CHAPTER 2

Myths and Texts

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The widespread turn to myth by modern writers is more commonly acknowledged than understood partly because it has no single genesis or meaning. The present chapter, therefore, will discriminate some of its principal manifestations through their historical and philosophical contexts. Historically speaking, modernist appreciation of myth descends from a European romantic tradition in which literary creation and a national or folk spirit were intimately associated; yet it also constitutes a distinctive new phase reflecting philosophical and political shifts, as well as other cultural and intellectual developments around the turn of the twentieth century.

The modern valorising of myth was partly in response to the waning of religious belief and authority. In the anglophone tradition, a classic argument is set out in Matthew Arnold's *Literature and Dogma* (1873). A literal belief in the Biblical story of human origins had become widely untenable due to the growing prestige of scientific protocols of thought, a new knowledge of the age of the earth, the evolutionary origins of its inhabitants, and the impact of modern scholarship on Biblical studies. But Arnold argued that the Bible, far from losing its truth value thereby, had acquired a new and more intrinsic significance. It was the literary achievement of the Hebraic people articulating a development of moral consciousness which was their peculiar contribution to human culture. Literature bearing this weight of cultural meaning, and seen as the primordial production of a complex of values drawn from ancestral experience, is effectively myth.

Myth, in other words, may denote a falsehood, or it can be the fundamental narrative of a culture, and it can be both at once. Some

important orders of value are not susceptible to a criterion of objective truth and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) had influentially argued that, as well as the universal truths of mathematics and philosophy, different human cultures produced incommensurable formations and human types. For Arnold, the Bible represented a contribution to moral culture that matched the Hellenic articulation of aesthetic beauty and philosophical truth.

The positive valuing of myth, then, could be an acknowledgement of cultural relativism, and it was acquiring precisely such a new significance as anthropology began to shed the pre-scientific and imperialistic premises of the Victorian era to become a major modern discipline in which the human as such is placed under question. But the full recognition of this potentiality still lay in the future, and the ambivalent truth value of myth at the time was compounded by the ambivalence of its cultural placing: it was at once the characteristic mark of tribal or archaic peoples thought of as 'primitive', yet also a feature of the classical cultures which represented a high point of civilisation. Only perhaps poetry, conceived as a specialised imaginative domain, could accommodate this dual perception. As T. S. Eliot was to surmise: 'The artist, I believe, is more *primitive*, as well as more civilized, than his contemporaries . . . and he only uses the phenomena of civilization in expressing it.'[1] But one of the defining features of the period we now think of as modernist is precisely the breakdown of the contrasting categories of the 'primitive' and the 'civilised'. An inaugural text in this regard was Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which, perhaps significantly, was a realist prose fiction. Conrad's novella exposes the connection between a sordid reality and a characteristic form of nineteenth-century idealism.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who opposed all forms of idealism, articulated a philosophical basis of modernist mythopoeia by arguing the connection between archaic modes of sensibility and a highly sophisticated understanding of the aesthetic. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) he reversed the meaning of classical culture as it had been understood in the eighteenth century by J. J. Winckelmann (1717–68) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). The

classical beauty and order they had associated especially with the god Apollo was not a reflection of the ancient Greek character but precisely the opposite: it was the artistic dream that the Greeks needed to impose on their destructive, orgiastic nature which they at the same time honoured in the god Dionysus. The aesthetic remove from common reality – what Nietzsche called 'dream' – is the condition under which these two opposed, yet necessary, powers could be accommodated. Without Dionysus life is hollow, withered and degenerate, yet Dionysus alone would represent a destructive collapse of civilisation into animal nature. In Nietzsche's view, the Western tradition since Socrates and Plato had suffered a progressive domination by the Apollonian order along with the loss, repression, and denigration of the Dionysian power. In effect, Nietzsche combines two aspects of myth which often appear separately in the period: it is at once a highly avant-garde, philosophically sophisticated embrace of modernity, and a nostalgic rejection of it in favour of a 'primitive' form of life.

While Nietzsche was a quite conscious resource for a number of modernist writers, few of them would have been aware of their own contemporary, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), who, while seeking to articulate philosophically a critique that was even more elusive and against the conventional grain than Nietzsche's, was closely paralleled in the literature of the period. Heidegger had a comparable invocation of the archaic and of art as unveiling the truth of things, but his focus was quite different. Nietzsche had argued that European thought since Socrates was mistakenly preoccupied with epistemology, the problem of knowledge: what we know and how we know we know it. For Nietzsche, the pursuit of knowledge rests on a prior, but unexamined, question of value: we seek to know what it interests us to know. Rather than the common-sense assumption that we place value on existing objects, he proposed that we unwittingly create a world of objects formed by our values. In this radical philosophical sense, man is an inescapably mythopoeic animal.

