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Myths and Modernity: Evaluation of Eliot's Mythical Methods

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ABSTRACT

Eliot's mythical methods well serve his "Traditional Modernist' purpose, to administer to and correct the modern world, instead of collaborating with it. Delineated from Jung's collective consciousness, myths for Eliot are utilities to bridge the rupture between the past and the present, escapes off individuality and personality to achieve objectivity. Yet, the paradox remains unresolved between the longing for order and rationality through the nostalgia for the very world of folly and irrationality of the mythic world. Also, Eliot mythic methods work towards dogmatism and totalitarianism, violating the dialectic and intertextual nature of myths.

Keywords: Dogmatism, Modernity, Mythic Methods, T.S. Eliot, Totalitarianism.

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1. Modernism(s)/modernization(s): An overview

I am beginning to feel the drunkenness that this agitated, tumultuous life plunges you into. With such a multitude of objects passing before my eyes, I'm getting dizzy. Of all the things that strike me, there is none that holds my heart, yet all of them together disturb my feelings, so that I forget what I am and who I belong to.²

Rousseau thus features his naked contact with modern life in the 18th century. His sense of rootlessness and timelessness, mixed with agitation and tumult, envisages the advent of modernism/modernization. Nevertheless, it is only since the French Revolution until the end of 19th century that the ideas of modernization and modernism emerge and unfold. Nietzsche predicates the death of God, and the advent of nihilism, whereas Marx appears to be more dialectic:

On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces which no epoch of human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors of the latter times of the Roman Empire... At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. [...] All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and stultifying human life into a ma-

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² Berman, Marshall, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (London: Verso, 1983) p.19.

terial force.³

The paradox of modernism, namely, scientific and technological advancement accompanied by devastation, continues overwhelmingly into the 20th century, taking in virtually the whole world, and lurches far more towards polarities:

Modernity is either embraced with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm, or else condemned with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt; incapable of being shaped or changed by modern men.⁴

The split in the idea of modernism/modernization is confirmed by Calinescu in his book *Five Faces of Modernity*, which elaborates the multi-facets of Modernity.

What is certain is that at some point during the first half of the nineteenth century an irreversible split occurred between modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization – a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought by capitalism – and modernity as an aesthetic concept.⁵

Calinescu further defines the former as bourgeois modernity, characterized by its doctrine in progress and the confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology. Conversely, modernity as an aesthetic concept, or cultural modernity, rejects bourgeois modernity and its consuming passion.

It was disgusted with the middle-class scale of values and expressed its disgust through the most diverse means, ranging from rebellion, anarchy, and apocalypticism to aristocratic self-exile.⁶

Noticeably, Eliot's perception of modern world identifies, rather, with the later one. Peter Brooker in his introduction to the book *Modernism/Postmodernism* employs the term 'Traditionalist Modernist' (first used by Frank Kermode) to refer to those 'modernists' who came to prescribe a 'modern' art which would administer to and correct 'the modern world, instead of collaborating with it.⁷ And Eliot observably falls within the category of traditionalist modernist. "Eliot, [...] as we can see, saw modern art and the contemporary world as drastically at odds; related [...] as order is to anarchy."⁸

If modern art and modern world are at odds as order is to anarchy, then, what is capable to bridge the two polarities? In an essay entitled "*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*", which was published in 1923, Eliot proposed one possible way – the mythical method.

It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. [...] Instead of the narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, [...] a step toward making the modern world possible for art, [...]⁹

Eliot clearly perceives the modern world as the immense panorama of futility and anarchy. Unambiguously, he hinges on the mythical method to give shape and significance to futility, and control and order over anarchy. Then, what exactly are Eliot's ideas of myth? And what roles does mythical method play in modernism? And how does this mythical method fulfill Eliot's expectations of works of art? Does this mythical method fulfill Eliot's purposes duly? Paragraphs below will contribute towards unraveling the mysteries surrounding the ideas of myth and the mythical method.

