

CULTURAL MYTH CRITICISM: MYTH AND DEMYSTIFICATION

(Seminar, 9th Sept.)

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The seminar will delve into some issues related to the interweaving of European myths according to Cultural Myth Criticism methodology.

- 1. Various extraordinary events will be discussed: metamorphosis, fulfilment of the announcement and magic.*
- 2. We will also debate the processes of demystification in Contemporary literature.*
- 3. This will lead us to the importance of the spatial-temporal coordinates. Maybe would we be able to establish a link between Iceland and Spain.*

Several outstanding mythical texts will be studied. The participants will discuss the relationship between Greek, Latin, Celtic, Norse, Slavonic, and Finno-Ugrian myths.

READING LIST:

- Extraordinary events
[Völuspá](#) poem (part of the *Poetic Edda*).
- Demystification process
Homer, *Odyssey*:
 - Book (bk) VI, lines 1-114 ("[Nausicaa](#)").
 - Bk IX, l. 315-567 ("[Cyclops](#)").Joyce, *Ulysses*:
 - II, 4 ("[Calypso](#)").
 - II, 13 ("[Nausicaa](#)").
- Space and time coordinates
Strabo, [Geography](#), bk 2, chapter 4 (1-2). Also, in "[Perseus](#)" site.
Virgil's [Georgics](#), bk 1, lines 1-42. In "[Perseus](#)".
Seneca's [Medea](#), act 2, sc. 3, lines 310-364. Also, in "[Archive](#)" site.

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1. EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS

Völuspá: “Heidi men call me when their homes I visit, / A far **seeing** Volva, wise in talismans. / Caster of spells, cunning in magic. [...] Wider and wider through all worlds **I see**. / Outside I sat by myself when you came, / Terror of the gods, and gazed in **my eyes**. / What do you ask of me? Why tempt me? / Odhinn, I know where **your eye** is concealed, / Hidden away in the well of Mimir [...] Well would you know more? / Of Heimdal too and his horn I know. / Hidden under the holy tree / Down on it pours a precious stream from Valfather's pledge / Well would you know more? / **Silence I ask** of the sacred folk, / Silence of the kith and kin of Heimdal: / At your will Valfather, **I shall well relate / The old songs of men I remember best**. / I tell of giants from times forgotten”.

Gilgamesh: “He, **who has seen everything**, I will make known (?) to the lands. / I will teach (?) about him who experienced all things, / ...alike, / Anu granted him the totality of knowledge of all. / **He saw the Secret**, discovered the Hidden, / he brought information of (the time) before the Flood”.

Iliad: “**Sing, O goddess**, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures, for so were the counsels of Zeus fulfilled from the day on which Atreides, leader of men, and godlike Achilles, first fell out with one another”.

Odyssey: “**Sing to me** of the man, **Muse**, the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course, once he had plundered the hallowed heights of Troy”.

Aeneid: “**I sing of arms** and the man who of old from the coasts of Troy came, an exile of fate, to Italy and the shore of Lavinium; hard driven on land and on the deep by the violence of heaven, for cruel Juno's unforgetful anger, and hard bestead in war also, ere he might find a city and carry his gods into Latium; from whom is the Latin race, the lords of Alba, and the stately city Rome”.

Nibelungenlied: “To us in olden story / are wonders many told / Of heroes rich in glory, / of trials manifold: / Of joy and festive greeting, / of weeping and of woe, / Of keenest warriors meeting, / shall ye now many a wonder know. / There once grew up in Burgundy / a maid of noble birth, / Nor might there be a fairer / than she in all the earth: / Kriemhild hight the maiden, / and grew a dame full fair, / Through whom high thanes a many / to lose their lives soon dooméd were”.

Beowulf: “So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by / And the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness. [...] Every day in the hall, **the harp being struck** / And the clear **song** of a skilled poet / Telling with mastery of man's beginnings...”.

