

MYTH AND LITERATURE IN AFRICA

Myth is like religion: both present one and the same fundamental problem—that of the whole of existence.

Indeed, as Gusdorf¹ writes, “Myth takes on the dimensions of human time, the precarious destiny of man who lies prey to the future... All the dramatic categories of existence, articulation and rebound, have a mythical substructure... There the mythic consciousness adopts all the purposes of the religious.” It is because it relates how a reality came into being at the beginning of all beginning, that Myth inspires, grounds and justifies human action.

Yet before becoming the basis of the religious rite by lending itself to repetition, and before serving as a model for human action, Myth is firstly the gateway to a ‘trans-human’ and ‘trans-world’ reality which man can nevertheless reach through experience. The world contains for man a language and informs him of the origins of both. It tells him that they are co-participants in one and the same universe, and that it bears the stamp—in the sense of ‘inscriptions’—of that Cosmos which it was first to know in order to have been first to be created (essence, it is said, precedes existence). Nevertheless man’s experience occurs at the level of understanding: mythical intelligibility is existential;

Translated by R. Blohm.

¹ Gusdorf, G., *Mythe et Métaphysique*, Paris: Flammarion, 1953, p. 223.

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mythical thought—a clinging to the real. Moreover, in his attempt at dialogue with the World, he must, as L.-S. Senghor² writes, “listen to the inaudible, and, in his attempt at deciphering the World, let himself be guided by shades and signs.”

For the writing of the World is an ‘ideographic’ writing: ideas are directly represented by signs. This is why reality is not the world which surrounds us, i. e. Nature, but the world of spirit, the Supernatural, which is found beyond sensible material forms and reflections, symbols of this superior kind of existence. It is that sibylline ‘phrase’ of Nature which reveals the essence behind the appearance, or that mysterious ‘correspondence’ between all the components of the Universe and the confusion in “a mysterious and profound unity” to which Baudelaire³ gives expression when he writes:

“Nature is a temple whose living colonnades
Breathe forth a mystic speech in fitful sighs;
Man wanders among symbols in those glades
Where all things watch him with familiar eyes.

In interpreting the mysterious correspondences between the visible and the invisible, man does not arrive at a true ‘knowledge’ of the World but merely at the bitter realization that what he can fully conceive of he cannot clearly express, that the World is at once open and mysterious, at once opaque and transparent, and that it does not easily lend itself to grasping, translation, or explanation.

To express the ineffable realities which cling to the very core of his being and which the World shows to him only through a veil, man is going to use a language attuned to that of the World: he will thereby “represent the mystery of things by a mystery of language,” as is so well expressed by Paul Valéry, whom Mircea Eliade echoes when he writes:

“If the world through its stars, its forests and its animals,
its rivers and its mountains, its seasons and its days, speaks
to man, he responds by his dreams and his imaginal spirit...⁴

² Senghor, L.-S. *Chants d'ombre*: “Que m’accompagnent koras et balafon, IX,” in *Poèmes*. Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1964.

³ Baudelaire C., *The Flowers of Evil*, “Bible and the Ideal: IV Correspondences,” trans. R. Wilbur, New York, New Directions, 1955.

⁴ Eliade M., *Aspects du Mythe*, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 175.

Yet myth and the Imaginary are on an equal footing. Neither treads the ground of rationality. Both escape attempts at giving them a form other than their own.

Besides, what need has Myth for reason? Myth is never justified: on the contrary, it justifies; it is integration, rather reintegration, into the Totality which, to quote Goetz,

“is the expression of a sudden and deep awakening to realities which exhaust all possibilities of definition by reason and which man can express in their operative totality only through symbols.”⁵