2. The roles of Eliot's mythical method

The common misconception about myths is that myths are merely primitive fictions, illusions, or opinions based upon false reasoning. However, Carl Gustav Jung, in his essay "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry", redefines myths and proposes the concept of 'collective unconsciousness', and moreover, elucidates the relationship between myths, art, and collective unconsciousness.¹⁰

³ Berman, Marshall, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* p.19-20

⁴ Ibid. p. 24

⁵ Calinescu, Matei, *Five Faces of Modernity*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997) p.41

⁶ Calinescu, Matei, *Five Faces of Modernity*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997) p.41

⁷ Brooker, Peter, *Modernism/Postmodernism*, (Essex: Longman, 1992) p.6

⁸ Ibid. p.6

⁹ Rainy, Lawrence ed., *Modernism: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) p. 167

¹⁰ Jung defines collective unconsciousness in contrast to the personal unconscious, which is relatively a thin layer below the threshold of consciousness. However, the collective unconsciousness does not imply inborn ideas, but rather, suggests inborn possibilities of ideas that set bounds to even the boldest fantasy and keep our fantasy activity within certain categories: a priori ideas, as it were, the existence of which cannot be ascertained except from their effects. For more details, please refer to

Jung in that article introduces the concept of 'collective unconsciousness':

Those acts and mental patterns shared either by members of a culture or universally by all human beings, which, under certain conditions, manifest themselves as archetypes -- images, patterns, and symbols that are often seen in dreams or fantasies and that appear as themes in mythology, religion, and fairy tales.¹¹

The recurrent themes in mythologies, according to Jung, are the manifestations of the 'collective unconsciousness'. Myths, therefore, are "the projections of innate psychic phenomena".¹² In other words, myths are the channels through which the 'collective unconsciousness' of human kind are released or unleashed. Furthermore, according to Jung, work of art, "[...] has its source not from the personal unconscious of the poet, but in a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind";¹³ That is, works of art have their sources not from the personal conscious of the poet, as had been commonly assumed, but from the common heritage of mankind, specifically, the 'collective unconsciousness'. Nevertheless, works of art also function as the medium through which 'collective unconsciousness' are articulated or released. Therefore, both myths and works of art are the medium through which 'the collective unconsciousness' can be unleashed. When the unnamable -- the 'collective unconsciousness' is made concrete by the reappearance of mythological situations, it is as though chords in us were struck. And there are magic and power accompanying the unleashing of those mysterious forces which Jung expresses with awe:

The moment when this mythological situation reappears is always characterized by a peculiar emotional intensity; it is as though chords in us were struck that had never resounded before, or as though forces whose existence we never suspected were unloosed.¹⁴

Jung's theory of *collective unconscious* was published in 1917, which unambiguously, influenced Eliot, who had his major poem *The Waste Land* published in 1922, and his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" published in 1919. Jung's influence to Eliot is clearly manifested in Eliot's essay "Tradition and Individual Talent". In this essay, Eliot insists that a poet should maintain a consciousness of past in order to sustain a tradition; and furthermore, the composition of poetry commands the depersonalization of the poet. Why does Eliot's mythical method, or the ideas of myth plays such a central role in modernism. The following section discusses Jung's ideas of myth, as well as his theory on collective unconsciousness in relation to Eliot's mythical method.

For one thing, the mythical method helps to manipulate a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity. With the engulfing advancement of science and technology, and the devastating march of modernization, a rupture between past and present, between contemporaneity and antiquity was triggered off. Modern men's feelings of homelessness and timelessness are exemplified at the beginning quotation of Rousseau's. This rupture between past and present is also manifest in Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land*, where the rupture is laid bare by the infertility of the impotent Fisher King in modern *Waste Land* in contrast to the past prosperity and fertility. Eliot believes that it is the responsibility of the poet to procure a consciousness of past, or to maintain a historical sense so as to bridge the rupture between past and present.