But Heidegger argued that in claiming the priority of value over knowledge, Nietzsche had overlooked something even more fundamental: what he named as Being, and which his translators always

capitalise to indicate its specialised meaning. For him, we are so caught up in an instrumental and value-laden response to the beings around us that we have lost a sense of the mystery of Being as such: the sheer presence of all beings, animate or inanimate. True myth is attention to Being. Moreover, with respect to artistic expression, Nietzsche had further claimed in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the gradual predominance of realism in European art signalled the loss of a true sense of the aesthetic and therefore of the mythopoeic imagination on which it depends. Heidegger likewise privileged poetry, and in remarkable late lectures he drew on mysteriously auratic poets such as Friedrich Hölderlin, Georg Trakl, and Rainer Maria Rilke to show the unveiling of Being in language. For both of these thinkers, the archaic mode of thought and feeling characterised by myth was not something belonging just to the remote past, but was the unacknowledged condition of our present being. The privileging of myth, therefore, was not a regression *to* the past, but a true understanding of the present by reflection *on* the past.

Aristotle's well-known use in the *Poetics* of the word 'myth' to signify an action had made it central to narrative and drama. The modernist generation, however, inherited a growing focus on not just the content, but also the modality of myth. Myth when considered as a way of being in the world had a close kinship with poetry, and especially as this had been conceived since the European romantic period. Writing in 1800, both Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich von Schelling had advocated the creation of a 'new mythology' as the basis for a modern poetry to rival that of the ancients.[2] For them, mythology was a necessary condition of the poetry they desiderated. More emphatically, a number of early twentieth-century writers recognised, with varying degrees of explicitness, that mythology need not precede poetry because mytho*poeia*, or myth *making*, is precisely the *proprium* of poetry as such. Myth lies not in remarkable figures or stories but in a way of responding to the world, and the poet, in a radical understanding of the Greek meaning of the word, is the primordial world-maker. At the same time, the conjunction of 'responding' and 'making' in this last sentence points to an inescapable ambiguity: does the poet, as

representative of the human mind as such, create a world by *imposing* a vision on reality or by *responding* to what is there? There is no escaping the ambiguity of 'vision' in this respect, but there can be significant difference in the spirit of looking. The difference between the masterful and the responsive, as partly reflected in the contrast drawn here between Nietzsche and Heidegger, can be seen also in the poetry of the period.

While the combined frame of reference provided by Nietzsche and Heidegger helps to illuminate a wide range of modernist poetry, there are other important developments in the understanding of myth: along with the establishing of anthropology as an academic discipline came the Freudian tradition in psychology. For the most part, the poets' interest in anthropology was not an informed reflection of the contemporary discipline so much as a parallel reaction against Victorian anthropology from within its premises. The third edition of Sir James Frazer's multi-volume (and highly influential) *The Golden Bough* was produced over the first decades of the century, culminating in the abridged version of 1922, the *annus mirabilis* of anglophone modernism. Frazer was still in a Victorian mental world for which myth represented a superstitious phase of culture from which mankind had happily, if not yet completely, released itself. But as John B. Vickery has pointed out, his readers in the modernist generation were entranced instead by the mythopoeic wealth he had revealed.[3] Indeed, although *The Golden Bough* was outdated even in its own day, it helped to found a whole school of criticism, or way of looking at literature, for which Jessie L. Weston's study of the Fisher King legend became one of the most famous through its impact attested by T. S. Eliot in his 'Notes' to *The Waste Land*.[4]

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) similarly straddles the historical epochs. He was immensely interested in 'primitive' peoples and artefacts, he adopted anthropological terms such as 'fetish' and 'taboo', and he explained the deep structures of the psyche through such mythic figures as Oedipus and Elektra. Most importantly, however, despite his concern to give psychoanalysis scientific status, he was in the grip of what was effectively a contemporary myth shared with Frazer. His necessarily speculative scheme of the id, ego,

and superego suggested the fragile control by the civilised principle over a permanently rebellious, and cunningly deceptive, life of the instincts. In that respect it paralleled the ideology of colonialism in which it was, in Rudyard Kipling's phrase, the 'white man's burden' to be the ever beleaguered and resented upholder of civilisation.[5]

