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The traces of certain collisions: contemporary writing and old tropes

Abstract:

I grew up immersed in mythology, voraciously reading the tales of ancient times, willingly suspending disbelief so that I could accompany characters through unfamiliar worlds, believing in the transformative power of an unfamiliar logic and imaginatively participating in impossible acts of fight or flight. Rocks could talk to humans, humans could become birds or trees, the gods walked among us: it all made perfect sense. I am not alone in my fascination. Myths seem to have been with us for as long as we have been human beings and they shape us through their capacity to deliver form within the chaos of everyday life (Miller 2000, 64): they exploit the operations of metaphor and thus structure our ways of thinking (Behler 2000, 82) and, by filling our imaginations, they fit us for cultural contexts (Foucault 1998, 239).

Why we have myths is a subject of ongoing debate among mythologists, psychoanalysts, philosophers and narratologists. But the study of mythology is a process of constant collisions – theory clashing with theory, story colliding with science. In this paper I want to add another collision, and discuss how contemporary writing might bump up against tradition mythology to produce something new. The reason is not only that mythology has enduring value, but also that publishers and writers are showing a revived interest in myth and in what it might add to contemporary storytelling. The result is often a productive collision between two sets of values and aesthetics: the ancient and the contemporary. And the novels that emerge from this often contain collisions of their own – between men and women, between self-interest and equity, between courage and venality. These collisions are relational, part of 'the glue of being' (Mertz 1996, 25), and hence are ethical as well as lyrical. This paper explores the context for myths, their contradictions and complexities, and the possibility of re-appropriating them not only to tell stories in a fresh way but also to find ways of thinking that are poetic as well as scholarly.

Biographical note:

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> *Even now that they are dead, myths still continue to excite and cast their shadow on the imagination of mankind.* (Roger Caillois 2003, 116)

1. Introduction

The myths of the ancient world keep returning, spiralling through the millennia to emerge and re-emerge in philosophy, art, music, poetry, film and fiction. They are tropes that have shaped my sense of story, from the long bed-bound days of my childhood winters when I first encountered the Greek and Roman and Sumerian myths, to now when I am beginning to produce my own re-visions of the stories. I am not alone in this: those ancient stories have inspired some very significant creative practitioners across the ages, and audiences seem equally eager to consume new versions of old stories.

Just a handful of the recent retellings include Homer's *Iliad* in the form of Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* in 2004 and David Malouf's *Ransom* in 2009, and its sequel *The Odyssey* in Zachary Mason's *The lost books of the Odyssey: a novel* (2010), Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), and the Coen brothers' movie *O brother, where art thou?* (2000). Victor Pelevin's *The helmet of horror* (2006) places the Minotaur and his nemesis, Theseus, in the 21st century, while the Titans re-enter the world in Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* (2005), and in Tarsem Singh's movie *The immortals* (2011).

Canongate, which publishes an award-winning series titled The Myths, provides an explanation for the enduring interest in the form:

> Myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives – they explore our desires, our fears, our longings, and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human. (Canongate 2005)

Universal and timeless stories; this is an explanation that appears across the popular and literary discussions of myth and its endurance in Western culture. I suspect it is an insufficient explanation, and in this essay I explore the complexities that I find in using myth as a tool for thinking as well as creating.

2. Myth and reason

Myth is surprisingly useful for thought, given that those of us raised and trained in Western orthodoxy have been schooled in the fundamentals of the Western Enlightenment. In this context, knowledge is predicated on wrestling with evidence and argument, and working with testable hunches and demonstrable facts. This is not a context sympathetic to mythology: 'Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world', writes Theodor Adorno. 'It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge' (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002, 1). In this view myth is associated not with science, but with a kind of un-reason: positioned outside the domain of knowledge and within the realm of fantasy.

And yet it is rare that reason, logic or evidentiary knowledge in fact dominate human thought. The practices and beliefs of everyday people seem more often to be predicated on personal opinion, affect, and the impact of story. Similarly, the practices

and impulses of investigative science – a domain often identified as the bastion of Enlightenment reason – are predicated not only on empirical evidence and the scientific method, but also on hunches, intuition and creative processes.