We say ‘expression,’ but this word is really inadequate. For the very term ‘Myth’ means ‘story’ and if the Myth is expressed at the level of language, it is, above all, “a spontaneous ontology which is preliminary to any abstraction.”⁶ That is to say, it is a story which not only expresses a way of life and reveals its fundamental structures, but, what is more, is felt and lived, or is life insofar as it inspires and is the basis for meaningful human activities. In virtue of this, Myth constitutes the intimate acquaintance with being-in-itself. At this first stage Myth is living: its performance is the prerogative of a few privileged ones recruited from among the initiated—brothers in secret societies. This assures “coherence in the first human communities” which draw from these sources “an assurance of life, and the means to ward off anguish and death.”⁷

Little by little the members of primitive communities are individuated and the adherence to the Myth in one voice becomes individual. At that point the religious universe is desanctified, and mythology—demythologized. The *logos* has triumphed over the *mythos* and the Myth which was but the scene of “a collision of atoms, an aggregate of concepts”⁸ or of archetypal imagery, is no longer self-sufficient in its “intrinsic dynamism;” rather, through an extrinsic dynamism it confers on itself the form of a narrative.

⁵ Goetz, *Le péché*, quoted by Henri Maurier, in *Essai d'une Théologie du paganisme*, Ed. De l'Orante, 1965, p. 63.

⁶ Gusdorf, Georges, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

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It is this Myth-Narrative, a degenerate case and fossil of the living, operative and effective Myth, whose links with literature we are about to examine.

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Before alluding to the elaborate form of written literature, let us firstly focus our interest on the oral tradition: it consists of the literature of speech, of total speech, or of Totality. Here the *logos* is still closely tied to the *mythos*; "everything is buttressed by everything else; everything holds together link by link and is explainable; the visible and the invisible, through a network of correspondences, stand steady."⁹

Such is the case in the following account which we shall examine in translation; we shall endeavour to keep as faithful as possible to the original. It was related by an informant, Madame Christina Hapi, at Bafang (Haut-Nkam, Cameroon), in August 1965.

"There once was an orphan who was sheltered by a woman. One day the woman gathered together her plates and sent the orphan down to the river to wash them. He made his way there and while he was washing the plates, one of them fell into the water and was carried away. The orphan returned to relate to the woman what had happened. Upon hearing this she said:

—Go back to the river, find my plate, and bring it to me. If you do not find it we shall no longer live under the same roof.

"The child then departed. He followed the course of the river, walking mid stream in search of the plate. He came upon an elderly woman of repulsive ugliness whose dwelling consisted of a hovel permeated by the stench of bird droppings. Nevertheless the boy entered and, concealing any repugnance, asked the old woman:

—Madam, have you seen a plate drifting by here? She replied:

—Yes, my child. However, if, when I have left, you do not rid my hut of all the bird droppings inside it, I shall not let you have it.

⁹ Colin, R., *Littérature africaine d'hier et de demain*, Paris: A.D.E.C., 1963, p. 56.

"Having spoken, she left. She then returned, changed into a young girl of striking beauty, and set out to incite him to frolic. But she used in vain all the tricks of seduction, for she did not succeed in distracting the boy from his task. For the sake of peace she departed, and when she returned, changed back into an elderly woman, the orphan had cleansed not only the inside, but also the exterior, of the hut.

"The old woman then prepared a dish of mashed potatoes, seasoned with bird droppings; the boy ate it showing no trace of discontent.

"Finally the old woman said to him:

—Go up into the hut over there. There will be two eggs in it. The one which says: 'take me, take me,' you will not take. The one which utters nothing will be the one which you shall take, and, once having reached a suitable place, you will break it by casting it to the ground. There will emerge from it many things, including the plate, which you will return to your 'mother.'

"The orphan went up to the hut. One egg began saying to him: 'take me, take me.' He did not touch it; he chose instead the one which had uttered nothing, went away, found an appropriate site, and let the egg drop. There emerged a large and magnificent village with many prosperous inhabitants over whom he was the chief. For himself there was a luxurious house teeming with servants and handmaidens tending to their chores, and filled with inestimable riches. There finally emerged the plate belonging to his 'mother.'

"The boy went to deliver the plate. The woman, standing in the doorway, did not recognize him, since he appeared handsome and noble in his rich clothing. The orphan had yet to show forth. The woman asked him to explain these changes. The boy told of his adventure from beginning to end.

