there the old Count von Kaltenborn who explains to him the complex laws which govern heraldic symbols. "Abel comes to believe that this arcane knowledge will eventually help clarify his destiny" (Cloonan, Michel 39 ).

As the outcome of the war becomes apparent and the German army begins to lack manpower, more and more SS adults are taken from Kaltenborn to serve at the front, so Abel assumes an increasingly important role. At first, his duty is to feed the children and to anoint their lips with cream in order to heal their sores. However, since the shortage of recruits becomes pressing, he begins to roam the surrounding countryside, searching for young boys. As a consequence, the people of the region print and distribute the following proclamation:

Cet avertissement s'adresse à toutes les mères habitant les régions de Gelhenburg, Sensburg, Lötzen et Lyck!

PPENEZ GARDE À L'OGRE DE KALTENBORN!

Il convoite vos enfants. Il parcourt nos régions et vole les enfants. Si vous avez des enfants, pensez toujours à l'Ogre, car lui pense toujours à eux! Ne les laissez pas s'éloigner seuls. Apprenez-leur à fuir et à se cacher s'ils voient un géant monté sur un cheval bleu, accompagné d'une meute noire. S'il vient à vous, résistez à ses menaces, soyez sourdes à ses promesses. Une seule certitude doit guider votre conduite de mères: si l'Ogre emporte votre enfant, vous ne le reverrez JAMAIS!

In such a manner, Abel, who at the beginning of the novel was only symbolically an ogre, has now become a real one. Apart from his recruiting efforts, he also leads the boys through elaborate, quasi-religious ceremonies organized in the castle. Only the disintegration of the Third Reich and the collapse of the state allow him to see to which kind of atrocious use the

children he has imprisoned have been put. After finding a half-dead Jewish boy, Ephraim, during one of his trips across the countryside, Abel saves him from death by exhaustion, brings him to his room and attempts to nurse him back to health, but in doing so he begins to discover how badly he had misinterpreted the various symbols he associated with his destiny. Although deranged by the illness brought about by his experience, Ephraim unveils to Tiffauges the existence of the network of concentration camps. Abel “learns among other things that his “Canada” has a terrifying parallel,” as “Ephraim explains that ‘Canada’ was the name given at Auschwitz to the room where the Nazis would store the valuables they stole from the gassed Jews” (Cloonan, Michel 39-40).

Consequently, the Nazi empire and Abel’s symbolic universe crumble and fall simultaneously. The last days of war, when the young recruits in the Napola put up an insane and futile resistance against the advancing Red Army, are described in apocalyptic terms as the Massacre of the Innocents. While the fortress is destroyed by Russian guns and the boys are slaughtered, Abel gets away from the fighting, “like Aeneas from burning Troy” (Platten 96), carrying on his shoulders the young boy instead of a father. He loses his glasses in the process and thus depends on Ephraim to guide him. They wander over the moor and finally lose their way. The little child crushes the ogre with his weight — which represents the weight of Abel’s sins in his voluntary participation in the Nazi machinery — and they both perish in the waterlogged swamp. The last thing Abel sees before disappearing into the slime is a six-pointed star that shines in the heavens:

Tiffauges obliqua vers le talus de gauche, s’enforça dans les congères boueuses qui les bordaient, et sentit sous ses pieds le sol mou et traître de la brande. Un arbuste lui griffa le visage, et il avança, dès lors, les bras tendus en avant, comme un

aveugle. Il marcha longtemps ainsi, au point que le pilonnage de la route ne fus plus à ses oreilles qu'une vague et orageuse rumeur. Peu à peu, le sol devenait spongieux sous ses pieds, et il devait faire effort à chaque pas pour les arracher à sa succion. Puis ses mains rencontrèrent les branches et les troncs d'un petit bois, et il reconnut l'aulne noir des marécages. Il voulut s'arrêter, faire demi-tour, mais une force irrésistible le poussait aux épaules. Et à mesure que ses pieds s'enforçaient davantage dans la landèche gorgée d'eau, il sentait l'enfant — si mince, si diaphane pourtant — peser sur lui comme une masse de plomb. Il avançait, et la vase montait toujours le long de ses jambes, et la charge qui l'écrasait s'aggravait à chaque pas. Il devait maintenant faire un effort surhumain pour vaincre la résistance gluante qui lui broyait le ventre, la poitrine, mais il persévérait, sachant que tout était bien ainsi. Quand il leva pour la dernière fois la tête vers Éphraïm, il ne vit qu'une étoile d'or à six branches qui tournait lentement dans le ciel noir. (496)

The ogre is a familiar character in folk tales from many different parts of the world. It is a kind of giant, a common mythic figure, usually described as an "être chthonien, symbolisant la prédominance des forces issues de la terre par son gigantisme matériel et son indigence spirituelle" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 474). In other words, giants represent excessiveness, purely corporeal instincts and regressive tendencies. The ogre appears in stories for children in such famous collections as those by Charles Perrault and Madame d'Aulnoy in France and by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm in Germany. The myth of the ogre, like any major myth, is in fact pulled in opposite directions, and it is because of these conflicting forces that the ogre is not a consistent figure (Bouloumié, "Ogre" 918). Tournier successfully preserves and exploits the ambivalence of the myth. From the Erl-King who carries children off to their death, Abel is transformed at the end of the novel to Saint Christopher, the savior of children. In such a way the storyline follows the legend, as told in

La Légende dorée of Jacobus de Voragine, which portrays Saint Christopher as a converted ogre. He was originally a terrible giant, reportedly more than twelve feet tall, endowed with a terrifying appearance and an insatiable appetite, who had initially entered into the service of the dark powers, but was converted to Christianity after having seen how much the Devil was afraid of the cross. Following the advice of a hermit who taught him the way of repentance, Saint Christopher went to live on a bank of a dangerous river, where he helped travelers to reach the opposite shore. One day a small child came and asked him to carry him across. Christopher lifted him on his shoulders and stepped into the river, but, all of the sudden, the waters grew rougher and rougher, and the child felt as heavy as lead, so much so that he feared that he would drown. He eventually managed to reach the other bank with a lot of difficulty. He then learned that the child was Christ himself, and that successful crossing of the river marked his salvation (Voragine 173-77).

On the other hand, the dark side of the ogre, its sinister avatar, is far more recurrent in traditional tales. Despite its anthropomorphic form, the ogre is a type of carnivorous, predatory animal. The ogre's sense of smell, its weak eyesight, its lack of intelligence, the size of its teeth, its animal appetite, a perverse taste for human flesh, and the fact that it eats its prey raw, are all characteristics associated with wild animals. These same characteristics, only on the reduced scale appropriate for a realistic narrative, are used to describe Abel Tiffauges' physical appearance. He likes to eat raw meat and sea food, and consumes two kilos of meat and five liters of milk per day. He even eats his three favorite pigeons in an act which, in his view, has "un caractère presque religieux, et serait en tous cas le meilleur hommage qui pouvait leur être rendu" (205-6). His pedophilia, inchoate coprophilia,

vampirism (e.g., when he sucks Pelsenaire's cut knees<sup>80</sup>), and fetishism are all characteristics of the polymorphous perversities of a modern ogre.

Several other avatars of this mythic figure are alluded to in the narrative. For example, at the end of the novel Abel is compared to Orion, who was blinded by Oenopion for raping his daughter, and whose sight was restored by Helios when he traveled to the east, carrying the young apprentice Cedalion on his shoulders as a guide (Roberts 44-45). One of an ogre's distinctive traits is his ability to assume the shape of an animal. In a Canadian version of the Blue-Beard story (Delarue and Tenèze 128), the protagonist changes into a giant horse when he is pursuing his victims, becoming a creature that is half man and half horse. Accordingly, Abel's horse, which he rides on his excursion to collect children for the Napola, is called Barbe-Bleue, which stresses the analogy between the ogre and his mount. The horse serves as a substitute for its master, who proudly states that "Barbe-Bleue [...] n'était qu'un alter ego" (401) when he picks up the scent of a child and tracks it down.

Abel's family name also emphasizes his ogreish nature. Tiffauges is the name of the castle of Gilles de Rais, which implies that Abel too is a child-murderer, like the infamous companion of Jean d'Arc, one of the richest noblemen of his time, a practitioner of black magic and a notorious pervert, who kidnapped hundreds of children and teenagers of both sexes — but mostly boys — raped and killed them. It is thought that this historical personage gave rise to the legend of Blue-Beard (Pezechkian-Weinberg 22). On the other hand, the dedication of the book links Abel Tiffauges to Rasputin, another historical 'ogre'

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<sup>80</sup> This episode has a parallel in *Gilles et Jeanne* where Gilles de Rais "goes through a baptisme in blood when he licks the blood from Jeanne's injured knee" (Baroche, "Perpetual" 54).

often reviled in literature, whose historical destiny seems to have been just as ambivalent as the fictional one of the hero of the RA:

A la mémoire diffamée du  
Staretz Grigori Iefimovitch  
RASPOUTINE  
guérisseur du tsarevitch Alexis,  
assassiné pour s'être opposé au  
déchaînement de la guerre de 1914. (9)

Rasputin personifies Tiffauges' phoric ideal: a person who was able to help children in serious danger, when no one else was able to do anything for them. At the same time, Tiffauges praises the Russian for preaching the innocence of sex and opposing the war party in Saint-Petersburg court. However, he is much more impressed by Rasputin's mysterious healing powers, as he was the only person capable of alleviating the suffering of the hemophiliac prince Alexis. The Russian appears in Abel's dreams and opens his eyes to his desired destiny: "Raspoutin m'est apparu, non plus comme prophète et martyr de l'inversion bénigne, mais revêtu des attributs de sa troisième et suprême dignité, celle du grand héros phorique de notre temps [...] portant haut cette flamme blonde, ployé par la souffrance, le tsarevitch Alexis endormi" (165). Thus, Rasputin becomes the ogre Tiffauges wishes to emulate.