But this is not an entirely valid perspective. Though myth and reason remain discrete ways of thinking (Caillois 2003, 117), they are more closely allied than the conventional view of 'science' might suggest. This should not come as any surprise: reality is complex and often underdetermined, and few people will be able to conduct their lives on the basis of reason alone. Rather, people tend to rely on emotional or habituated responses, and to protect themselves from complexity and discomfort by attending not to rational processes of understanding, but to what is familiar and what is of interest. This is what William James termed 'selective attention':

> Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no *interest* for me. *My experience is what I agree to attend to*. Only those items which I *notice* shape my mind – without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. (James 2007 [1890], 402)

My experience is what I agree to attend to. How then, as writers, is it possible to jolt a potential reader out of the constraints of selective attention, to seduce them instead into paying attention to something outside their experience? How to set up a new set of parameters that will provide them with an 'intelligible perspective', and a way of mining the possibilities of 'utter chaos'?

Myth provides an answer, because its use of impossible situations can lead to a moment of collision between the known and the unknown, which can shake readers out of their default positions and interrupt their selective attention. Artist William Kentridge makes this point, insisting that only a shock of some sort can cause audiences to be 'more than momentarily moved' (in Christov-Bakargiev 1998, 56). Myth, conjuring up events and individuals predicated both on fantasy (a conscious process of imagination) and on phantasy (unconscious or preconscious processes),[1] can provide this shock. A boy flies toward the sun on wings of feather and wax, and then falls to his death; a young woman, brokenhearted, is changed from person to mere echo; the youth who rejected her in favour of his own beauty is transformed into a flower; a warrior prince comes up against a murderous bull-man and begins the ruin of a kingdom. These impossible situations that nonetheless draw on very familiar elements (love, thrill, vanity, courage), and frequently incorporate shocking scenes of violence, combine the titillation of sex-and-violence, the allure of the wildly improbable and the comfort of the known. This combination is one that is, I suggest, well positioned to attract the interest of readers, *enter into their experience*, and begin to *shape their minds*.

3. Collision and change

Story after story from the ancient world deals with conflict between communities, and with the four key conflicts identified by narratologists as vital for fiction.[2] Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is perhaps the best-known collection of accounts of conflict, but collision and change emerge across the ancient narratives. In the body of mythology,

someone is always marked or changed; someone's heart or body or honour is always damaged; someone is always dying. These changes are not, however, of the same order as the changes in contemporary literary narratives because in myths, the conflict typically results in a magical, an impossible, transformation. Myth is not concerned with empirical reality, but with story; indeed, the word itself comes from the Greek *mythos*, meaning *speech, thought, story*. A myth, then, can be understood as something that generates ways of saying and thinking, and consequently provides spaces in which cultural experiences can be portrayed and explored. Giambattisto Vico implies this, arguing that myth offers 'true and trustworthy histories of the customs of the most ancient peoples of Greece … stories of the times' (Vico 1948 [1725], 6). This is echoed by Michel de Certeau who writes, some centuries later, that the contemporary novel acts as 'the zoo of everyday practices' (1984, 78) – a place to visit, a place in which to experience, within the safe trajectory of story, the sorts of things that mattered to the ancients, and the ethical and epistemological frameworks of their culture.

Viewed in this way, it is possible to discount the Enlightenment view of myth, and instead perceive it as a discourse that is directed toward knowledge. August Schlegel suggested this, writing that myth is 'a universal and necessary product of human poetic power … a metaphorical language of reason' (in Behler 2000, 81).[3] Schlegel's view is supported by 20th-century mythologists who likewise argue that myth constitutes a knowledge framework. Joseph Campbell, for example, takes this position on the basis that myth is capable of 'seizing the idea and facilitating its epiphany' (1951, 48): that is, capable of an act that might include violence ('seizing'); the generation of connections (through metaphor); and the production of change (through the epiphany). Myths are not merely stories or works of imagination; they are also vehicles for the *speech, thought, story* we use at moments of reflection and analysis; that make visible the limits of cultural knowing. They allow writers to look directly at the chaos and the contradictory elements of everyday life, and to take up those tools for thought that have been circulating in our cultures for millennia.