Freud and Nietzsche represent two opposite attitudes with a widespread impact on modern thinking, yet which are not amenable to rational argument or proof, so that they are in themselves a priori world views, or myths. In this radical sense of the word, one's own myth is always the hardest to recognise as such since it always appears as common-sense reality. In contrast to Freud's tragic view of civilisation as dependent on the repression or sublimation of instinct, Nietzsche thought that habitual repression and sublimation were themselves the cause of those evils of violence and predation that Freud attributed to the instincts as such.[6] Tragedy for Nietzsche was a mode of affirmation even – or rather, especially – in the face of destruction. Similarly, one of Freud's major breaks with a disciple was with Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) who emphasised the positive wisdom of the unconscious. Jung espoused the notion of a collective unconscious in which the experience of the race was sedimented into mythic archetypes.[7] Hence, whereas Freud saw religion as the anachronistic survival of a primitive illusion, Jung could see its mythic status more positively as a guide to wisdom. Similarly, Freud never quite escaped a 'symptomatic' conception of art, while Jung could appreciate the positive achievement of the artistic imagination, albeit in a very different spirit from Nietzsche. Hence, while Freud has had a powerful impact on modern thought generally, Jung has often proved the more sympathetic figure for creative writers and for the academic myth criticism of the mid-twentieth century which followed in the wake of the modernist generation.[8]

Given the myriad different invocations of myth by poets in the modernist period, this chapter seeks not to cover them all, but to suggest an analytic spectrum of some of the principal modes of mythopoeia to be found in their work. For this purpose, the focus is primarily on the imaginative modality, rather than the content, of the poetry.

W. B. Yeats is perhaps the most exemplary and historically encompassing instance as he lived to become a mature poet of the nineteenth century before converting himself into a modern, and maybe even a modernist. His early poetry combined a contemporary symbolist aesthetic with a romantic Celticism, both of which converged on a melancholy longing for the unattainable whereby myth opened the way to a dream world. Yet even in early poems like 'The Stolen Child', the romantic dream is recognised as a dangerous seduction and, after his intensive reading of Nietzsche from around 1902, his use of the word 'dream' took on a new philosophical complexity.[9] It remained a primary term in his dramatic examination of myth in his verse while the analytic word 'myth' was mainly reserved for his prose. The romantic image of the Celt – as analysed, for example, by Matthew Arnold – was different from the assumed norm of English common sense: the Celt was dreamy, melancholy, poetical, and unworldly.[10] Around the turn of the century, however, Yeats began to claim the Celt as not a marginal but a central figure. In the light of books such as *The Golden Bough* these same qualities of the Celt now represented for Yeats the primitive and essential humanity that was being destroyed by modernity.[11] A comparable universalising of the Celt can be seen in two later poets: Robert Graves and Edwin Muir. Graves's interest in Welsh mythology contributed to the theory propounded in *The White Goddess* (1948) whereby all poets, whether consciously or not, are in thrall to the female principle. The figure of the Goddess – who, like Dionysus, was an enemy to Apollonian order and clarity – raised this principle to the level of what Jung would call an archetype:

> All saints revile her, and all sober men
> Ruled by the God Apollo's golden mean–
> In scorn of which we sailed to find her
> In distant regions likeliest to hold her
> Whom we desired above all things to know,
> Sister of the mirage and the echo.[12]

In a different way, Edwin Muir's boyhood experience of a pre-modern Orkney way of life gave him a standpoint from which to

assess the modern world in which he subsequently lived, and to bring an inward appreciation to classical myth.

But Yeats was unsurpassed in his realisation of the mythopoetic process as such, for there is a crucial difference between *using* myth and being *mythopoeic*. Yeats's greatest poems do philosophical work between their lines: as with any conjuror, you have to attend not to what he says, but to what he does. In 'Easter, 1916', for example, his overt mythologising of the Irish rebels is signalled in the title, but the truly mythopoeic action lies in the gradual shift whereby the initial distinction between the revolutionaries' dream and the solid everyday reality begins to shimmer until their dream becomes constitutive of reality. The rebels are finally named only when their names have become the legendary formula of a changed world whose sublimity still evades easy judgement:

> MacDonagh and MacBride
> And Connolly and Pearse
> Now and in time to be,
> Wherever green is worn,
> Are changed, changed utterly:
> A terrible beauty is born.[13]