The end of RA can be understood as the redemption of the ogre. Abel, transformed into a Saint Christopher figure (who was ready to give his life in order to save the infant Jesus), carries on his shoulders Ephraïm, who thus becomes an image of the Christ child, just as every martyred child reflects the image of the martyred Christ. Abel's conversion

takes place during a routine training exercise, when Arnim d'Ulm, one of his protégés, accidentally detonates a mine he is carrying only ten meters from Abel. The boy is pulverized by the explosion, while Tiffauges, covered from head to toe by Arnim's flesh and blood — and thus 'washed' or 'baptized' — is suddenly illuminated, becoming "un autre homme" (465). His violent conversion parallels that of Saul on the road to Damascus in the Bible (Acts 9.1-8): "Un cyclone écarlate a enfoncé ma figure dans la terre, comme la majesté de la grâce ordonnant cloue au sol le jeune lévite. Et ce cyclone était un petit homme de Kaltenborn" (466). Understanding the explosion as a mystic light enfolding him, he is now prepared to sacrifice his own life in order to save the Jewish boy. His final "phorie" is no longer an act of abduction, but of deliverance. As he carries the boy out of the castle, a phrase remembered from childhood rings through his brain: "pour cette seule fin qu'en la société de leur fortune, son innocence lui servit de garant et de recommandation envers la faveur divine pour le mettre à sauveté" (492). It comes from the story about Alphonse d'Albuquerque, another phoric hero, a Portuguese conquistador who, in a situation of extreme peril at sea, took on his shoulders a young boy as a safeguard, in the hope that the latter's innocence will protect both of them. At the same time, it is the redemption of Abel's own ogreish nature enabling him to reappropriate his childhood innocence. In such a manner, Abel's last act is as noble as that of Saint Christopher. It seems that Tournier gives us a hint here of how necessary it is to accept the ambiguities of the world, because they represent the dynamic tension between the opposite poles without which there is no life possible.

The structure of RA is composed as an initiation quest (Brogniet 51),<sup>81</sup> and the hero's itinerary as "the search for truth" (Davis 34). The protagonist explores numerous dead ends of the labyrinth of this world, becomes a prey of its malicious and perverse forces, but in the end, unexpectedly, achieves a victory against his own inner monster. Nestor, whose namesake in The Iliad is the archetypal wise old man, and who acts as a counterweight to the normal authority structure of school and society, guides the beginning of Abel's quest; his friendship with Tiffauges is contrasted with the latter's complete indifference to him. The chain of initiation thus begins with an image of spiritual filiation: "Nestor... a couvé dans sa grand main pesante et moite mon faible poing, ce petit oeuf osseux et translucide" (48). The image of the egg suggests in many different mythologies the idea of beginning, and, in the context of initiation, of a new beginning and a second birth of the acolyte. And when Nestor quite unexpectedly dies, everything happens as if he is reborn in Abel, who becomes a perfect picture of his first teacher.

Abel's adventures while being a prisoner of war symbolically follow the pattern of traditional narratives, in which the hero leaves everyday world, spends some time in solitude, experiences a symbolical death, and after that advances to a higher level of existence. The outbreak of the war opens up Tiffauges' initiation voyage towards the east, which is in accordance with "the direction of the voyage usually taken in initiation ceremonies," where the "neophyte is [...] reborn as the sun rises in the East" (Edwards 193): "[O]n roulait vers la lumière. *Ex Oriente lux*" (216). Already Germany appears not only like "une terre promise," but also like "le pays des essences pures," which is "tout entière [...]"

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<sup>81</sup> David Gascoigne thinks that RA is a *Bildungsroman*, as the hero undergoes a significant *dépaysement* through a troubled quest for identity, has a mentor (Nestor), and achieves maturity in the end ("Michel" 92-93).

une constellation d'allégories" (242), and where "tout ce qui se passe est symbole, tout ce qui se passe parabole" (404). For that reason, he feels his captivity as "un apaisement proche de l'extase" (Broignet 58). The time spent in the POW camp is one of solitude, as Abel is alienated from his fellow prisoners. His transfer to East Prussia leads him to the last stage of his initiation, for that region is described in the novel as mythic space *par excellence* and is consequently referred to as Hyperborea: "Il lui semblait avoir été transporté dans un autre pays, sur une autre terre, sans doute parce qu'il avait échappé à l'atmosphère du camp, mais aussi grâce à l'étrangeté de la voie à demi souterraine qui l'avait mené jusque-là" (266). Arnim's death symbolically introduces Abel's rebirth and opens the door to his renewal. Like Saul, who used to persecute the Christians before becoming their chief supporter, the predator of children becomes in the end the savior of Ephraim.<sup>82</sup> His self-sacrifice is comparable to that of a mythical giant in traditional stories, so we may expect that it will bring about the beginning of the next historical cycle.<sup>83</sup>

However, the end of the novel can be understood also in a diametrically opposite way, that is, as an "unfulfilled initiation" (Levy 77), and Abel's destiny as "a tawdry, hyper-ironic repetition of the Erl-King motif" (Facknitz 108). Tiffauges' overwhelming obsession with the distant past and his unquestioning identification with the funeral mask of the cadaver preserved in the peat bog — identification which he reaffirms at the very end of the novel, seeing its image emerging in his mind as "l'ultime recours, l'ultime retraite" (491) — actually makes it impossible for him to live up to the phoric ideals (whether those

<sup>82</sup> In Nestorian terms, Tiffauges can be understood as Christ's human body, which is mortal, while Ephraim is "like Christ's divine essence, which does not die" (Petit 44).

<sup>83</sup> David Platten thinks that Tiffauges can be understood "as an unlikely Messiah, bearing the sins of the world on his shoulders, the inference being that only a Second Coming could provide redemption for mankind in the wake of the Holocaust" (104).

of Saint Christopher or Rasputin) he sought to emulate. His atavistic affinity with the man whose body was exhumed by the archeologists is accentuated in the last part of the novel, where Abel gathers boys from the countryside, stealing them from their parents, just as “le roi des aulnes” did in Goethe’s poem. His fixation with images of the pure and frozen past paralyze his will. Although he realizes that purity is the evil inversion of innocence and that all forms of purity — sexual, racial, or spiritual — end in fire, it is nonetheless purity that captivates him most profoundly. The most longstanding expression of this attraction is his fascination with the pristine frigidity of the Canadian tundra. That nostalgic realm, “un monde vierge et inhumain, blanc et pur comme le néant” (56), was brought to him by Nestor from James Oliver Curwood’s novel The Golden Snare. The Nazi regime provides him with the opportunity to realize his dreams of purity, as well as to act out his fantasies of superiority and to indulge his conviction that he is somehow the main performer in a cosmic drama where the forces of good and evil are easily distinguishable. In the condition of captivity, limited freedom of travel and isolation from non-Nazis, Abel’s vision and understanding devolve from the confused to the simplistic. In the end, as the Third Reich comes crashing down, he does not take advantage of the fact that he is a French prisoner of war, but rather sets off without conviction across the land he had so long scoured in search of prey for the elite institution of Kaltenborn. When he enters the swampy grounds of the alder tree grove, feeling the implausibly heavy body of Ephraim’s pushing him down, he knows he must struggle to get out, but instead chooses not to try. He perseveres, but only in closing the gap between himself and the corpse of the Erl-King. Unlike Rasputin or Saint Christopher, he neither supports the child nor carries him to safety. Instead of flying as he

said he hoped to, Tiffauges sinks contentedly into the peat bog “sachant que tout était bien ainsi” (496). His death, then, can be understood not as a sacrifice or a noble service, but rather as a final manifestation of his enslavement. The alder trees which surround him — in contrast to the “palmier” in Saint Christopher’s legend which blooms confirming that the ogre’s sins have been forgiven (Voragine 175) — suggest that the last scene describes his punishment rather than his redemption. The star of David he thinks he sees against the black sky is as illusory as the dignity he feels he has acquired by identifying himself with the image of the Erl-King and embracing the glacial purity of nothingness. He does not redeem himself but cedes to the temptation of the void and to his desire to make his life conform with his obsessions.