[...] the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.¹⁵

It is hard not to associate Eliot's 'historical sense' or 'past consciousness' with Jung's ideas

Jung's essay "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry" in Zhongzai, Zhang etc. ed. *Selective Readings in 20th Century Western Critical Theory* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2003), p.231

¹¹ Jung, Carl Gustav, Zhongzai, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry" in Zhang etc. ed. *Selective Readings in 20th Century Western Critical Theory* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2003), p. 233

¹² Ibid., p.235

¹³ Jung, Carl Gustav, Zhongzai, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry" in Zhang etc. ed. *Selective Readings in 20th Century Western Critical Theory*. p. 233

¹⁴ Ibid. p.232

¹⁵ Eliot, T. S., "Tradition and Individual Talent" in Rainy, Lawrence ed., *Modernism: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p.152

about myth and 'collective unconsciousness'. Eliot's 'consciousness of past' or 'historical sense', to a degree, is the 'collective unconscious' made conscious through poets' mental engagements. As 'collective unconsciousness' is shared by all human beings from past to present, therefore, in making conscious the 'collective unconsciousness' through mental activities, poets manages to preserve the link between past and present. Moreover, as myths as well as works of art are manifestations of 'collective unconsciousness', therefore, the ideas of myths well serve to bridge the rupture between past and present. This conclusion is further supported by the ideas that "myth is ubiquitous in time as well as place. It is a dynamic factor everywhere in human society; it transcends time, uniting the past (traditional modes of belief) with the present (current values) and reaching toward the future (spiritual and cultural aspirations)."¹⁶ In Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land*, the primordial fertility myth is employed to link the sacred past with the present waste land, and more importantly, to express spiritual and cultural aspirations for the future. Therefore, the ideas of myth do serve to fuse past, present, even future together.

For another, the mythical method is a way for the artists to make escape from emotion and personality, thus achieving objectivity. In his essay entitled "Tradition and Individual Talents", Eliot emphasizes the "depersonalization" of poets. He maintains that the creation of works of art commands the continual surrender of the poet, as the poet is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.¹⁷ Therefore, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."¹⁸ It is clearly elucidated in Eliot's article that to be an individual talent requires the poet not to produce works of art which are 'expressions' of 'emotion' or 'personality', but try to attain 'impersonality' instead. The poet should have the 'mind of Europe' in mind, which is 'much more important than his own private mind'.¹⁹ For Eliot, the poet is only the medium through which the collective mind is conveyed. As a result, talented poets should be as impersonal as possible. To achieve impersonality or depersonalization in poetry composition, there should be no more suitable method than mythical method, for myths, as discussed before, are the representations of the 'collective consciousness'; And there is no more method as powerful as mythical method in uttering the voice of all mankind.

So it is not surprising that when an archetypal situation occurs we suddenly feel an extraordinary sense of release, as though transported, or caught up by an overwhelming power. At such moments we are no longer individuals, but the race; the voice of all mankind resounds in us.²⁰

The articulations via the assistance of myth are the voices of all mankind resounded in the artists, Jung thus relates.

The mythical method to date contributes to maintaining a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, and assists the poets in realizing depersonalization, thus attaining the 'objective correlative' which is desired by Eliot. By restoring the link between past and present, it is hoped that order and control will be delivered to the chaos and futility of the modern world. However, problems do arise. Subsequent discussion will be relating the problems of the mythical methods of Eliot.

3. Eliot's mythical method

Eliot in his notes to *The Waste Land* proclaims his indebtedness to James Frazer's book, *The Golden Bough*.²¹ Frazer, in this book, envisages that humanity progresses from magic, through religion, and so to science. However, Lawrence Coup in his book *Myth* points out the two paradoxes of Frazer. One paradox lies in Frazer's 'myth of mythlessness', that is, he approaches myths via rationality, which in turn, breaks the myths he has been studying. For another, he betrays a nostalgia for the mythic world

¹⁶ Guerin, Wilfred L. etc. eds., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1999) p.160

¹⁷ Eliot, T. S., "Tradition and Individual Talent" in Rainy, Lawrence ed., *Modernism: An Anthology*, p154

¹⁸ Ibid. p.156

¹⁹ Eliot, T. S., "Tradition and Individual Talent" in Rainy, Lawrence ed., *Modernism: An Anthology*, 153

²⁰ Jung, Carl Gustav, Zhongzai, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry" in Zhongzai, Zhang etc. ed. *Selective Readings in 20th Century Western Critical Theory* p.232

²¹ Rainy, Lawrence ed., *Modernism: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p.143

which he thinks is folly as opposed to the truth of the scientific world.²² It appears that Eliot is stuck in similar paradoxes. His longing for order and rationality is manifested through his nostalgia for the mythic world, which, for Frazer, is the very world of folly and irrationality.