"After the orphan departed the woman re-entered her hut, took a plate and gave it to her own son, saying:

—Take this, and let it be carried away by the water in order that you likewise might become rich.

"The boy thus took the plate and proceeded to let it fall into the river. He went down stream, walking in the middle of the river, looking for the plate. He came upon the old woman of repulsive ugliness living in a cottage. Holding his nose, the boy entered and asked:

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—Madam, have you seen a plate floating by here?

She replied:

—Yes, my child. However, if when I have left, you do not rid my hut of all the bird droppings inside it, I shall not let you have it.

“Having spoken, she left. She then returned, changed into a young girl of striking beauty, and set out to incite him to frolic. The boy, putting his task aside, frolicked and frolicked with her until nightfall. She then departed. When, changed back into an old woman, she returned, the boy had not made a single sweep with the broom.

“The old woman then prepared for the boy a dish of mashed potatoes, seasoned with bird droppings. The boy pushed it away saying:

—At home my mother prepares this kind of dish only for the dog. I shall not eat any of it.

“Finally the old woman said to the boy:

—Go up to the hut over there. There will be two eggs in it. The one which says: ‘take me, take me,’ you will not take. The one which utters nothing will be the one which you shall take and, once having reached a suitable place, you will break it by casting it to the ground. There will emerge from it many things, including the plate which you will return to your mother.

“The boy went up to the hut. One egg began saying to him: ‘take me, take me.’ The boy said to himself: ‘I would leave the one which speaks and take the one which does not.’ No sooner had he spoken than he carried away the one which had said: ‘take me, take me.’ Having arrived at home, he fetched his mother as well as his father, his brothers as well as his sisters, in short, his entire family, and gathered them round him. He then broke the egg by letting it fall to the ground. Smack!

“Some wicked men emerged from the egg, and stabbed them all to death.”

This tale has been found to be spread over a large part of Africa. Similar stories have been found, in a way parallel, on the other five continents, under the title *Aquatic Mother*. It makes our task easier to have an analysis on this theme by G. Durand, from which we have largely drawn our inspiration.¹⁰

¹⁰ Durand G., *Structures Anthropologiques et l'Imaginaire*, Paris: P.U.F., p. 391 ff.

The story is dominated, in all its vicissitudes, by a bipartite structure. It contains two volets, dedicated to the orphan and the natural son respectively. Both are perfectly synchronous and symmetric to one another.

Each volet appears as a self-contained tale, and repeats the totality of events in the other, in inverse synchronism.

This inversion further unfolds under the ambivalence in the figure of the old woman and thus constitutes the outline of the whole Myth.

Finally, the story contains "the archetype of aquatic descent" assimilable to an initiating ritual. The numerical correspondences, since they have the world as an archetype, become a convenient procedure to follow in the construction of the latter. Every presentation of the world being a model, the presence of numbers in the myth will be symbolic.

Here it is the number two to which value is given: the adventure told in two sequences is that of two youths: they have each to endure two ordeals; finally the egg gives a second dimension to the offer of oneself.

The myth in two parts depicts cosmological pairs—and oppositions—Day and Night, Heaven and Earth (the High and the Low), Man and Woman, the Strong and the Weak, the Right and the Left. Good and Evil. It is the last pair to which value is given here, twice: in the two-fold structure of the tale and in the ambivalence of the old woman. As to the structure of the inversion of values, it is found at four levels.

In a synchronous repetition, the myth holds in store for the second protagonist the same events as for the first. Yet the bad character of the son makes them have exactly opposite outcomes: the orphan, humble and submissive, becomes rich while the natural son, arrogant and proud, perishes with the rest of his family.

The first inversion is that of the rewards. These lie in a Lilliputian container, an egg, with power and importance far out of proportion to its size.

The injunctions made by the old woman to the two youths to act in the way contrary to that proposed by the eggs constitute the third reversal of values.