On another level, there is no doubt that Tiffauges is tempted by little boys. Emotionally a preadolescent, and having an underdeveloped sexual organ, he has very little interest in genital sex. What he wants is not sexual gratification in the normal sense of the term, but “la phorie,” which signifies the experience of emotional satisfaction that comes from his carrying a child on his shoulders. He discovers it for the first time when he takes in his arms in his garage Jeannot, a little boy who hurt himself, and immediately feels “l’extasie phorique”: “Oui, c’est une manière d’euphorie qui m’a enveloppé des pieds à la tête quand j’eus soulevé dans mes bras le corps inanimé de Jeannot” (112). Nowhere in the novel does Abel molest a child, “but he does seek and obtain a type of fulfillment that falls outside the established categories of homosexual and heterosexual love” (Cloonan, Michel 42). In fact, the original title of the novel was La Phorie, which indicates its central importance in RA. That is confirmed by the writer himself: “Encore une fois, il ne s’agit

pas d'un roman sur le IIIe Reich mais sur la Phorie. Toute lecture qui ne se centre pas sur la Phorie est entachée de contresens" (Vent 118). The word, which is not found in any standard French dictionary, comes from the Greek verb *φέρειν* — "to carry." Tournier uses it to create a whole family of related neologisms, which are encountered one after the other as the story unrolls, such as phallophore, astrophore, superphorie, nécrophorie, antiphorie and euphorie. The act itself can be qualified as "the morally ambiguous act which unites sex and religion" (Petit 40).

Abel, the protagonist's first name, is taken from Biblical myth. Abel was the second son of Adam and Eve, the first shepherd in history, and the victim of the primordial fratricide. Throughout the novel the Cains and the Abels are confronted: "the Cains are sedentary and tend toward complacency, while the Abels are nomads, forever in pursuit of some elusive goal" (Cloonan, "Artist" 194).<sup>84</sup> The extermination of Jews and Gypsies, traditionally nomadic peoples, by the Nazis marks the culmination of that conflict. Tiffauges is an ambiguous Abel as he understands the necessity of moving forward only at the very end of the novel. He is also portrayed as an androgynous figure, symbolizing the need for re-establishing the lost integrity.<sup>85</sup> In Tournier's interpretation of the myth, "wholeness is possible only when we have refound and reincorporated into ourselves *as individuals* the elements stolen from us by God's separation of Adam into man and woman"

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<sup>84</sup> In the short story "La Famille Adam" (Coq 9-18), Tournier gives another explanation of the same myth, presenting Cain as a sedentary agriculturalist and a cultural hero. Since Abel keeps destroying Cain's fields with his herds, a dispute flares up between the two of them in which Cain kills his brother.

<sup>85</sup> Abel's ambiguous sexuality is emphasized by the nickname "Mabel" Nestor gives him, which can be understood in French as "ma belle."

(Worton, "Genesis" 79). Abel's understanding is based on the Biblical myth of Adam who was "formed from the dust of the ground" (Gen. 2.7), and then split into man and woman:

On n'échappe pas à la fascination plus ou moins consciente de l'Adam archaïque, bardé de tout son appareil reproductif, vivant couché, incapable de marcher peut-être, de travailler à coup sûr, perpétuellement en proie à des transports amoureux d'une perfection inouïe — possédant-possédé d'un même élan — si ce n'est sans doute — et encore qui sait — pendant les périodes où il se trouvait enceint de ses propres œuvres. Alors quel ne devait pas être l'équipage de l'ancêtre fabuleux, homme porte-femme devenu de surcroît porte-enfant, chargé et surchargé, comme ces poupées gigognes emboîtées les unes dans les autres. (31-32).

The Fall is thus not presented as the result of the acquisition of the knowledge of good and evil, but rather as the splitting of the original Adam, "faisant choir de l'homme la femme, puis l'enfant, créant d'un coup ces trois malheureux, l'enfant éternel orphelin, la femme esseulée, apeurée, toujours à la recherche d'un protecteur, l'homme léger, alerte, mais comme un roi qu'on a dépouillé de tous ses attributs pour le soumettre à des travaux serviles" (32). In traditional stories, androgynes represent "le symbole le plus adéquat pour exprimer toute quête de plénitude, de totalité, soit qu'on envisage son existence dans un passé mythique, tel Adam Cadmon de certaine tradition hébraïque ou l'homme sphérique de Platon, ou bien qu'on le situe à la fin d'un processus de transmutation, comme nous l'affirment les alchimistes" (Biondi 41). Furthermore, they also appropriate for men a maternal vocation. Abel's scatological obsessions (e.g., when he remarks: "je regarde attendri ce beau poupon dodu de limon vivant que je viens d'enfanter" [144]) signify his desire to appropriate the maternal function, to 'porter l'enfant,' as the words "poupon" and

“enfanter” suggest (Gascoigne, Michel 76). His excitement in carrying little children can be understood in the same way.

Time and space in the novel have both mythic and historical characteristics, adding to the ambiguity of the narrative. Both the protagonist and the narrator often destroy the everyday conception of time. Abel is obsessed with escaping from temporality, which he does by his contact with children. Historical time has no relevance for him, since he does not understand it as bringing progress and change. On the contrary, he sees in it simply the recurrent representation of the same prototypes and believes that he has existed before Earth itself:

Lié à l'univers plus par l'esprit que par le corps, il semble n'accorder aucune importance au temps historique. Bien qu'il participe aux activités du commun des mortels, sa présence est souvent fantomatique. En effet, ses fugues nocturnes du camp de prisonniers ne sont remarquées par personne. Tout comme les personnages fantastiques classiques, Tiffauges figure à la fois à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des catégories temporelles et spatiales réalistes. (Koopman-Thurlings 196)

In a similar vein, Abel is fascinated by East Prussia, seen as “une sorte d'utopie” (Krell 42), or as the mythic land of Hyperborea,<sup>86</sup> which gives him a feeling of emancipation as soon as he arrives there:

À perte de vue, c'était tout alentour une succession d'étangs, coupés de prairies qu'on devinait prêtes dès l'automne à se métamorphoser en marécages. De loin en loin un bouquet de sapins donnait l'échelle et rendait sensible l'immensité de l'horizon noyé de fumées innombrables qui couraient au ras des joncs et des hautes herbes. Tiffauges qui ne connaissait en dehors de Paris que des pays de coteaux ou

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<sup>86</sup> The mythology of Hyperborea was used by other French writers before Tournier. For example, in the stories of Barbey d'Aurevilly it is the mythic country of origin of his heroes (Aurais -Jonchière 29-34).

des campagnes bocagères fut saisi par la grandeur de cette terre. Parce que sa vue s'étendait à l'infini de tous côtés, galopant parmi les brumes, planant au-dessus des bruyères et des miroirs d'eau, il eut un sentiment de liberté qu'il n'avait jamais connu auparavant. (218-19)

Glad that he left behind the society whose codes he resented, Tiffauges becomes now even more conscious of his destiny as he sees it. In this Nordic land of somber forests and misty skies he finds his own personal version of terrestrial paradise (Scheiner 146-47).

Although ethical and natural dimensions are less pronounced in Tournier's mythopoeia than, for example, in Aitmatov's, they are still important. The author implies that only working in harmony with nature can preserve the planet. "Tournier axe sa démarche sur le concept de Nature qui est symbole de destin pour les Stoïciens, d'immanence de Dieu chez Spinoza, signe de l'harmonie de l'univers dans la philosophie leibnizienne, source d'imagination créatrice pour Gaston Bachelard, et de vie chez Nietzsche" (Drouillard 160). His novel exercises an anti-sentimental distancing to highlight a difficult ethical complex whose real bearing is in the reader's historical present. Although some critics, e.g., Saul Friedländer, thought that the novel implicitly endorses Nazi ideology, Tournier explains that what he wanted to show is that the Nazis were not grotesque, but frightening (Koster 154). When Abel encounters Nazi ideology, as expounded by Dr. Blättchen, his disquiet is intense. The doctor's thesis postulates that heredity, the inheritance of blood, is all and that the environment and the cultural context count for nothing in the value of an individual. Abel understands that Blättchen's bloodthirsty enthusiasm for the extermination of the 'racially inferior' could easily be applied to the likes of him. Yet the reader may also observe that Tiffauges himself claims

special status by virtue of belonging to “la race ogresse,” marked by particular physical and behavioral characteristics. Although his concept is different from the Nazi ideal, he also disdains any responsibility to history for consequences of his actions, and claims a metaphysical vocation which feeds on the residue of ancient fears and legends. As Tournier remarked in his fourth novel, “l’humanité est composée d’ogres, d’hommes forts, oui, avec des mains d’étrangleurs et des cannibales. Et ces ogres ayant par leur fratricide originel déclenché la cascade de violence et de crimes qui s’appelle l’histoire, errent de par le monde, éperdus de solitude et de remords” (*Météores*). In such a way, “en plaçant l’essentiel de l’action en Allemagne pendant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, Tournier profite de la concordance des tendances collectives et individuelles. La nature de l’ogre se retrouve dans le nazisme, dans ses rituels et chez des personnages de premier plan, tels Göring et même Hitler” (Degn 141).