The true choice now is not between dream and reality but between rival dreams as the bearers of reality. That is the mythopoeic standpoint as Nietzsche understood it, and Yeats's late poem 'Lapis Lazuli' is a summary enactment of the Nietzschean affirmation of a mythopoeic art in relation to history and politics. Life and art, initially placed in opposition, are shown over the course of the poem to be not just inseparable but mutually dependent. Yeats's gradual unpacking of the line 'All perform their tragic play' is perhaps the subtlest statement in the European tradition of the power of the aesthetic as based on its elusive ontological status; the same blend of poetic power and cunning kept Yeats largely free, at least as a poet, from the dark underside of myth in the mid-twentieth century: its co-option by right-wing politics.[14]

Not so with his friend and collaborator, Ezra Pound. When Pound came to England in 1908 Yeats was the one established poet

he admired, even as he set out explicitly to modernise his elder, and he was a contributory factor in the radical modification of Yeats's poetic voice. Yet despite this productive friendship, their underlying difference highlights a fundamental divide in modernist mythopoeia. Yeats's life and oeuvre reflect his dictum that we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.[15] His great poems, such as 'Easter, 1916', are dramatic reveries turning on the radical division and uncertainty of his own commitments. By contrast, Pound's greatest project, *The Cantos* (published cumulatively in volumes between 1925 and 1969), despite the frequent subtlety and power of its parts, often depends structurally on the allusive presentation of historical figures and episodes who are meaningful only in a monolithic interpretation which reduces them in effect to an inarguable doctrine. The mode is often denunciatory, and can be splendidly so, as in Canto XLV, where Pound attacks the modern financial system by invoking, with poetic and historical authority, the medieval ban on Usury as a 'sin against nature'. But Pound accepted the anti-Semitic association of capitalist finance with Jews as well as the Nietzschean critique of Christian compassion:

> Compleynt, compleynt I hearde upon and day,
> Artemis singing, Artemis, Artemis
> Agaynst Pity lifted her wail:
> Pity causeth the forests to fail,
> Pity slayeth my nymphs,
> Pity spareth so many an evil thing.
> Pity befouled April,
> Pity is the root and the spring. (XXX)[16]

In the now unavoidable light of Pound's pre- and war-time support of Mussolini's fascism, the medievalising and mythopoeia of these lines suggest a deliberate blindness to contemporary reality. As the intended mythic sweep and historical compression hardened into dogma, Pound, with his extraordinary generosity and talent, became the tragic centre of poetic modernity. The positive lesson of modernist mythopoeia in writers such as Yeats, and most notably James Joyce, is that of living with an internal scepticism about one's own

beliefs. These writers recognise that the radical premises of any world view are inarguable: we can usefully reason *about* them, but they cannot be based *on* reason. By the same token, however, a different temperament draws on myth, not to question, but to authorise its own outlook. In the mind of the fascist, myth boosts, rather than checks, dogmatic confidence. As T. S. Eliot observed, Pound's Hell was only for other people.[17]

Eliot himself lies revealingly between these possibilities. He is the poet most commonly associated with modernist myth owing to his use of the Fisher King fertility motif in *The Waste Land*. Yet when he spoke, apropos Joyce's *Ulysses* but with manifest reference to *The Waste Land*, of 'using' the 'mythical method' to make 'the modern world possible for art', he made it clear, albeit inadvertently, that he was not himself exercising a mythic sensibility.[18] A mythopoeic imagination does not *use* myth as a *method* – it *is* it. And in his case the difference represented two opposed possibilities. His mythic allusions in *The Waste Land* made the 'modern world possible for art' by providing a satiric and plangent contrast with, rather than a mythopoeic transformation of, the modern. Or, to put the point in stronger and more substantive terms, the fertility that is notionally celebrated in the Fisher King myth is belied by the poem's snobbishly inflected sexual distaste:

> The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
> Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
> Out of the window perilously spread
> Her drying combinations . . .[19]

The truly mythic power of the poem lay in the way its jaundiced and class-bound vision of modernity gained such widespread acceptance. Yet Eliot was right from his point of view to resist internalising a properly mythopoeic sensibility for this would displace the religious belief to which he was more truly drawn. In retrospect, the real function of the myth in *The Waste Land* was to provide a place-holder for Eliot's later religious faith. His *Four Quartets*, meanwhile, is a remarkable example of both modernist poetry and religious sensibility. The four poems are not

expressions of faith so much as dramatisations of doubt so that they embody a spiritual experience that is not dependent, for the reader, on a religious belief and in that respect, ironically enough, he comes closest to the self-reflective mythopoeia of other modernists even as he continued to reject the blend of humanism and aestheticism on which they drew.[20]