Myth also comprises stories that 'embod[y] a people's deepest insights into its origins and destiny' (Miller 2001, 5); and not only its insights, but also its anxieties. We cannot know precisely what our origins were or our destiny might be, but we can tell and retell stories in an attempt to accommodate what we can never really know or control. As Victor Pelevin observes, 'We can argue about whether we were ceaselessly borne back into the past or relentlessly pushed forward into the future, but in fact we never moved anywhere at all' (2006, ix). We wander blind through the corridors of the labyrinth, banging up against its walls.

4. The trace

Myths, though, perhaps allow us to trace our way through the dark. They deliver form within the chaos of everyday life (Miller 2000, 64) and, by filling our imaginations, they fit us for our cultural contexts (Foucault 1998, 239). But myths are not stable. As we read and reread or tell and retell the myths, the content of those stories changes – sometimes subtly, sometimes more radically. Each new reader and each new

(re)writer of those tales leaves on them what Italo Calvino calls 'the traces of readings previous to ours', while the myths themselves 'bring in their wake the traces they themselves have left on the culture or cultures they have passed through' (Calvino 1986, 128). Imagine myth as a sheet of paper covered in pigment. As it is passed from hand to hand, it leaves a smudge of colour on each person; and it takes from each person the mark of their hand, the acids on their skin, the faint imprint of fingerprints, the dust they have picked up in their day-to-day activities. It changes them; it is changed by them.

Something similar happens to stories as a result of the passage of time, and of cultural and personal changes. For instance, I still have the copy of Homer's *Odyssey* that I read when I was eight, but it is not the same story that I read now, even though I am holding the same book. I have been changed, through decades of living and looking and learning, and the story has changed too. The representation in the original of the qualities of masculinity and of what counts as nobility and ethics, the meaning of leadership and camaraderie, and the relations between men and women: all are now quite alien, at least to my educated-liberal understanding. In consequence the story is no longer what it was and I cannot find a way back to my personal experience of the origin. How much less possible is it for me to understand its identity and its meaning as they obtained a century ago, five centuries, a millennium? I trace my way through the traces of its history and all I find are more traces.

In my current creative research I am tracing my own path through a small collection of ancient stories, adding my own traces to them as I rewrite them; changing them, and changing myself and my own understandings, at the same time. The mythological situation that has captured me is the one that deals with Icarus, Daedalus, and the royal family of Crete. At the heart of these tales is the labyrinth, and in attempting to craft my own sense of that environment, I find myself wandering through a new kind of labyrinth, one whose corridors lead to other cultures, other historical epochs. The residents of Crete reappear in North American antiquity, in Indonesian myth and in the stories of ancient Sumer. The trickster, the magic man, the goddess, the fecund fatal mother, the ill-fated lover, the boy who tried to fly to the sun: all occupy multiple parts of the labyrinth, playing similar but different roles. Their appearance and reappearance across time and cultures almost give credence to the insistence of mythologists like Joseph Campbell that myths are a biological feature (1951, 55).[4]

But this stymies my efforts to build my own contemporary version of the myths because I cannot easily find a path through all the possibilities. The story is never there, or not reliably there; and as I trace its various paths, I find myself lost in the process. I should have known; there is no Ur-version of any myth, writes Marina Warner (1994, 8); there is no beginning, writes Jacques Derrida. All we have are variants, or possibilities, and the trace I think I see is only a presence in absence, 'presence-absence' (Derrida 1976, 71), an origin that *is-not*, a space that presents itself as the starting point when in fact it is only a point on the journey.

5. Tangled tales

The effect is a concatenation of voices, a tangled ball of narrative threads. And they are often threads of story rather than a completed tale. Many of the myths that have come down through the centuries exist only as fragments and most are told by many different authors. The story of Icarus and Crete, for instance, is told as both story and history by (among others) Ovid, Apollodorus, Pausanius, Euripides, Catullus, Severus, Libanius, Herodotus, Strabo, Philostratus and Pliny. And the Icarus myth is only one of many that were told and retold by the ancients, long before it was relayed to us by way of the artists and writers of the Renaissance, the baroque, the neoclassical and the Romantic periods. Layer upon layer of story.