Several other myths are woven into the network of connotations, suggestions and association which add to the complexity of the novel. For example, Pegasus, the mythical winged horse, symbolizing the rapidity with which curses are fulfilled (Worton, “Myth-Reference” 303), appears early in the novel as “le cheval ailé de *Mobilgas*” (15), i.e., as a symbol of the oil company, anticipating Abel’s work for the Napola. Abel’s and Ephraim’s escape from the castle is described in terms of the Biblical myth of the Exodus, while the Apocalypse of Saint John provides the background for describing the deaths of the three children, impaled on the heraldic swords of Kaltenborn during the last fight with the Russians.

On a higher spiritual level, Tiffauges represents a typical modern man, disoriented and lost in a hostile world which lacks any kind of spiritual dimension. The only way for him to reestablish his physical and psychic individuality is to undertake a spatio-temporal trip, an itinerary consisting of several stages essential for his self-fulfillment. It is a trip of re-education and rehabilitation that leads him towards his transformation and, beyond that, to transcendence. Tiffauges follows the stages of that trip before he is able to reach the final destination: first he has to break the negative links with his past experiences, and then to go back and recuperate his past. Next, he must learn the qualities that are inherent to human nature, reconstruct his original innocence and finally connect with the Absolute.

Furthermore, RA is also a novel about literature and the role of fiction and fictionalizing in the daily lives of ordinary human beings, "both the fiction consciously conceived by an artist and the bastardized form of fictionalization that transpires in Abel Tiffauges's head" (Cloonan "Artist"). He sees everywhere signs of his destiny; nothing that happens and no object he encounters are, in his view, without a meaning or simply arbitrary. The common understanding that a novelist consciously creates characters and events to make a story he/she wishes to tell leads to a distinction made between the 'make-believe' of literature and what actually happens in 'real' life. The weakness in such distinction is that it overlooks the important role that 'make believe' plays in the everyday lives of all people, because for all of us daydreams and fantasies about the past and the future are a constant, albeit only half-conscious, occurrence; what matters here is that the fictionalizing process is not confined to literature. In such a manner, his diary entries are not a simple transposition of a given reality. "Writing is no longer the passive ancillary to

life: it has overturned its subordination to the task of representation and actively participates in the reality it was deemed to transcribe" (Davis 43-44). The Count von Kaltenborn warns Abel, explaining the power and the danger of symbols:

[I]l y a un moment éffrayant où le signe n'accepte plus d'être porté par une créature, comme un étendard est porté par un soldat. Il acquiert son autonomie, il échappe à la chose symbolisée, et, ce qui est redoutable, *il la prend lui-même en charge*. [...] Lorsque le symbole dévore la chose symbolisée, lorsque le crucifère devient crucifié, lorsqu'une inversion maligne bouleverse la phorie, la fin des temps est proche. Parce qu'alors, le symbole n'étant plus lesté par rien devient maître du ciel. Il prolifère, envahit tout, se brise en mille significations qui ne signifient plus rien du tout. [...] Vous savez, bien entendu, qu'en termes de blason la droite s'appelle gauche, et la gauche droite? (405-6)

Abel Tiffauges's conflation of truth and fiction leads to death and destruction. He creates "a mythic universe with himself at the center" (Cloonan, "Roi" 36). The belief that St. Christopher's college has burnt in order to save him from discipline marks his first step in his way to 'ogrehood,' while the presumption that the reason for the outbreak of the Second World War was the need to save him from being judged for something he did not do, pushes him even further on the way to perdition. He perceives his personal myths as eternal givens which confirm and justify what he believes to be his preordained mission.

The cyclical structure of RA is expressed on several levels, as the narrative is organized around "the constant theme of the triumph of cyclical time over chronology" (Anderson 19). "L'univers mythologique de Tournier est un monde clos où l'espace et le temps se rejoignent en un cercle, où le bas communique avec le haut" (Kyloušek 24). The protagonist explains his circular view of history at the very beginning of the novel: "J'ai

toujours été scandalisé de la légèreté des hommes qui s'inquiètent passionnément de ce qui les attend après leur mort, et se soucient comme d'une guigne de ce qu'il en était d'eux avant leur naissance. L'en deçà vaut bien l'au-delà, d'autant plus qu'il en détient probablement la clé" (13). "His remarks here suggest that his ending will be the same as his beginning: that he will return to "la nuit des temps" from whence he came, and in fact this is exactly one way of interpreting what happens when he sinks into the marshes at the end" (Edwards 164). Both his death and the apocalyptic end of the war bring one historical cycle to an end. However, the beginning of the next one is by no means certain; as in other novels analyzed in this thesis, it remains unclear what is needed to ensure a new beginning. According to myth, creation of a new world can not be achieved without immolation of a human being, best of all of a primordial androgynous giant, but Abel's ambiguous disappearance in the bog does not provide sufficient proof for any optimistic conclusions (Tomé 63).

Tournier is aware of the fact that the very notion of myth has become ambiguous in our society. This means that parodic and fabulous levels of narrative do not necessarily exclude each other, which enables Tournier to rest the action of the novel on both of them, hovering between the mimetic fictional and the postmodern ludic. Setting the reader at odds with the point of view of the central character, who pursues his own vision of self-fulfillment into realms of irresponsibility and brutality, the author ironically draws attention to Abel's self-delusions, and thus explores the causality of a period marked by a collective irrationality and an insane brutality. Although myth often "illuminates for a moment the miseries of our condition," and "gives meaning to our lives" (Tournier, qtd. in Bouloumié,

“Germanic” 142), it can also be dangerous if understood literally. Thus, “the myth [Abel] thought he was pursuing turned out to be indeed a myth” (Cloonan, “Roi” 36), but it led to massive destruction of human lives. A grotesque combination of clownish action and demonic outcome, RA actualizes the myth of the ogre in terms of Nazism, the outright exploitation of men by other men to the point of making fabric out of human hair and using human beings as laboratory animals. It can be read as the mythical itinerary of an ogre towards the — achieved or unachieved — redemption that would transform him into Saint Christopher, or as “une enorme farce au destin” (395), a farce which is underlined by the unexpectedly brilliant career of a Tiffauges’ doubles — Victor the Madman, “maître de Seegutten” (340-343) — whose success could be accomplished only in a country completely turned upside down by war.

Tournier understands the “role of the artist” as “that of ‘buffon’ (clown or jester), that is, one who can tell the truth to those in power” (Koster 211). His mythological novel serves as a search to find some sense of this world, even if what he finds can only challenge the established order. The myth of the ogre evokes the war with its murderous ideologies that lead to the massacres of children, and its actualization of myth sometimes has a parodic effect because of the inversion and the familiarizing of the archetypal figure. This means that Tournier uses myth not to integrate his heroes in their culture, but rather to subversively and iconoclastically change the way they — and we — look at it. Myths in his work is always characterized by the ambiguity of real-life events, forming intricate structures whose dual purpose is to enrich and support our lives. However, they must be

treated as open-ended constructions produced by human beings, and not as eternal unchangeable truths..

Like Harris, Tournier “édifie une ensemble où tout est lié par des liens nécessaires et signifiants pour instaurer un système cohérent mais ambivalent” (Pezechkian-Weinberg 20). In the works of these authors “la fonction des [mythes] n’est sûrement pas de nous soumettre aux ‘raisons d’État’ que l’éducation, le pouvoir, la police dressent contre l’individu, mais tout au contraire de nous fournir des armes contre elles. Le mythe n’est pas un rappel à l’ordre, mais bien plutôt, un rappel au désordre” (Vol 31-32). At the same time, both RA and PP aim to be, “par le moyen même du mythe, une initiation au réel” (Mieke Taat, qtd. in Korthals Altes, “Mythique” 677). In other words, the dynamic of myth provides humans with imaginative projections of their aspirations, contestation of social imperatives and enrichment of their vital space, thus giving them a sense of stability in a world which is far from being stable. The final epiphany in both novels is highly ambiguous, and the messages of the authors exist “only as an epiphany” (Sbiroli 123). However, they do offer an image of hope, in spite of the fact that their ends are left open in an attempt to point out just how uncertain is any possibility of new beginnings.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **WILSON HARRIS'S PALACE OF THE PEACOCK: WRITER AS TRICKSTER AND SHAMAN**

When you come here on pilgrimage, don't bore us with  
Your stories of judges and human laws; bring wine!  
Hafez (169)

So our campaign slogan must be: reform of consciousness,  
not through dogma, but through the analysis of that mystical  
consciousness which has not yet become clear to itself.

Karl Marx  
("Letter to Ruge," qtd. in Drake 169)

It is no exaggeration to say that Wilson Harris (1921- ) is one of the most original and significant writers of the second half of the twentieth century, and, at the same time, a very difficult one to read, as his works "frustrate every normal expectation of novel readers" (Kinkead-Weekes, "Bone" 141). Harris ignores the usual conventions of narrative fiction to such an extent that it is not always easy for his audience to follow the plot. He rejects traditional realism, arguing that such mode of writing endeavors to persuade readers of the inevitability of given ways of behavior. Although also a noted poet, critic and essayist, Harris's main contribution to literature is by way of fiction, largely in the form of novels: in his fifty-five-year-long writing career he has published only twelve short stories but no less than nineteen novels. One of the main preoccupations of Harris — and of many other Caribbean writers and intellectuals of this century — is examining the origins of New World history and culture, and appeasing creatively the longing for what he calls a "tribal past" and Edouard Glissant calls "le désiré historique" (*Discours* 18). They both feel very deeply "the West Indian's sense of rootlessness" (Gilkes xi), and the consequent need to formulate a racial and cultural identity. West Indian societies were, in a way, forced to come to terms with their own broken cultural ties with the past and their new racial and

cultural links with the present, which resulted in what was called “the search for a cultural pedigree” (Mason ix) and “the quest for personal identity” (Martin Carter, qtd. in Gilkes xi).