Finally, the central figure takes on a countenance which is among the most misleading: under her repulsive appearance

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goodness and generosity are hidden. In this, she is comparable to the Beast in the European tale of *Beauty and the Beast*.

"Semantically, inversion is a direct transmutation of values of imagination" effected by a psychological mechanism, and "is the essence of the euphemism which tends right to irony itself... The procedure lies essentially in forming the positive by the negative."¹¹

Thus appearances are deceiving:

The old woman, with an animal-like appearance, is, in reality, a good fairy.

The language of the eggs which place themselves before the two youths, to be chosen, is deceptive and leads to error on the question of their true capacities: "they present what they are under the guise of not being it."

Likewise, to the Lilliputian contents of the egg correspond the abundant wealth of a veritable gold mine, and the power attached to it.

Elsewhere, it is the dwarfish David who triumphs over the giant Goliath; it is Jesus Christ under the guise of the hungry beggar, the thirsty traveller, the widow, the defenseless orphan, or the next nameless soul...

Thus it is noted that inversion is one of the constants of "the literature of imagination, from the *confidants* and *confidentes* of classical tragedy, to the unexpected turns of events in detective novels in which the roles of the sadistic murderer and the quiet and unsuspected honest man are reversed."¹²

It is inversion which is expressed by popular wisdom in the form of those opened lockets which are the proverbs:

- To the rogue, a rogue and a half (French)
- As he was biter so was he bit (French)
- Something always comes of misfortune (French)
- The wolf's mourning is the fox's feast (Arab)
- Sorrow can be a bridge to happiness (Japanese)

The last mark of the tale is that it is inscribed more in space than in time. This space is replete with liquidity: from the washing of the dishes to the allusion to liquid contained in the egg, by way of the descent through the river.

The liquid universe is here symbolic of the cosmic aquatic

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 221.

cycle: the waters are at the beginning of everything, as a primordial substance containing, *in posse*, all virtualities, all germs, and all forms. Here they pre-exist the two actors and the acts which they will perform in their midst. The ground of what is to come, by their density, and guide, by their free and living fluidity, they escort and direct the course of events, of those phenomena which, through a slow and mysterious working, will, at the end of the adventure, result in a kind of creation. The water of the river joins the primordial waters from which all modes have issued.¹³

Contact with the river signifies for the orphan and the son the beginning of their initiatory route. Stepping into the water is equivalent to returning to the womb of the Mother, in which will take place the slow gestation and which will propel in time the parturition of the two embryos which are the two heroes. The winding course of the river, itself having the form of a labyrinth, the scene of initiations, is assimilable to the bowels of the Mother.

At the end of the process the orphan and the son are other than what they were at the beginning: they are "reborn," having received in virtue of the immersion, baptism, the outward sign of this regeneration, as did Moses and Jesus.

The old woman takes on new attributes: living amid the waters, she is infused with their force; she is their guardian and acts as distributor and controller of their power of fertility and re-creation.

We shall, as we have said, allude to written literature, indicating some directions for further research—which we intend to carry out—rather than beginning to undertake a study which the abundance of material would not allow us to conduct fruitfully.

At the level of written literature, in its most developed forms, the *mythos* is nearly completely eclipsed by the *logos* and one has to be a philosopher of the imaginary in order to reveal, under these new forms of words, the trace of what was originally signified, in its extension. Today Myth is disguised. Its

¹³ Cf. Parrinder, Edward Geoffrey, *African Mythology*, London, Hamlyn, 1967, p. 20; cf. also Eliade, Mircea, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, trans. Philip Mairet, London, Harvill, 1960, p. 35.

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use in language and its utilization in literature have become unconscious.

The question is well one of disguise and not of disappearance, for myth could not disappear, as it is consubstantial with human society. If in modern societies myth is not present in the capacity of an adhesive, which is its function in traditional societies, it is no less evident that there remain certain practices or acts of "participation," certain rites which bear witness—in less elaborate and less authentic a way, granted—to the ever-continued presence of the degraded and desanctified myth, and to the need felt unconsciously by modern man for a certain return to sources. (Christianity and Marxist communism, myths *par excellence*, are not here concerned).