In *Tanglewreck*, Jeanette Winterson writes of time that it:

> is always present, but buried layer by layer under what people call Now. Today lies on top of yesterday, and yesterday lies on top of the day before, and so on down the layers of history, until the layers are so thick that the voices underneath are muffled to whispers. (2006, 20)

Time, comprised of voices whispering the traces of stories that have endured, and that do more than endure: they weave together the past and the present. Roger Caillois describes myth as comprising 'two converging strands of determinations' (2003, 116) operating according to 'a form of vertical integration' and 'a form of horizontal integration' (2003, 118). Both depictions suggest the warp and weft of a piece of fabric, fabric that provides a canvas on which to express enduring questions of human being and of cultural formations. But pick at that weaving, and it may disintegrate into a handful of threads: it is a work of human creativity and not a natural phenomenon. It has no Ur-form, no fundamental being; it is only 'one of the representatives of the trace in general', writes Derrida, 'it is not the trace itself. *The trace itself does not exist*' (1976, 167).

I give up on the attempt to find the originary tale, and decide to think instead in mythological terms – in terms of *speech, thought, story*. Like other writers who retell those stories, who fill the gaps in the originals, I will aim to make what Jeanette Winterson calls 'cover versions'. Winterson says, of her decision to produce a work for the Canongate series:

> I like to take stories we think we know and record them differently. In the re-telling comes a new emphasis or bias, and the new arrangement of the key elements demands that fresh material be injected into the existing text. (Winterson 2005, xiv)

Margaret Atwood makes much the same point in discussing her own contribution to Canongate's series: her reworking of the *Odyssey*. This is a reworking that is effectively an intervention, because Odysseus plays a very small part, and the story is set on his home island of Ithaca, not – as is the original – scattered across the Mediterranean. The narrator and point of focalisation is Odysseus' neglected, faithful wife Penelope, and her account sheds a new light on Odysseus, on their son Telemachus and on how men behaved towards women in the original tale. Atwood wrote this story, she says, because 'The story as told in the *Odyssey* doesn't hold

water. There are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself' (Atwood 2005, xv).

The story is indeed built on inconsistencies: how to reconcile a clever, insightful and inventive hero with the man who returns home to behave only like a brute? How to reconcile the representation of an intelligent, engaging woman as enduringly patient and faithful despite the inevitable frustrations of two decades of neglect? Atwood teases out some inconsistencies by placing Penelope at centre stage and allowing her to come across as a less-than-reliable narrator. Penelope's absolute insistence on her constant loyalty to her husband, for example, leads me to doubt that very fidelity; particularly since her maids are quite blunt about the fact that she did, in fact, have sexual relations with her suitors. Again, Penelope insists on her intimacy with her maids and her deep affection for them, but they were, after all, slaves and not friends; and she did not protect them from her suitors, or from their tragic end at the hands of her husband and her son.

Bronislaw Malinowski's anthropological explanation of the role of myth provides a way of thinking through what Atwood is doing, and to what effect:

> Myth, as a statement of primeval reality which still lives in present-day life and as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief. … The function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events. (2004, 122)

The Homeric version represented Penelope as a stereotype of the good wife, and the maids as discourteous, libidinous and ungrateful, thereby strengthening a patriarchal tradition and overlaying the violence and injustice of this story with 'a retrospective pattern of moral values [and] sociological order'. Atwood's story, by contrast, assaults that same tradition, overlays the earlier narrative threads with contemporary values and beliefs, and traces the story back not to a better reality, but to one that is coarse, unjust and seamy.

6. A conclusion

My own cover version of the Icarus stories begin with a suspension of disbelief; I pretend to myself that Daedalus, the greatest artist and architect of the ancient world, in fact existed in history. I explore the representations of his son; his practically invisible wife; his king and queen, and their children Ariadne and Asterion the Minotaur. I read up on the history of the relationship between Athens and Crete, trace out the weaving of story and fact, of history and shadows, that comprises the world of this myth. In the ancient literature I read poets, playwrights, philosophers and historians; moving up through the centuries I read their descendants, who are still telling and reworking the old stories, still explaining and arguing and justifying.