This longing Harris felt for the first time during his explorations in the interior of Guyana, when his first encounter with the jungle profoundly affected his art. He experienced, in his own words, “the shock of great rapids, vast forests and savannas — playing through memory to involve perspectives of imperiled community and creativity reaching back into the Pre-Columbian mists of time” (qtd. in Maes-Jelinek, “Wilson” 447). Behind this intensely colored landscape lay a nature drained by heat and drought, flooded by hurricane, cataclysmic with earthquake and volcanic eruptions. Harris became aware not only of natural presences, but, more importantly, also of the ancestral inhabitants of the forest, the Amerindians, of their culture and mythology, which he later tried to recreate in The Age of the Rainmakers and The Sleepers of Roraima. Harris’ concern with the problem of Caribbean consciousness led him to believe that, while Europe remained locked in materialism and moribund tradition, the relative emptiness of the Caribbean basin offered a profound potential for regeneration: “the very bareness of the West Indian world reveals the necessity to examine closely the starting point of human societies.” West Indian man, free from a false individualism, can remain in harmony with “all the levels of his life,” and be at one with “the rhythms within the welter of his existence” (Harris, Tradition 31). In his novel Carnival, the protagonist Jonathan Wehl, led by Everyman Masters through an Inferno of colonial history and the Purgatory of cleansed vision, discovers that “the twentieth century was a century of realism that failed entirely to plumb the reality of the

pagan in ourselves" (Carnival 109). Consequently, Harris replaced the European worldview with his own personal vision, rooted in his experience of the open spaces of Guyana, and in the consciousness and practices of its autochthonous cultures. He managed to find an adequate tool for the reconstitution of the Caribbean psyche in creative imagination, whose regenerating role he believes to be very important for the future of human civilization; it can be defined satisfactorily only "within a deepening cycle of exploration" (Harris, Tradition 32). According to him,

imaginative fiction is a genuine initiation into kinds of knowledge which cannot be borne unless we go through the initiation step by step and begin to see ourselves for what we are, the things we do without intending to do them and at the same time the joy and ecstasy which we can bear without committing ourselves to some extremity which would destroy us. (Fabre 9)

It follows that one can attain authenticity only through the workings of imagination.

Harris studied West Indian carnival celebrations and Haitian vodun rituals developed as creative responses to the traumas of history. The limbo dance and vodun represent for him "a profound art of compensation which seeks to re-play a dismemberment of tribes and to invoke at the same time a curious psychic re-assembly of the parts of the dead god or gods" ("History" 9), involving "a crucial inner re-creative response to the violations of slavery and indenture and conquest" (11). They "break the tribal monolith of the past and re-assemble an inter-tribal or cross-cultural community of families" (14). Obviously, such popular manifestations belong to the same liminal space in which the author attempts, using creative imagination, to build his mythical framework. The folk culture of the Caribbean is thus one of the primary sources of his inspiration. Especially

important for him is the long tradition of trickster tales about Anancy the Spider, the figure which has “undergone many complex transformations in West Indian literature since his Middle Passage crossing as trickster-hero of the West African folk tale” (Tiffin 47).

In such a manner, all novels of Wilson Harris can be regarded as successive stages in one unfinished quest for a new beginning and for a new and vital society. While they appear on the surface to be quite different in form and texture, the truth is that they relate as repetitions with variations — which he himself dubbed “rehearsals” — of one long drama of consciousness with “varying emphases on dismemberment and metamorphosis” (Fabre 15). This means that Harris’s novels tend to return to the same themes and images, while his characters are like migratory birds flying from one world to another, and from one work to the other. As Hena Maes-Jelinek explains: “it becomes increasingly clear that, however different from its predecessor in plot, subject and setting, each novel is a new installment of a ‘work in progress’: themes and metaphors which are briefly presented in one novel receive a gradually fuller treatment in later ones” (Naked 14).

Drawing from various traditions and tirelessly “exploring the culturally mixed heritage of the Caribbean” (Wilentz 57), this “most eclectic of writers” (Gregory Shaw, “Novelist” 143) constantly blends in his works characters, plots, and imagery from many different mythologies: Native Indian (above all Arawak and Carib), Greek, African, East Indian and European. Like Tournier’s, his works often form a complex revision of some crucial texts, important for the history and culture of the region which interests him. Thus, for example, The Carnival Trilogy reinterprets three essential texts of Western culture: The Odyssey (in Carnival), The Divine Comedy (in The Infinite Rehearsal), and Faust (in The

Four Banks of the River of Space). Harris' unique conception of fictional time, character and event is combined with complex narrative technique which blends concept and metaphor, abstract and concrete. Although his works are sometimes associated with magical realism, and although his approach shares certain characteristics with writings of authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and Alejo Carpentier (Booker and Juraga 153), Harris is, ultimately, a completely original author, operating outside of any literary movement. The density of the symbolic meaning of his fiction "added significantly to the concept of myth in literature" (Gowda 174). In the beginning of his career, before moving on to fiction, he wrote poetry which offers the same hermetic images later developed in his novels. Like Derek Walcott in Omeros, he gave the names of Greek gods and heroes to his Guyanese personae, "supplying them with an immediately recognizable mythical dimension while pointing to the significance for the community of the everyday figures he was thus elevating to a heroic or divine status" (Adams 72). His novels, from PP to Jonestown, are full of plots and characters which echo the plots and characters of many different mythologies. The trickster figure first appeared in his poetry, in the second section of Eternity to Season, where the archetypal native is represented, in the setting of a small village in Guyana, as a drunken prophet, a clown wakened out of a century of sleep, and, at the same time, as a possessed initiate who bears the mark of Anancy. This carnival figure already shows the ambivalence and the liminal tendencies typical of Wilson Harris' mature works.

Palace of the Peacock is the first volume of Harris' Guyana Quartet, which also includes The Far Journey of Oudin, The Whole Armour, and The Secret Ladder. It is

undoubtedly his most fascinating text, containing almost all of his basic themes and anticipating many of his later designs. As the central piece of his *œuvre*, it is the most widely read of his numerous works and — for many — his masterpiece, hailed as becoming “increasingly significant within the development of Caribbean literature” (Louis James 171). The novel is full of “vivid but completely original [...] imagery and symbolism.” Characterized by “the rich suggestiveness of a poem” (Boxill 381), it “exploits creative symbolism toward the search for individual and collective wholeness” (Dieke 291). The inward journey it relates can be understood as a quest with many significances. Most importantly, it represents the search for illumination or true selfhood, and for the reintegration of the individual psyche. The plot of PP, centered upon a journey made by Donne and his racially mixed crew, which symbolizes the common history and destiny of the many races of Guyana, retells the myth of Eldorado, one of the most important myths of the post-Columbian Caribbean, functioning as a link between the past and the present. Harris’ version of this ‘ur-myth’ strikingly resembles accounts of actual expeditions, most importantly in tone (Drake 5). The greed, the hysteria, the self-destructive stupidity and brutality of the European crew abusing the Indian who is trying to answer their questions, the wanton disregard of their own and others’ welfare in the pursuit of fabled wealth and power, the suggestion of delirium and disorientation at the end of their terrible adventure — all of these echo throughout PP. The absolute validity of ‘colonial conventions’ is called into question, the purpose being to offer a glimpse into a reality not bounded by our conventional understanding of it. Such insight gained from altering what Harris calls the “settled fabric” will constitute a resource for dealing with the psychological and cultural

crises of the modern era in the region. Harris recaptures and converts the myths that have informed European imperialism from the outset and reinterprets them alongside the mythic systems of the various cultures which this imperialism displaced. In his novel he ties the European spiritual vision of the cosmos to the Amerindian one. It is the archetype of the repeated invasion of Guyana and the abortive meetings between the conquerors and the native population. Real landscapes of the journey coincide with inner states of mind through spatialization of psychic content:

External and internal

forces are separate illusions that move

beyond the glitter and the gloom with a knife to cut inner and outer times from  
each other

as they weave and interweave in the tapestry of life.

(Harris, Eternity 15)

Harris is able to convey at the same time both a realistic incident and the vague, numinous atmosphere of a dream, and to create a “metaphoric symphony” (McDougall 104) filled with many reverberations and echoes. The novel gives the impression of a maze with complex evocations. It ends with Donne reaching a momentary apotheosis of vision at the instant of his death in a timeless place of supreme liberation where all principles of opposition cease.