Kalevala: “Mastered by desire impulsive, / By a mighty inward urging, / I am ready now for **singing**, / Ready to begin the chanting / **Of our nation's ancient folk-song** / Handed down from by-gone ages. [...] In primeval times, a maiden, / Beauteous Daughter of the Ether, / Passed for ages her existence / In the great expanse of heaven, / O'er the prairies yet enfolded”.

Os Lusíadas: “Arms and the heroes, who from Lisbon's shore, [...] **My Song shall spread** where ever there are Men”.

Paradise Lost: “Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste / Brought death into the world, and all our woe, / With loss of Eden, till one greater Man / Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat, / **Sing Heav'nly Muse**”.

The Messiah: “Oh! sing, immortal Soul, the glorious theme / Of sinful Man's Redemption”.

2. DEMYSTIFICATION PROCESS

Homer, *Odyssey*:

- a) Book (bk) VI, lines 1-114 (“[Nausicaa](#)”).
- b) Bk IX, l. 315-567 (“[Cyclops](#)”).

Joyce, *Ulysses*:

- a) II, 4 (“[Calypso](#)”).
- b) II, 13 (“[Nausicaa](#)”).

INTRODUCTION

Evolution from Antiquity to Contemporaneity.

One of the main tasks of cultural myth criticism is to analyse the reception of myths in "**anti-mythical**" works. Here I will focus on the procedures used by Joyce in his demystifying process.

T.S. Eliot once called “**mythic method**” the process of "manipulating a continuous parallelism between contemporaneity and antiquity": *Ulysses* is «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»¹. The poet of *The Waste Land* was thus responding to the criticism against the impression of "chaos" created by the novel: he had understood that the methodical use of styles and symbols of the *Odyssey* contained a profound meaning related to the new times.

2.1. PARALLELISM

This analysis requires the parallelism between the characters of both texts. Bloom/Stephen and Molly play the role of Ulysses/Telemachus and Penelope respectively, inhabitants of a modern Dublin that represents the Mediterranean of the ancient world. The work is conceived as a structural metaphor: the reader foresees that the protagonists will be reunited at the end; thus, Bloom's attendance at a funeral is worth the catabasis of Ulysses, and his hallucinations in the Nighttown neighbourhood replicate the metamorphoses of the Greek hero's companions on the island of Eea.

The parallel is far from perfect, to the extent that the novel's implicit references to the epic disorientate rather than clarify the correspondence.

- a) **Think of Molly/Penelope**, a character related paronomastically and argumentatively to Moll Flanders: although she was born on 8 September -the liturgical feast of the birth of the Virgin Mary-, she is at the antipodes of virginity.
- b) **The concordance between the male protagonists** in the Greek and Irish texts is also puzzling: it is not Stephen/Telemachus who seeks the father, but Bloom/Ulises who seeks a son who, moreover, is not his own.
- c) This “parallax” appears reduplicated in the particular **use of time-space coordinates**: Bloom and Stephen's wanderings coincide with those of any passer-by in the streets of Dublin at the beginning of the 20th century. The choice of the day (16th of June 1904) does not obey any internal necessity of the text, it adopts the mask of

¹ T.S. Eliot, «Ulysses, Order, and Myth», *Selected Prose*, F. Kermode (ed.), p. 177.

arbitrariness: that day is as good as any other day.

- d) The non-conformity with the epic mode extends also to the narrative mode: the realistic, trivial framework is superimposed on a mythical dimension, as the protagonists' actions parody those of the Homeric characters.

The Greek story functions as a paradigm, tensioned and subverted by the resistance to fiction and the unpredictability of intrigue in a novel essentially composed as a collage.