The regrettable evolutionist proposal of an advance beyond magic and religion to science could be discarded, leaving only the idea of a global myth whose 'roots' were the basis of a collective legacy.²³

Then, Eliot's emphasis on the need for hierarchical order and Word as against chaos works towards perfectionism.

[...] despite its demonstration of chaos, *The Waste Land* is really about the need for order. It uses the paradigm of fertility as the framework for a transcendent vision. For, no matter how lacking the age may seem in hierarchical principles and in ideas of perfection, the aesthetic ordering of words which the poem achieves is intended to stand as a reminder of the power of the all-embracing Word.²⁴

The hierarchical order and dictatorial Word that Eliot desires to return to, narrated via the fertility paradigm, exist only as an ideal in language, and therefore, remain as elusive as the primitive harmony which Eliot's fundamental resort in *The Waste Land* rely on. Consequently, it can be concluded that Eliot's quest is "The quest for totality, for completeness, for perfection. That will never be achieved".²⁵

Moreover, Eliot's ideas of myth lack dynamics and dialectic spirit, therefore, works towards dogmatism and totalitarianism. The use and interpretation of myth should involve a continuing dialectic as argued by Coup.

We may come to see that it is the task of myth constantly to imply, but always to resist, completion. Myth might then be appreciated as that narrative mode of understanding which involves a continuing dialectic of same and other, of memory and desire, of ideology and utopia, of hierarchy and horizon, and of sacred and profane.²⁶

By privileging order over chaos, by imposing Word over words, Eliot's *Waste Land* is based upon a fundamental error, namely, the searching for a Transcendental Signified, which is typified in the poem by the Grail search. Above all, it is to remember "[...] that Jung identified his archetypes with a fixed, eternal world rather than a dynamic, historical one".²⁷ Eliot takes what Frazer in his book conveyed about culture as universal culture: "[...] he inferred from *The Golden Bough* the existence of 'culture', essential and universal",²⁸ whereas the true spirit of myth, according to Warner, resides in its dynamism:

Every telling of a myth is a part of that myth; there is no Ur-version, no authentic prototype, no true account.²⁹ [...] Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but – and this is fortunate – never set so hard they cannot be changed again.³⁰

Warner's ideas about myth emphasize the inter-textual quality of myth rather than accept myth as static and conveying 'universality'. In contrast, Eliot expects to find in myths 'order' and 'shape', which violates the true spirit of myth. Postmodernists acknowledge the legitimacy of the mythical method, but never the authority of this mythical method. The limits of the ideas of myths have to be acknowledged.

By not taking itself too seriously (that is, literally), myth can be taken seriously once again. Whence the curious paradox: it is precisely when the modern cult of 'demythization' is itself unmasked as a myth (an Enlightenment myth of absolute reason) that the mythic imaginary can recover its legitimacy. But this legitimacy resides in the very acknowledgement of the limits of myths – its inherent modest and faiblesse as an experience of truth. The weakness of myth is its strength. Its disclaimer to

²² Coupe, Lawrence, *Myth*, (London: Routledge 1997) p.24

²³ *Ibid.* p.31

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.35

²⁵ Coupe, Lawrence, *Myth*, (London: Routledge 1997) p.170

²⁶ Coupe, Lawrence, *Myth*, p.197

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.168

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.31

²⁹ Warner, Marina *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time*, (London: Vintage, 1994), p.8

³⁰ *Ibid.* 14

absolute truth is its claim to partial truth.³¹

Then, postmodernists insist on myths having multifaceted meanings whereas Eliot's ideas of myths are dogmatic:

Postmodernists insist on retaining myth as a secular interplay of multifaceted meanings; an interplay which dramatizes our cultural memories and traditions as historical interpretations rather than idolizing them as timeless dogmas.³²

To be more precise, order and shape, which Eliot is trying so hard to attain with his mythical method, turn out to be the very weakness of myths. Consequently, the mythical method, rather than fulfilling Eliot, betrays his purposes instead.