The plot follows a journey made in an open boat by Donne — a white Creole rancher with a reputation for cruelty and hard efficiency — and his racially mixed crew in search of the Amerindian settlement, or the Mission, deep in the forest to which Donne’s entire Amerindian work-force has fled because of his ill-treatment of them. The crew

includes Schomburgh the bowman, his assistant Wishrop, the Indian guide Vigilance, his young black cousin Carroll, Cameron, Jenings the mechanic, and the da Silva twins. The story is recounted largely by an unnamed first-person narrator who at times becomes omniscient. When the novel opens, the narrator has come into the interior from the coast to join his brother Donne, who is already a legend in the region. Expelled from school and coastal society for his wild behavior, Donne has set himself up in the interior of Guyana, like Conrad's Kurtz, as ruler over a vast area of land that he works by impressing Amerindians into forced labor. Yet, when the narrator arrives, no one is to be found except Donne and Mariella, his presumably Amerindian much-abused mistress.

Donne learns that his labor force has vanished into the forest, to carry out a rite that must be undertaken every seven years to ward off drought. He flies into a rage, assembles a boat crew, and sets off with them and his brother/double/narrator along a turbulent Guyanese river in search of the "laboring folk." The crew, after an arduous journey, often carrying the boat overland through 'portages' in the forest, finally arrive at the Mission of Mariella only to find that the Amerindians — many of whom had earlier rowed out to meet them, out of curiosity — have again fled. The crew prepares to set off once more in search of them, taking along as a guide an old Arawak Indian woman who has been left behind by her people. She warns them that although they can overtake the fugitives in seven days, the journey on the river is extremely dangerous. Donne nevertheless insists on going ahead, and after spending the night camped at Mariella, the expedition sets out in the morning.

During the journey which lasts seven days, the crew encounters the rapids where a series of misfortunes begin. It is torn by internal strife, and its ranks are thinned by

accidents and through altercations among themselves. Carroll, the youngest crewman, falls overboard and drowns; Schomburgh, the oldest, dies in his sleep; yet another man is lost overboard, while Cameron is killed by da Silva in a fight. The others all meet their deaths trying to climb the rock-face of an enormous waterfall. Their boat falls into the basin of the waterfall and drifts away. On the realistic level, the novel seems to end in a disaster, and yet the lost crew members reappear, in a strange vision of a strange paradise that concludes the book.

This simple story is, however, only the most superficial level of a multilayered novel. The sequential plot is only one line of movement in this complex book, and not the most important one. The plot line is contradicted from the opening paragraph, when Donne is shot off his horse under the narrator's eyes, killed, as we are told, by Mariella, a figure who throughout the novel appears in various human and natural forms. But the narration is deliberately constructed so that it is impossible to determine whether the narrator is awake or asleep, alive or dead. Much of the beauty and artistic coherence of the novel derives from the consistency with which Harris weaves his tissue of cross-associations. Such a narrative technique seeks to establish oppositions, and then to undermine the status of relations of oppositions as a fundamental attribute of reality. The vision of paradise with which the book concludes constitutes a resolution of these oppositions. One such opposition is established between Donne and his brother-narrator, who represent, at the same time, one consciousness, but opposing, even antagonistic qualities.

The narrative is full of historical references to the early European quest for gold and the consequent conflict with the indigenous Caribs, as well as to the later arrival of African,

East Indian, Portuguese and other populations as a result of the slave trade, indentured labor and migration. The river voyage symbolically reenacts the historical voyage of the people of Guyana. The 'voyage' is the embodiment of the idea of a nation and a people "all in the same boat." Donne is clearly meant to represent the early European colonizer, as the Elizabethan resonance in his name, and his role as harsh ruler of the land and its indigenous people suggest. His crew is made up of a mixture of races (African, Amerindian, European) which, in their complex, genetic relationship, constitute a truly Guyanese society: "Cameron's great-grandfather had been a dour Scot, and his great-grandmother an African slave and mistress. [...] Schomburgh's great-grandfather had come from Germany, and his great-grandmother was an Arawak American Indian. The whole crew was one spiritual family [...] knotted and bound together in the enormous bruised head of Cameron's ancestry and nature as in the white unshaven head of Schomburgh's age and presence" (PP 40). The quest of Donne and the crew is therefore related to the first excursion of European conquistadors into the interior of the country, "long before they had conquered and crushed the region they ruled" (24). It also echoes the modern Guyanese dream of "repossessing the interior," which can be understood both as the developing of an extensive and potentially rich hinterland, and as the establishment of a genuine sense of cultural and psychological roots. Like Donne, the crew recognizes that only the Amerindians have any real title to the land, and in seeking the Mission (called "Mariella") they are in fact yearning for a sense of belonging to the land. They therefore represent the complex mixture of cultures and races which constitute modern Guyana, crowded together, living on the narrow track of coast land, while the Amerindians, true heirs of the land, continue an elusive, little regarded

existence in the vast hinterland. The journey, in the novel, is an imaginative attempt to discover and come to terms with this other, interior life.

The journey inland is also a spiritual journey, as the epigraphs from Hopkins' poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland" — about another boat journey in which death is seen as a spiritual regeneration — and from John Donne's "Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness" suggest. The journey takes seven days, which is the period of the Creation in Genesis. Although all members of the crew die in the end, they all are symbolically reborn through a process of self-knowledge. The death of each member of the group enlarges and illuminates the lives of the others: "So Donne had died in the death of Wishrop; Jennings's primitive abstraction and slackening will was a reflection of the death of Cameron; Schoomburgh had died with Carroll. And da Silva saw with his own sagging fool's life [...] like one who had adventured and lived on scraps [...]" (123). Donne and the rest of the survivors, hanging precariously to the slippery rock-face at the side of the great waterfall, experience an 'epiphany,' an incredibly beautiful vision, first of Christ, helping a wounded tapir and occupying himself with carpentry, then of the Madonna and Child through the torrent of water. Donne is struck by the Madonna's gentleness and grace, by Christ's concern for the ugly tapir, and by his not shunning manual activity. He begs to enter Christ's world but is not allowed to, for his future is to be one not devoted to religion exclusively, but to art informed by morality. He proceeds further up the cliff, and on the seventh day enters the Palace of the Peacock, thus experiencing his ultimate epiphany. He learns the necessity of an all-embracing vision, which does not ignore the savannah, although he is now in the Palace on the top of the mountain. The ugly tapir must be as important as the wounded,

ethereal parrot. Significantly and paradoxically he attains the panoramic perspective of the elevated Palace by falling back into the world of the savannah. Taken together with the peacock's color spectrum, the many eyes of the peacock's tail, and the heavenly music which pervades the palatial rooms, the Palace paradoxically suggests both oneness and multiplicity, qualities the protagonist now considers important for the artistic vision. The rest of the crew also fall to their deaths, but "the truth was they had all come home at last to the compassion of the nameless unflinching folk" (143). Their interior journey leads ultimately to life-in-death, as their outward experience had been a form of death-in-life. It is, in effect, a spiritual re-birth. But this process of death and rebirth, like that of the rhythm of nature itself, is continually going on; so we find that Donne and his crew are the descendants of an identical group of travelers long dead, whose ghostly presence still manifests itself and influences this new, yet in a way identical, journey: "The whole crew was one spiritual family living and dying together in a common grave out of which they had sprung again from the same soul and womb as it were" (40). Each member of the new crew is aware of a past self, and the journey is therefore a second chance, a second birth. Part Three, "The Second Death," which stands, structurally, at the middle of the book, begins with the following sentence: "We stood on the frontiers of the known world, and on the self-same threshold of the unknown." They are poised on the brink of a new self-awareness through a 'second death' which occurs, paradoxically, at the end of the seven-day period of creation-like journey. The "peculiar feeling of absence of living persons in the savannahs where [Donne] governed" (24) at the opening of the novel, gives away at the end to "an

intuitive feeling that the savannahs — though empty — were crowded” (144). A new beginning, a new and vital society, is clearly being evoked.