The understanding of poetry as in itself a form of mythopoeia helps to explain how modernist poets modified the influential legacy of late-nineteenth-century aestheticism. The notional posture of the aesthete was to espouse art as an alternative domain to common life. This, as Eliot pointed out, may not be fully coherent, and 'art for art's sake' was in itself perhaps one of that century's powerful myths.[21] But it had a philosophical articulation in Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), whereby all human aspirations are essentially illusions created by the impersonal process of Nature. The knowing, controlled illusion of aesthetic creation then provides the only escape from this humiliating condition. Schopenhauer had little impact on the mainstream philosophy of the day but his pessimism struck a deep chord with artists and writers, including Thomas Hardy, who, although he was not a modernist and had a Victorian intellectual's austere rejection of the comforts of myth, was one of the great poets of modernity. Nietzsche, however, responded to Schopenhauer as a philosopher and, while accepting his nihilistic model, reversed its meaning. For Nietzsche, aesthetic creation is not a voluntary alternative to, but the inevitable centre of, human existence. Moreover, it became a mode of affirmation of life through a celebration of the creative capacity.

The modernist poet who most embodies – indeed flaunts – the aestheticist roots of modernist world-making is Wallace Stevens. Stevens's play with language recalls the textual self-sufficiency of late-nineteenth-century French *symboliste* poetry, and the conscious display of the aesthete, although both are transposed into a fully American idiom. When we realise, like Joyce, the illusory nature of deep meanings behind appearances, the textures of experience are newly vivid and precious:

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be the finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.
('The Emperor of Ice-Cream')[22]

At the same time, while he achieves a remarkable variety of mood and tone, his poetry is largely devoted to celebrating the poetic principle itself. His poetic oeuvre has the deliberate self-limitation that would be expected in a philosophical argument and its stylishness is a necessary means of lending his theme its characteristic sense of iridescent life. Even so, the effect in the longer term is to leave some readers hungry in a way that invites turning to the other aspect of mythopoeia: the recovery of a primordial fullness of being and an unalienated relation to the world.

So far, the emphasis has been on myth as a self-conscious ordering, the masterful rather than the responsive potentiality of myth, and, as the vocabulary here implies, there may be a conventionally gendered dimension at work. The striking cases of mythic ordering mentioned so far – *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos* and Yeats's personal mythology of historical recurrence – all have a distinctively masculinist tinge even when the overt ideology of the work may deny this. In contrast, one might think of the more responsive mode of mythopoeia as feminine. For example, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), who was the sometime fiancée of Pound and then a close friend of D. H. Lawrence, sought, like the early Pound, to catch a mythopoeic response to the natural environment in poems such as 'Oread':

Whirl up, sea–
Whirl your pointed pines.
Splash your great pines
On our rock.
Hurl your green over us–
Cover us with your pools of fir.[23]

The invocation of the natural elements of trees, wind, and sea catches a moment of intense emotional identification to which the title gives a mythic signature by imagining a nymph as the appropriate locus of response. The poem is typically brief, in the spirit of Imagism, as it records a fleeting response which is then left alone, not made the basis of any more ambitious or encompassing structure. Much of H.D.'s poetic oeuvre is fragmentary and, in so far as Virginia Woolf's narrative prose might also count as modernist poetry, it often has a similar quality of intense local responsiveness within works whose tight artistic organisation insists on its own aesthetic arbitrariness, its implicit refusal of the grand claims of mythic ordering and permanence to be found in some of her famous contemporaries. Her highly wrought artistic structures ultimately reflect a similar sense of the transitory.

In this context, D. H. Lawrence is an interestingly mixed case. Lawrence had a strongly feminine sensibility, as is evidenced not least in his unfortunate tendency towards compensatory masculinist assertion. His work is pulled between a Nietzschean prophetic imperative and a more contemplative recovery of the primordial condition that Heidegger called attention to Being, or what Lawrence himself called the 'fourth dimension'.[24] Lawrence's supreme ability was to catch the quick of life in language and an important part of the secret was that, although his writing is always recognisable, he avoids what would more conventionally be called 'style'. His poetry is notably informal, and he drew an explicit distinction between what he called 'poetry of the present' and 'poetry of the eternal'.[25] In contrast to the exquisitely wrought lyrics of Keats and Shelley, he affirmed the value of a different kind of poetry that reflects the momentary passing of experience and, we might add, seeks to offer a participation in the experience itself rather than a verbal artefact. Of course, he knew very well that there is no escape from the condition of linguisticity, no unmediated relation to the world. But Lawrence constantly braved this paradox, and his mythopoeic imagination was most significantly manifest in the intuition of otherness, and of Being, that he manages to convey dramatically, and most crucially so in the implicit drama of his language.