2.2. TECHNIQUES OR PROCEDURES OF DEMYSTIFICATION

2.2.1. GROTESQUE

(A means to satirise through mocking models of order, reason and harmony)

- a) The story gives unusual importance to the body, especially its basic vital functions. Leopold Bloom is presented as a paralysed, inactive, suffering Irish Jew, in contrast to the pugnacity of Irish heroes (Yeats had just revitalised Cúchulainn). The first episode of the second part begins with a gastronomic sentence: "**Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls**" (p. 65). The description of his favourite menus (offal of calves, lambs and cods) would not be out of place in any ancient epic.
- b) However, minutes after a Pantagruelic feast, **this ogre is shown serving breakfast to his wife Molly and reading a magazine in the jakes.** The text offers a complicated interweaving of Bloom's stream of consciousness: the story read in the magazine, his wife's affair with Boylan, and his own scatological needs. Nothing of the sort is found in the *Odyssey*: the refined etiquette of the palace in Ithaca would not allow it.

This microscopic attention to menial tasks —the faecal and the lewdness included— denotes a change of perspective in the modern novel: **the importance given to the body**, which acquires equal relevance than that conferred on the spirit in classical tradition. Rabelais operated such a subversion, even if his comicalness was based on grandiloquence and immoderation. Joyce prefers to provoke irony through aesthetic distance (*écart*) produced in the reader's mind between the heroic model and the mediocre reality of his protagonist: in contrast to the lofty pretensions of the past, here we find condescension to the banality of the present.

This bodily inversion also suggests the corresponding mental inversion: the ancient hero showed a proactive mind-set, he attacked the enemy; on the contrary, the modern hero endures humiliation and mental lacerations. Odysseus killed his wife's suitors; Leopold did not take revenge on the one who made him a cuckold.

2.2.2. PARODY

(A means to satirise through paraphrasing well-known texts)

The story also makes abundant use of parody, disfiguring masterpieces of the past. I will bring forward two episodes.

a) **The Citizen (Polyphemus)**

In Barney Kiernan's tavern, Bloom found, sitting on a large rock at the foot of a round tower, **the "citizen"**. Joyce transports Polyphemus from the island of the Cyclopes to the heart

of a city at the beginning of the 20th century, turning him into a rabid anti-Semitic Irish nationalist, allegedly shaped in the mould of the founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association.

These features allow us to read the chapter without the slightest reference to the characters of Antiquity. Only an attentive reading adds an unexpected dimension. Physiognomy, attire, common name (citizen, that is, everyone and none, "nobody", like Ulysses in the Odyssey) and a clash with a "damn chimney sweep" (who almost gouged out an eye of the citizen with his brush) point to the giant.

This prosopomyth is profusely parodied with unequivocal recurrences: the "knockmedown cigar", the appellative "sheepface" and the box of cookies (tinbox) thrown by the citizen correspond respectively to the burning olive stake, the ram under whose belly Ulysses escapes and the rock thrown by the giant against the hero's ship.

b) Gerty MacDowell (Nausicaä)

In book VI of the Odyssey, Homer describes the encounter of the shipwrecked Odysseus in the lands of Scherie with "a young woman equal in stature and beauty to the goddesses". Advised in a dream by Athena, the daughter of Alcinous went on a chariot in the company of her handmaids to wash cloths on the banks of the river by the beach. Having completed her task, and "ready [...] to return to the palace", the goddess orders "that Odysseus should awake from his sleep" (vv. 110-113). The encounter serves as a portico for the narration of great adventures during chapters VII-XI (Polyphemus, Circe, the catabasis); it also offers an idyll between the protagonist and the young woman. Nausicaä begs him not to forget her when he returns to the fields of his homeland; he gratefully promises to invoke her "as a goddess for ever" (VIII, vv. 461-468). In the end, thanks to the vessel provided by Alcinous, Odysseus resumes his route to Ithaca.

On the beach at Sandymount, Gerty (Gertrude) MacDowell is sitting with two friends; the three of them are looking after three children. **Leopold, in the distance, fixes his gaze on her, and Gerty adopts a seductive posture, which provokes the protagonist to masturbate.** But it is getting late and the girls must leave. Gerty gets up and starts to walk with difficulty. The voyeur blames her slowness and insecurity on the unevenness of the terrain, the darkness and the objects scattered on the beach (stones, sticks, seaweed); perhaps her caution is also due to her footwear. Suddenly, he is disappointed: "Tight boots? No. She's lame! O!" (p. 479). The intrigue is thus broken, unpredictable, ridiculed.