This does not exhaust the novel's meaning, however, for, running parallel with this theme of society's spiritual re-birth through common suffering and the resultant new vision, is the psychological and alchemical theme of the re-integration of the individual psyche. The living crew is twinned not only with an identical dead crew, and Harris makes sure that we are never certain for long which crew is which, but certain of their members are, often by hereditary links, related to some other member who answers to a psychic need or lack. For example, Donne and the Dreamer/narrator are brothers, the one extroverted, harsh, and a ruler of men; the other ineffectual, introverted, but having sympathy and understanding for others. Carroll is the illegitimate son of old Schomburgh whose longing and insecurity are in contrast to the boy's natural warmth and sense of joy. Vigilance, the “seer,” whose job as a “look-out” is, in fact, to give warning of hidden dangers such as “tacoubas,” is the antithesis of Jennings, the practical engineer who mans the outboard motor. At the mid-point of the novel, in Part Three, the crew stands poised on the brink of death and self-discovery in the ‘War Office,’ which is the name of a notoriously treacherous rapids. In other words, they are about to enter the “straits of memory,” as the rapids are called (73), experiencing greater self-awareness and compassion, and about to be re-united with their other selves. The actual process of arousal — the fight to survive the almost certain death in the rapids — which serves as the stimulus forcing Donne and crew to come to terms with their inner selves, is a prelude to ‘authentic’ existence. The description of the crew's struggle to keep afloat in the churning water of the rapids is couched in language that

evokes the mythical crew of Ulysses' boat, their ears stopped against the sirens' song. The old Amerindian woman becomes in their eyes a seductive siren, symbolizing their longing for the security of land, but she also guides them to safety, because their ears are stopped and they are not therefore seduced into self-concern through fear of disaster. They are able to assimilate the catastrophe, to see with clearer vision that the apparent oppositions of pursuer/pursued, oppressor/oppressed, ruler/ruled are no more than a part of "that harmonious rounded miracle of spirit which the world of appearances had never truly known" (72). When Carroll falls overboard to his death, he is seen as a sacrifice through which they become aware of the possibility of an inner harmony in life. The song they all hear when he vanishes in the rapids is "an indestructible harmony within the tragedy" (75). It is the sirens' song, the beautiful music they will all hear again at the 'Palace of the Peacock' when, after they have all met their deaths on the seventh day of their journey from the Mission, the work of self-integration is complete and the narrator's voice returns to comment on the authentic existence which is now possible: "I had never before looked on the blinding world in this trusting manner — through an eye I shared only with the soul, the soul and mother of the universe" (146). The harmony of Carroll's music at the end of the novel is a reflection of the psychic integration which has been the main purpose of the interior journey, and the ego and unconscious, the outer and inner vision, the self and the Other, are, at last, reunited.

The eight members of the crew represent overlapping but distinct impulses of the ambivalent protagonist, who acts as the narrator, whereas his feelings are externalized and dramatized by conversations and actions of other characters. For example, when the

narrator, after helping the crew haul their boat around a waterfall, wanders into the jungle where he is first intoxicated by the natural world, but then soon so terrified by the jungle that he screams for help, Carroll and Schomburgh, who come to his rescue, function as aspects of his psyche and their conversation depicts his own confused thoughts. The novel is thus used to portray, to explore and to recreate the individual psyche itself, indicating that the personal reintegration must precede and so make possible a change in society at large. A unity must be established of present, past and future if the present is to give birth to a new whole human person replacing the broken isolated individual of today.

Harris's primary concern with the reintegration of the divided psyche as a solution to the tyranny of a static, destructive opposition of contraries is clear from his approach to fiction as an experimental, associative art which seeks "a strange and subtle goal, melting pot" within the theme of "a living drama of conception" (Harris, Tradition 32). "Herein lies the significance of Harris's interest in the Corpus Hermeticum and the Medieval and Renaissance cabbalists" (Gilkes 36). The seven-day interior journey in PP may be seen in the light of the seven stages of the alchemical process during which a chaotic mass is immersed in water and subjected to a controlled series of chemical and physical changes through a whitening or purifying stage to the final 'peacock color' (*Cauda Pavonis*) which symbolize unity within diversity and the 'wedding of the opposites.'

Christian mythological tradition is present in the novel through many allusions. The number seven, which has mystical significance in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, defines the length of the voyage (seven days); also, the rite to ward off drought must be performed every seven years. Mariella's name suggest the name Mary, the female principle in

Christianity. The figure of the carpenter near the end of the novel, the vision of the house of many mansions recalling the promise attributed to Jesus (John 14:2-3), and the Madonna figure with the child are other suggestive images. The idea of journey toward salvation is also consistent with Christian belief. However, the overall structure of the novel does not correspond to Christian ideology. The crew seems to be on its second journey along the same route, and there is no suggestion that any limits exist to the number of times the journey can or must be taken. It is not any sin in the sense of transgression against some divine ordinance, but rather blindness — sometimes willful — which keeps the crew repeating its journey. Thus, this spiritual journey has more characteristics of Eastern and of shamanistic religions than of Christianity, such as the idea of reincarnation, of circular time, and of the play of karma. In the same way, Mariella represents, at the same time, aspects of Mary from the Bible, and elements of much older traditions. She symbolizes Nature, the Americas, the Amerindians, the land itself. She is opposed to Donne as female to male, and as Amerindian to European invader. She is not merely a subservient woman, as the first scene of the novel, her killing of Donne, implies. In that role she is “suggestive of Kali the Destroyer in the Hindu pantheon” (Drake 69). Her act is not simply one of vengeance; in fact, it has cosmic overtones: the killing is inevitable given the behavior of Donne, who violates nature. Mariella is also portrayed as anima in the Jungian sense, that is, as a force that commands that aspect of existence which is clearly identified as the male complement to her femaleness: “One is what I am in music — buoyed and supported above dreams by the undivided soul and anima in the universe from whom the world of dance and creation first came, the command to the starred peacock who was instantly transported to know and

to hug himself his true invisible otherness and opposition, his true alien spiritual love without cruelty and confusion in the blindness and frustration of desire" (116).

The Dreamer sees the crew on its way to the interior moving "like upright spiders, half-naked, scrambling under a burden of cargo they were carrying ashore" (22). One of them, Wishrop, is specifically a trickster figure. When the rest of the crew indicate that they prefer not to go any further, this man of the world, who has lived among murderers and whores but nevertheless has some "faith and optimism," uses his powers of persuasion urging them to continue. In the moment of his death Wishrop, as a true trickster-transformer who can never die, seems to be transformed into a spider who is seen ascending precipitous cliffs above the rapids. Later on in the novel, the symbolism of the spider-trickster emerges at the point when the expedition approaches the Palace. "The boat still crawled, driven by the naked spider of spirit," we are told, and then "the engine lost its vulgar mechanical fervor and its enthusiasm was dwindling into an indefatigable revolving spider, hopeless and persistent" (81). This conjures up the 'spider-transubstantiation' in which the shaman initiates the neophyte through a process in which the subject is in a transitional state — in limbo — and in which the knowledge obtained changes the inmost nature of the neophyte. Harris uses the image of the trickster to underline the problem of opposites and to point to a resolution of the cleavage in the psyche of humans.

The interior boat journey in PP parallels the archetypal night journey of the hero, particularly the Aztec hero, Quetzalcoatl,

"who is a demiurgic cosmic figure. [...] In his ascent of the cliffs Donne has a vision of a demiurgic carpenter/craftsman who is a compound of many myths, but who is finally representative of the archetypal self as artificer and creator and destroyer of

worlds. [...] The demiurge is also a fertility figure whose appearance activates a riotous carnival release of birds and beasts and vegetation, populating and animating the formerly dead and sterile consciousness of Donne, reactivating the cycle of birth and death and re-birth, rhythms of nature within the cosmic rhythms and harmony of the universe, so that death itself becomes integrated into the regenerative cycle of the seasons. (Gregory Shaw, "Wilson" 168)

In such a manner, the whole adventure becomes a psychological and alchemical quest for inner harmony. By aligning his novel's theme with the traditional and archetypal motif of the inner journey, and by using proliferating images and symbols, Harris is able to expand the boundaries of his novel almost indefinitely. The reverberations and echoes set up within the novel go on multiplying in the reader's mind well beyond the actual limits of the story. If the protagonists in the novel "regress into a catastrophic past in order to come to terms with the destructive elements in it," it is primarily in order to "discover its potentially creative elements, the invisible spark that can redeem, modify the effects of the past, and that makes it possible to forestall the recurrence of similar catastrophes in the future" (Maes-Jelinek, "Faces" 90).

Another key myth in the novel is that of Eldorado. Its name comes from an ancient religious rite, extinct even before the arrival of the Europeans, in which Amerindians anointed their king with oil and powdered him with gold dust, and then carried him to a sacred lake, where he washed off, simultaneously throwing offerings of emeralds and gold into the waters (Webb 64). European explorers of the interior were searching for such fabulous riches for several centuries before realizing that it does not actually exist. Harris

uses the myth to suggest that some important treasure can still be found, but that it is spiritual, and not material.

His novelistic technique, characterized by ambivalence, polyvalent narration, multiplication of echoes, carnival performance, antisyzygy, and the use of *doppelgänger*, hallucinations and not-always-obvious disguises, is — doubtlessly — that of the trickster-artist, as Joyce Jonas explains:

Indeed, one could describe Harris's art as being a complex of Anancy strategies... He faces both ways in perpetual ambiguity, inviting — even provoking — intercourse between inside and outside and commerce across the boundaries of structured concepts. Interstitiality characterizes Harris's fiction. He negotiates that narrow margin between death-in-life and life-in-death, between mask and face, historical event and ideological reflection, materialism and idealism. Harris's threshold art may well have as its Muse the trickster spider-man, Anancy, of Afro-West Indian folklore. (30)

Harris wants his readers to involve themselves in the text, through continuous wrestling with the medium he employs. He forces readers to make the connections and establish the meaning, a process which is quite similar to the West Indian tradition of folk tale and ritual performance. "The ground of reality in an absolute sense may be changeless, but it remains for us something which is unnamable, something which cannot be structured" (Thieme 18). This means that the readers have to negotiate the realm of ambiguity and paradox through their own rites of passage. The trickster-artist provokes the dialogue which brings creative disorder into the oppressive structures that dehumanize our world. However, Harris's voice is ultimately hopeful, which sets him apart from other writers analyzed in this study, and he views the end of a centering tradition, which encompasses and grounds

all meaning, as a welcome, although dangerous and painful, transitional period for the entire world.