For example, when they are read naively, Lawrence's numerous poems devoted to encounters with living creatures seem to claim a directly sympathetic insight into these different life forms, but the verbal action is typically more complex. These poems enact a struggle between, on the one hand, the inevitable anthropomorphising imposed by the very fact of language and human thought, and, on the other hand, a recognition of the irreducible otherness of such different centres of life. In other words, the attempt to identify sympathetically with the other here is a dramatic feint by which its radical otherness is brought into awareness. In 'The Blue Jay' the narrator speaks in highly anthropomorphic terms of the jay and to his dog but then, through the bird's indifference to him, he is struck by its completely alien being:

> Every day since the snow is here
> The blue jay paces around the cabin, very busy, picking up bits,
> Turning his back on us all,
> And bobbing his thick dark crest about the snow, as if darkly saying:
> *I ignore those folk who look out*.
>
> You acid-blue metallic bird,
> You thick bird with a strong crest
> Who are you?
> Whose boss are you, with all your bully way?
> You copper-sulphate blue bird![26]

It is no accident that the recognition of the bird's ungraspably alien nature comes through imagining it using human speech, for difference can only be experienced in relationship, just as relationship depends on difference – a truth that bears upon the human sphere as well as the cosmic. At the core of Lawrence's oeuvre is the recognition of how human life is impoverished when it loses its relation to the non-human. But that includes the non-human dimension within the human, which is why the ultimate value of the encounter with these overtly alien forms of life is to revive the sense of radical otherness in relation to our fellow human beings too. For Lawrence, the mythopoeic imagination was a transcending of the habitual human viewpoint, a recovery of the impersonal mystery of Being within every human being.

Lawrence's meditation on the impersonal, or non-human, dimension of life, which was the philosophical ground bass of his oeuvre in all its genres, had its culmination, and perhaps its supreme test, in the poems through which he approached his own extinction towards the end of a long illness. In poems such as 'The Ship of Death' and 'Bavarian Gentians' he drew particularly on his experience of the Etruscan tombs, which had impressed him with their bright images of the life to which the Etruscan dead were thought to be proceeding.[27] Indeed, all conceptions of the afterlife, which Freud saw only as illusory wish-fulfilment, or 'merely' mythical, may be seen from an anthropological viewpoint as concentrated images of the living values espoused in the given culture, as mythical expressions of its positive conception of life. The good Christian death of earlier centuries, although a resignation to the will of God, had the value of agency in its deliberate preparation and positive acceptance. Likewise, in these poems Lawrence imagines not just a passive extinction but approaching death in a positive spirit as the last great experience of life. He will construct his own funeral ship or carry his torch into the underworld, and invites others to do the same.

> Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!
> Let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of this flower
> Down the darker and darker stairs . . .
>
> Have you built your ship of death, O have you?
> O build your ship of death, for you will need it.[28]

Modernist myth is itself a difficult construction that is open, in principle, to everyone but which few will manage. If life, as Keats thought, is a 'vale of Soul-making', post-religious modernity requires that this be done without benefit of clergy, and these late poems of Lawrence are a remarkable instance of modernist myth as an elusive and demanding successor to religious faith.[29] There is also a special aptness in Lawrence's image of a hidden underground life. For in his everyday surface life he refused to acknowledge the gravity of his illness, referring only to a persistent cold and avoiding medical examination till nearly the end. Yet in his poetic imagination

he was not in denial, he was preparing himself profoundly for his last journey by actively embracing it.

The greatest modern poems on this theme must be the *Duino Elegies* (composed 1912–22) of Rainer Maria Rilke. Just as Lawrence, after rejecting his Christian upbringing, still referred to himself as 'a passionately religious man', so Rilke might be classed as religious in having a comparably intense sense of natural piety realised in the language of poetry.[30] His mythopoeia, too, was not just a collection of poetic motifs but a form of life. In this regard, he exemplified the conception of language and poetry expounded by Heidegger, whose own discursive prose constantly approaches the poetic as he unfolds the significance, for example, of a phrase from Hölderlin: 'poetically man dwells upon the earth'.[31] Man does not merely exist, but dwells; and language is the significant medium in which this occurs. Heidegger rejected the common conception of language as an instrumental system of expression and communication within which poetry is a specialised function. In contrast, he saw the instrumental functions of language, however dominant in apparent practice, as the secondary domain dependent on its radical condition as the poetic medium of human being and the unveiling of Being.[32] It partly follows that the language of poetry will distance itself from commonsensical and instrumental registers as is notably the case with Rilke. The distancing is not just by the formal properties of verse, the traditional signals of poetic status, but by producing within an otherwise ordinary, colloquial idiom allusions, images, and affirmations that resist common understanding and allow the intuition of a radically different one gradually to emerge. Over the course of the ten elegies, pain and death take on the positive value of giving gravitas to human life:

> And yet, were they waking a symbol within us, the endlessly dead,
> look, they'd be pointing, perhaps, to the catkins, hanging
> from empty hazels, or else
> to the rain downfalling on dark soil-bed in early Spring.–
>
> And we, who think of *ascending*
> happiness, then would feel
> the emotion that almost startles
> when happiness *falls*. (X)[33]

Once again, this recognition has forebears in the great world religions, but Rilke avoids any too direct invocation of religious archetypes as his mythopoeia lies in producing a modern equivalent not dependent on supernatural faith.

The opposite risk in Rilke's idiom is of mystical obscurity in contrast to the robust realism with which Lawrence's verse is constantly freighted. This aspect of the Lawrencean tradition of 'nature' poetry was consciously developed by Ted Hughes, but with an instructive difference. Although Eliot's view of poetry as tapping the most primitive sources is echoed in many modern poets, Hughes is perhaps the most intensively focused example. His best-known poetry about animals seeks to bring forth their absolute difference; even the thrushes in the suburban garden are revealed at close quarters as violent predators:

> Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn[34]

Whereas Nietzsche and Lawrence sought the mutuality of Apollo and Dionysus – the civilised and the primordial – Hughes speaks most characteristically for the repressed life. So in this case, while Lawrence's self-reflective humour made the limits of his human perception part of the internal drama of the poem, Hughes's focus on the shocking non-humanity of these creaturely beings is ultimately more anthropocentric; hence, perhaps, the mixed reactions to his poetry. Insofar as he expresses a given response to the world, Hughes's verse has a unique power. But insofar as it expresses a view of the world, it may become emptily rhetorical. Keith Sagar, as an intelligent admirer, acknowledges such moments of relative failure but sees them as minor blemishes in a major achievement because he is convinced of Hughes's overall view.[35] This ambivalence lies at the heart of Hughes's most ambitious attempt at creating a myth. Drawing on worldwide anthropological sources he formed, in *The Life and Songs of Crow* (1970–72), the figure of Crow. The characteristic intensity of the figure, which compels some readers, is for others too much of a willed construction, a conscious attempt to create a myth, rather than truly mythopoeic.

Hughes showed his sensitivity to myth in his *Tales from Ovid* (1997), a dramatised translation of episodes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a work that has been a primary resource for English poetry since medieval times. Pound made a suggestive remark about Ovid which bears on the distinction between mythopoeic imagination and the deliberate use of myth. He said that Ovid 'walk[ed] with the people of myth' as if to say he was still close to them but no longer of them.[36] This seems to place Ovid on the cusp between a world of myth and a world to which myth had become a usable poetic resource – usable, that is to say, under poetic conditions. It may be that the mythopoeic imagination, whether in the Nietzschean or the Heideggerian mode, remains an ever-present possibility for a poet but may be pre-empted by a too conscious recourse to mythic motifs. In this respect, Hughes's wife Sylvia Plath provides an illuminating instance in her poem 'The Arrival of the Bee-box'.

The poem contains no explicitly named mythic or classical allusion but it presents a frightening intensity of alienated emotion embodied in the bees contained within a wooden box. The poem is in the American 'confessional' mode which invites the reader to use knowledge of the poet's life and personality in responding to it. Plath's blonde locks and her episodes of emotional instability will be known to readers. Of course, even in the most confessional mode the poet's personal presence is still a dramatic persona and to that extent it is potentially, as it became in Yeats, the creation of a personal myth. In this poem, the speaker attempts to contain the bees emotionally and intellectually within a series of imagistic allusions with powerful resonances in Western tradition: 'the swarmy feeling of African hands' and 'like a Roman mob'. At the same time, these images, which seem to be thrown defensively over the bee-box, only intensify the emotion even further while expanding its order of significance until the speaker concludes:

> I wonder if they would forget me
> If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.
> There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,
> And the petticoats of the cherry.