What are the Epiphany, those feasts and rejoicings around New Year, at births, baptisms and marriages, and on the occasion of the construction or the opening of a building, if not testimonials to the truth that the great mythical themes linger, instilled in the obscure psychic actuality of contemporary man? One could point out instruction or education, in a word, culture, in which a mythic behaviour is detected in the holding up to new generations of the deeds and achievements (which by now have become paradigms) of the heroes of generations past. These heroes can be imaginary as in novels and the cinema; the imitation of their actions informs against the need, experienced by modern man, to escape his present condition which encloses him within the narrow confines of historical time, in order to reinstate the Great Primordial Mythical Time.

Modern literary productions in their essence and in their form are not exempt from being part of this quest. They are inspired by mythical archetypes.

Let us leave aside lyric poetry whose language is the product of an effort to make it different from the current everyday language, which seeks to remove, to abolish time and History and which, in virtue of this fact, in its structure as well as in the function which it assumes, excellently prolongs the Myth, in order that we may consider the novel where mythic models abound.

Writes Mircea Eliade on this subject:

"The difficulties and trials that a novelist's hero has to pass through are prefigured in the adventures of the mythic Heroes.

It has been possible also to show how the mythic themes of the primordial waters, of the isles of paradise, of the quest of the Holy Grail, of heroic and mystical initiation, etc., still dominate modern European literature. Quite recently we have seen, in surrealism, a prodigious outburst of mythical themes and primordial symbols. As for the literature of the bookstalls, its mythological character is obvious. Every popular novel has to present the exemplary struggle between Good and Evil, the hero and the villain (modern incarnations of the Demon), and repeat one of those universal motives of folklore, the persecuted young woman, salvation by love, the unknown protector, etc. Even detective novels, as Roger Caillois has so well demonstrated, are full of mythological themes.”¹⁴

So much for the essence.

As far as form is concerned, vocabulary has preserved some residue of mythic consciousness. “Mr. Leenhardt has ingeniously shown the persistence of this mythic reading of the world in certain terms of our [French] language. The only highland vocabulary presents us in effect with words like: *tête, couronne, dent, gorge, col, memelon, flanc, côte, dos, croupe, culée, pied, ossature*, etc. We have stopped viewing the mountains as just so many giants. Our words unconsciously retain the fossilized wreckage of a vanished vision of the world, or one deprived of its direct influence, having become simply allegorical.”¹⁵

But it is above all in that part of the rhetorical devices which comes under the name ‘figures of speech’ that there appear the close affinities between literature and the imaginary. The most important property of Rhetoric is expression, that is to say, the transcription of a thing signified through a signifying process, “through a debasement of the meaningfulness of symbols.” “All of rhetoric hinges on this metaphoric power of the transposition (*translatio*) of meaning. All expression adds to the strict sense the aura, the halo, of style, and rhetoric proceeds toward poetry which is scorned. This is what appears in the metaphoric procedures which go from simple comparison to the more subtle provinces of metonymy, synecdoche, antonomasia and catachresis: they all bring about a warped objectivity; they all consist in

¹⁴ Eliade, Mircea, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, p. 35. Cf. also Gusdorf, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Gusdorf, G. *op. cit.*, p. 16.

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rising above the strict sense, the residue of linguistic development, to the primitive life of the figurative meaning, in transmuting endlessly the letter into the spirit."¹⁶

Literature is a degeneration of Myth allured to intellect. Intellect, in transcribing the Myth, gives it a well-considered bill of goods, an autonomous thought, released from Nature and, consequently, disembodied. Then Myth, by the action of poets and thinkers, becomes supernatural, symbolic of indissociable Reality and of Totality which it was.

Literature is the Sin of Myth which has become conscious of itself and has laid itself bare in its nudity as myth.

¹⁶ Durand, G., *op. cit.*, pp. 452-456.