Ironically, Eliot proposes the mythical method utilizing James Joyce's *Ulysses* as a model, yet Joyce's *Ulysses*, rather than serving Eliot's purposes, does actually infringe on his purposes. Lawrence Coupe in *Myth* makes two reservations on *Ulysses*' fulfilling Eliot's purposes. For one thing, Eliot takes the notion of myth as paradigm to the point of an arid formalism. He privileges form over matter, structure over story for he assumes that what matters most about *Ulysses* is the paradigm inherited from Homer rather than the actual tale it tells.³³ Therefore, Eliot fails to

[...] give due weight to the dialectical nature of plot, which mediates between the temporal flow of events and the human need for hierarchy, stability, order. [...] The mythos of Homer becomes the logos which Joyce is credited with forcing upon his material. Thus Eliot effects his own kind of demythologization even as he proclaims the indispensability of myth,³⁴

For another, Eliot overlooks the order and mythic power embodied in 'the transformation of Nature by human and collective praxis',³⁵ and rather, emphasizes, 'a shape and a significance' imposed from above.

The possibility that human life is already structured, and already symbolic, before the artist begins his or her work, is precluded. It is as if mythopoeia, the capacity to produce myths and to provide a model of the world, belongs only to an exclusive elite.³⁶

For the above reasons, Coupe accuses Eliot of elitism, which, in my opinion, has done him justice.

More than that, Lawrence goes on to accuse Eliot of 'aestheticism', for it appears to him "The only human labour which Eliot in his review wishes to connect with myth is aesthetic." And by subliming Christian myths over other myths, with the yearning for Word transgressing everything else, Eliot can be easily labeled as culture Chauvinist. Besides, feminists would question the place of women in Eliot's hierarchical order, and won't be hesitated to label him as male Chauvinist as well, for, in Eliot's perspective, the voices of 'other', such as women's and others', which constitute the 'chaos' and 'words', should all get ready to be disciplined by 'order'.

4. Conclusion

The mythical method is central to traditionalist modernists such as Eliot, for it caters to the necessity to convey rampant chaos and anarchy of modern world as felt by them. And more than that, it delivers control and order to the rampant chaos and anarchy of modern world. On one hand, it manipulates a parallel between past and present, thus bridging the rupture between past and present. On the other hand, it serves as the medium through which the 'collective unconsciousness' is manifested. Works of art, instead of conveying petty personal concerns, attain universality. However, the mythical method, specifically, Eliot's mythical method, lacks dynamics and dialectic spirit, and works towards totalitarianism. The Mythical method, rather than fulfilling Eliot's attempt to convey order and shape to modern chaos and anarchy, betrays him instead, for the very power of myths lies in their dynamism and interplay. Then, Eliot's obsession with order, and its attempt to discipline chaos, rules out the voices of 'the other', and brings him accusations of cultural Chauvinism and male Chauvinism. Moreover, in ignoring the hidden power of laymen, and resorting to a power or order imposed from above, as embodied

³¹ Kearney, Richard, *Poetics of Imagining: From Husserl to Lyotard*, (London: Harper Collins, 1991), p.183-4

³² Kearney, Richard, *Poetics of Imagining: From Husserl to Lyotard*, (London: Harper Collins, 1991), p.183

³³ Coupe, Lawrence, *Myth*, p.38

³⁴ Coupe, Lawrence, *Myth*, p.39

³⁵ Coupe, Lawrence, *Myth*, p. 39

³⁶ Coupe, Lawrence, *Myth*, p.40

in the power of “Word”, Eliot is not oblivious of elitism. Last, but not the least, with more attention on mythical method than on the content of art works, specifically, by elevating paradigm over content, Eliot can not be absolved of formalism.

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