They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral veil.
I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

The box is only temporary.[37]

Knowing the containment in the wooden box cannot last, the female speaker imagines herself turning into the living, but insentient, wood of a tree in which her feminine attributes are placed out of reach by passing into a different mode of being. The 'blond' locks of the laburnum are reified and masculinised while the 'petticoats of the cherry' suggest a desperate self-alienation. And we may surmise that the cherry blossom will after all need to be fertilised by the bees. The poem produces from within its own emotional dynamic the impulse that might be supposed to lie behind Ovid's story of Daphne turning into a laurel tree when pursued by Apollo. The last verses then anticipate the releasing of the bees only when the speaker's femininity, and indeed her humanity, are closed down. The only really secure container is the coffin, which is itself quite temporary in the larger scheme of things. Plath's poem, with its hysterical emotion contained by sardonic wit, and its compulsive longing for insentience, enacts in entirely modern terms an Ovidian metamorphosis which invites, but cannot be reduced to, psychoanalytic explanation. Ovid's myth takes on a vivid new life with Plath's dramatically spontaneous rediscovery of the mythopoeic in everyday modernity. She too walks with the people of myth as her highly self-conscious poem seems to recreate its primordial emotion. Her mythopoeia is a striking instance of the creative dynamic between the sophisticated and the primordial in a poem that has fully absorbed the example of modernism.

Notes

1. T. S. Eliot, '*Tarr*', review of Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr*, *The Egoist*, 5.8 (Sept. 1918), 106.
2. See Friedrich Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry* (1800); Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800).

3. John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of the Golden Bough* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).
4. Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920). A school of anthropological criticism grew up around the Cambridge classicist Gilbert Murray.
5. Kipling's popular poem 'The White Man's Burden' was first published in *McClure's Magazine* in 1899.
6. See *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, xxi: *Civilisation and its Discontents*, ed. and tr. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), 57–145.
7. See *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ix: *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, tr. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), pt 1.
8. Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), typified a mode of mythic interpretation which was given its most systematic articulation in Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).
9. Yeats's introduction to Nietzsche's writings was Thomas Commons's greatly abridged translation of *Thus Spake Zarathusa* (1900), augmented, in September 1902, by the gift from John Quinn of Alexander Tille's 1899 translation of the entire work. In 1903–4 Yeats read Quinn's copy of Commons's *Nietzsche as Critic, Philosopher and Prophet* (1901): see *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, iii: *1901–1904*, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 239.
10. Arnold expressed this in his *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867).
11. Yeats challenges Arnold's view in his 1898 essay 'The Celtic Element in Literature', in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, iv: *Early Essays*, ed. Richard J. Finneran and George Bornstein (New York: Scribner, 2007), 128–38.
12. Robert Graves, 'The White Goddess', *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, ed. Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), 428.
13. *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, i: *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (2nd edn, New York: Scribner, 1997), 184.
14. Yeats, *Poems*, 300. For a detailed reading of both poems, see Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 46–60.
15. See *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, v: *Later Essays*, ed. William H. O'Donnell (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), 8.
16. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (13th printing, New York: New Directions, 1995), 229, 147.

17. See T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 44–7. Eliot withdrew the book but the remark remains apt.
18. '*Ulysses*, Order and Myth', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 178.
19. *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 68.
20. See the essays on 'Arnold and Pater', 'The Humanism of Irving Babbitt', and 'Second Thoughts about Humanism', in T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (3rd edn, London: Faber, 1951), 431–43, 471–91.
21. Ibid., 439.
22. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 50.
23. H. D., *Collected Poems 1912–1944*, ed. Louis L. Martz (New York: New Directions, 1983), 55.
24. D. H. Lawrence, 'Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine', in *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, ed. Michael Herbert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 358.
25. See D. H. Lawrence, 'Preface to *New Poems*', in *The Poems*, 2 vols, ed. Christopher Pollnitz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), i, 645–9.
26. Ibid., 327.
27. See D. H. Lawrence, *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, ed. Simonetta de Filippis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
28. Lawrence, *Poems*, i, 611, 630.
29. John Keats, letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 Feb.–3 May 1819, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 249.
30. D. H. Lawrence, letter to Edward Garnett, 22 Apr. 1914, *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ii: *June 1913-October 1916*, ed. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 165.
31. See Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Alfred Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).
32. See Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, tr. Peter D. Herz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).
33. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, tr. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (London: Hogarth Press, 1963), 99.
34. Ted Hughes, 'Thrushes', *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 82.

35. See, for example, the reservations expressed about the formal achievement of *Cave Birds* in Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 184–5.
36. Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (1910; rev. edn, New York: New Directions, 1968), 16.
37. Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 63–4.