The characters from the early versions, creatures of myth and of history, shift and slide across the pages I read, and across the new versions I am inventing in my head. Their movements make me think of the dance performed on the labyrinth-dance floor in Homer's account; or of the movement of the shuttle, if I adopt Caillois' weaving

metaphor. There is no origin as such, so I can make my own selection of 'the truth' from the options available to me in the literature. Daedalus may hail from Athens, or from Crete. He may be an architect, an artist or an inventor. His labyrinth may have been an open-air dance floor, as Homer describes in *The Shield of Achilles,* or the nightmare underground prison in Ovid's version. Icarus may have fallen to his death, scorched by the sun, or have drowned after falling out of a boat. The Athenian youths may have been sent as a tribute to Crete every year, every seven years or every nine years. The queen, Pasiphaë, may have fallen in love with a bull, or with a soldier. Her daughter Ariadne may have suicided on Naxos, or been caught up by the gods to the stars, or married Bacchus and lived happily ever after. And so on. The stories twist and turn even across the versions of the ancient writers, each of whom interpreted the raw ideas according to his[5] perspective, each of whom added something new, subtracted something old. I aim to add my own perspective to them, to subtract the elements that do not convince me. In this I am participating in a pattern of narration that is pretty much as old as mythology itself.

But is it reasonable to take a story that emerged in a very different episteme and a very different ethical context, and apply a twenty-first-century framework to it? Is it possible to retell those ancient stories without sanitising them, colonising them and taming them? Perhaps. But I am not sure these are the right questions to ask. If myth is indeed 'a metaphorical language of reason' (August Schlegel) and an exploration of 'a people's deepest insights into its origins and destiny' (J Hillis Miller); and if there is in fact no point of origin (Marina Warner, Jacques Derrida), then perhaps we owe no debt to earlier iterations of the tales, and can do them no harm. Those stories have, after all, evaded resolution for something like 3000 years. Perhaps what matters more than an attempt to identify and preserve an origin is a commitment to a continual re-exploration of the possibilities offered by chaos, by catachresis, and of the poetry that resides at the heart of language. Perhaps what will be achieved is a productive collision between different sets of values and aesthetics, and explorations of relationality or what the Greeks called the *ontoglial*, 'the glue of being' (Mertz 1996, 25). Tracing the lines that flow and ebb across cultures and centuries, between moments of collision, it may prove possible to exploit that relational glue in the interests of building not just story, but also knowledge about the quality of being. As Foucault observes:

> the poet is he who, beneath the named, constantly expected differences, rediscovers the buried kinships between things, their scattered resemblances. Beneath the established signs ... He hears another, deeper discourse, which recalls the time when words sparkled in the universal resemblance of things: the Sovereignty of the Same, so difficult to express, effaces in its language the distinction between signs. (Foucault 2002, 49)[6]

Endnotes

1. This distinction comes from Freud's work, particularly his 1911 essay 'Formulations on the two principles of mental functioning'.

2. For Gerald Prince, these are conflicts with fate/the divine; with the social or physical environment; with other human beings; or with themselves (Prince 2003, 1959).

3. I cite Schlegel via Behler because I cannot access a copy of the original in English and my German is too poor to provide a reliable English version.

4. Campbell receives some support from an unexpected source: Roger Caillois, who points out that psychoanalysis has not offered a convincing explanation for the continued impact of myths, and writes that 'we must look to biology' (2003, 116) to understand the role of myths in our lives and in our psychology.

5. Among the ancients writing on the crowd from Crete, I have only found male authors.

6. I would like to acknowledge, with thanks, Professor Andrew Melrose, University of Winchester, for his comments on an earlier version of this draft; Associate Professor Paul Hetherington, University of Canberra, for talking through the ideas with me; and the anonymous referees whose generous reading provided me with a refined sense of the project.

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