The fiction of Wilson Harris can be described as being "at once mythical, metaphorical, allegorical, philosophical, and dramatic" (Pagnouille 76). Believing that "fiction can be proven or validated by live myth, living fossil-strata," ("Validation" 51) he is preoccupied with the eternal cyclic existence of man. Such an approach results in his using of the cyclic and circular patterns which are hallmarks of mythic modes of writing, and which lay at the base of all six novels discussed here. His richly textured and multi-layered works, PP being the best example, have a protean, metamorphic form striking the reader as a dreamlike experience. Drawing from local folklore, biblical and classical motifs, traditions and historical facts, Harris creates a model of the world which is, at the same time, typically Caribbean and universally human. Obstinate refusing to admit the fragmentation of experience and rejecting the ideology of individualism, he attempts to find "a new, comprehensive mythology that would support his vision of a unified consciousness" (Gilkes 23), capable of sustaining new beginnings and helping the reader to discover hidden layers of signification.

## AFTERTHOUGHTS

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

William Shakespeare (Hamlet I.v.166)

In the nineteenth century the problem was that *God is dead*; in  
the twentieth century the problem is that *man is dead*.

Erich Fromm (312)

The novels presented in this study attest to the richness, meaningfulness, variety, and significance of mythopoeia in narrative fiction in the second half of the twentieth century. Ever since modernists revived interest in myth in the early nineteen-hundreds, initiating the “mythic method,” this approach grew in importance, resulting in a constant stream of literary production characterized by employment of traditional stories and creation of myth-like structures. After the Second World War, especially in the third quarter of the century, it flourished worldwide. It was present in its last decades too — although perhaps not as much as in the previous period — as indicated by a number of important mythopoeic works published during that time (see p. 64 above). In the course of the century aspects and attitudes of literary mythopoeia changed, so that, for example, mythopoeia in the period studied here is different both from the modernist one, represented by works such as James Joyce’s Ulysses and D. H. Lawrence’s The Plumed Serpent, and from the one developed in the eighties and nineties, exemplified by Mario Vargas Llosa’s El hablador and Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses. Although myth criticism, which was expected to provide a theoretical basis for myth in literature, failed on account of its reductionism, mythopoeic writing continued to thrive in many contemporary literatures around the globe.

In spite of the fact that myth was intensively studied in several academic disciplines throughout the twentieth century, and that innumerable theoretical works were devoted to it, a majority of definitions of the concept of myth are not very useful, most often because of their limited vision. Many of them are focused only on their author's particular field of interest (e.g., Freud; Malinowski), whereas others tend to be too narrow in scope (e.g., Frazer; Bascom), too rigid in outlook (e.g., Cassirer; Lévi-Strauss), or much too fanciful (e.g., Bergson; Campbell). Even those definitions that come close to the mark are often too loose (e.g., Kirk; Burkert), or incomplete (e.g., Watts; Dupriez). Some authors overestimate the range of myth (e.g., Eliade; Jung), while others exaggerate in the opposite direction, interpreting it merely as a type of propaganda or a scheme for deception (e.g., Barthes). Apart from the unsuccessful attempts to define myth, numerous misuses of the term have also cast a shadow of doubt on the concept itself, resulting in views purporting that myth does not really exist, but is only an academic construct. The definition proposed here, i.e., the explication of myth through delineation of its semantic field (see pp. 45-50 above), has the advantages of being able to comprise all of its important traits, and, at the same time, of being applicable not only to literary myth, but also to classical myths and myths of small-scale societies. As was shown, both the traditional stories retold in WS and MR and the central structural devices of IN, ND, RA and PP have typical mythic structure, content and function, as described in my definition. Of course, myth remains — on account of its multiple secondary, tertiary or metaphorical usages by many authors — a notion slippery to handle. Nonetheless, it is certainly a valuable concept, denoting a special type of fictional

narrative which exists in many cultures, indispensable for literary studies, as the analysis of the six novels in this thesis suggests.

Relevant and appropriate examination of mythopoeic works must address all aspects of the art of writing, such as form, theme, plot, style and imagery, instead of just identifying recurrent mythic patterns and 'archetypes'; only in such a way can the pitfalls of traditional myth criticism be avoided. Daphne Patai explains it as follows:

The use made of myth in a given novel is but one facet of a complex, interrelated whole. This is why I devote so much attention to narrative structure and technique, rather than focusing exclusively on myth; to do the latter would be to treat myth as a disembodied feature of these works. A novel's ideology is conveyed through the totality of its elements. (40)

The 'world-wide spread of mythopoeia' means that myths are used in literary endeavors in many countries, that their importance for creating polyvalent texts and accentuating philosophical and ethical issues is acknowledged by numerous authors, and that in such works mythic overtones constitute one of the most important narrative dimensions. At the same time, all other characteristics and specific qualities of these works can be very different. Mythopoeic novels display a huge variety of forms, themes and topics; consequently, they do not represent any particular subgenre. In an age in which ever-growing cultural connections bring separate national literatures much closer to each other than in any previous historical period, mutual influences and exchange of mythopoeic techniques and mythic stories between writers from different parts of the world have also reached unprecedented levels.

Although the six authors who are the focus of this study look at first sight like strange bedfellows because of the differences among their cultural backgrounds, general approaches to literature, and narrative techniques, the fact is that they also have a lot in common: not only similar concerns and a similar cosmopolitanism, but also a tendency "to try to wrest a meaning from the world through myth" (Baldick 175). More importantly, they share a similar main mythopoeic approach, typical for the period which interests us here (mid-fifties to mid-seventies), which lies between the modernist use of myth as a structuring device necessary for finding depth and coherence in contemporary history, and the postmodern contestation of metanarratives. Perfectly aware that they are unable to say anything about final truths, and without any need to posit a transcendental signified, their mythopoeia explores "the ontological gap between events and meanings" (Gould 6), searching not to rediscover some pristine immediacy, but "to meditate again and again in a new and more creative fashion" (Ricoeur, *Dialogues* 24) and to "engage the questions of value as such" (Bell, *Literature* 229). The six novels, dissimilar in terms of their form, style and imagery, have a number of common characteristics: eclectic use of myth, the merging of mythic and realistic planes, interplay of space and time, preference for totemism, animism and shamanism over monotheistic religions, consideration of problems of roots, identity and hybridity, concern for nature. Several key myths recur in the novels: those of the garden of Eden, of the Waste Land, of the labyrinth, quest-myth, and trickster stories. Because uncertainty about the future and loss of belief in eternal progress are primary preoccupations of the authors, the circular time of nature and myth is employed as the main structural feature of all six novels. Focusing on the critical passage from one cycle to the

other, they end ambiguously, since it is by no means certain that the attempts to bridge the transitional gulf will be successful. Or, in mythic terms, the Ouroboros is stretching itself, and has almost caught its tail, but the final outcome of its efforts still remains undecided.

The worldwide presence and acknowledged importance of contemporary mythopoeia clearly stand in opposition to postmodernists' — or scientists', or rationalists', or dogmatists' — "belief that mythic narratives are" — unlike their own 'true' narratives — "in essence irrelevant lies" (Arias 23) and that the time of the telling of the great stories is now over. As Laurence Coupe aptly remarked, "whenever myth has been pronounced dead, artists have risen up to proclaim it alive" (19), and the six writers discussed here have done just that. Seeing myth as essential but not transcendental narrative, always polyphonic and capable of multiple meanings (Albouy 8), they consciously use it for exploring and "interpreting the human situation in the world" (Ihde 12), for rediscovering the human element in contemporary society, and for sustaining the spiritual factor in human consciousness. Combining the serious and the ludic, and opening new vistas on many important questions, myth is the best tool of subversion of monologic narratives. Mythic novels thus have the same function which oral narratives perform in traditional societies: they act as "an aesthetic medium for the exploration of large questions about existence" (Okpewho 259), creating "the dimension of meaning" which is only conceivable in light of "the human effort and desire to be" (Ricœur, *Fallible Man* 215).

The present study does not exhaust all possibilities of mythopoeia in the narrative fiction of the third quarter of the twentieth century. On the contrary, although the same general mythopoeic stance was dominant in that period, there are numerous other structural

and thematic solutions. It would be interesting to compare the novels analyzed here with those from other cultures and parts of the world. Another possible extension, beyond the scope of this research, would be to study the history of the concept of myth in other civilizations, such as South Asian or Chinese, and see if their ideas could help us to shed more light on the semantic field of myth. I have argued throughout this thesis that myth is, essentially, story. Like all other narratives, "myths of mankind are worthless for us as long as we do not dare to interpret them personally, for ourselves and our time" (Hermann Hesse, qtd. in Ziolkowski 121). Or, as Isidore Okpewho observed, "our appreciation of literary merit of traditional tales has often suffered" from too much theorizing (264). Therefore, instead of being overwhelmed by the concept itself, we should rather indulge in the wonderful possibilities mythic stories and mythic novels open for us.

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