At the beginning of the episode, Gertrude meditated on love, marriage and sexual relations. She did so in an old-fashioned, but also classical and romantic way: some of the ideas and expressions that flowed through her imagination would not be contradicted by the heroes and heroines of love stories of the 17th and 19th centuries, as well as of sentimentalist comic strips of the early 20th century. Leopold's meditation, if it can be called that, is realist in character.

The discordance of perspectives mirrors the Odyssey episode (Nausicaä's idealism and Odysseus' realistic choice to follow his path); but Gerty's limp and Leopold's disillusionment are embedded in literary parody.

We are far from heroic exploits of ancient epic: here everything is reduced to a mute and passing exchange between two characters in a confined space, accompanied by brief but piercing cries of misfortune that lead to nothing. In the Odyssey, the encounter between the young woman and the hero relaunched the story (the tales of wondrous adventures and the

possibility of homecoming); in *Ulysses*, the episode resists mythical transformation, because it denies the character of fiction, because it implies the unpredictability of plots, and because it leaves the sentences suspended, without continuity or end.

2.2.3. PETTINESS

(Lilliputian Technique)

Finally, the story presents a particular treatment of space. This reincarnated Ulysses (the reflections on metempsychosis are numerous throughout the novel) wakes up, eats breakfast, wanders the streets, engages in conversation with strangers and locals, visits sordid places and finally returns to his maternal and marital bed, betrayed but not abandoned by the woman who sleeps beside him. His Dublin wanderings and his funeral visit remind the attentive reader of the Homeric hero's katabasis and navigation. Two observations can be made.

- a) **In the cemetery, Bloom's thoughts are purely material** (death happens when the heart pump breaks), morbid (a telephone in the coffin would avoid irreversible situations of premature burial), pragmatic (the arrangement of the bodies standing up would help to save space) and disbelieving: Bloom only manages to imagine the decomposition of his friend Paddy Dignam, whose cells endlessly metamorphose over time; thus we "live for ever practically" (p. 137).
- b) In the penultimate episode, disgusted by his senescence and the indifference of others to him, **Bloom is possessed by a sudden desire to travel through Ireland, the far reaches of Europe, other exotic places, and even 'to the ends of his planetary orbit**, to the other side of fixed stars and variable suns and planets, to the uttermost reaches of space' (*Ulysses*, p. 858). Only then would he "obey the call to return [...] as a strange avenger...". But the irrationality of the enterprise reveals his nostos (homecoming) to be merely illusory; the impotence of this Ulysses renders "the march undesirable". Withdrawn in the face of darkness, insecurity, weariness, and attracted by human warmth and the coolness of the sheets, Bloom is reduced to "the statue of Narcissus, sound without echo, desired desire" (p. 859). We are afar from the Pillars of Hercules. When, in the last scene, Molly pronounces her definitive "yes", the book, rather than concluding, seems to begin again, it remains open for other similar days.

We can thus observe various demystifying procedures.

- According to the first, the spiritual dimension yields in importance to the corporeal; the swallowing and evacuation of food are described in detail, a grotesque perspective which implies a reduction of the framework of his interests in relation to the traditional mythical heroes.
- The second procedure consists in the mockery of the idealistic aspects of love; the parody of the Homeric episode ridicules the mute encounter on the beach of Sandymount, where the seductress and the seduced only speak with their bodies or "in" their bodies.
- The third procedure points to the material limit of man; on the one hand, death does not imply any crossing of boundaries between two worlds, one immanent and the other transcendent, on the other hand, the journey contemplates very narrow milestones in comparison with the broad ones of the Odyssean journey.

Thus, *Ulysses* undermines three key centres of classical narrative: **preponderance of the spirit, spirituality of love, and reaching remote boundaries**. These processes can be synthesised in the prominent role of bodily functions, the reduction of love to biological functions and the confinement of the human being to his earthly life; in literary terms: grotesque, parody and spatial restriction. Moreover, the three are conflated into one: **the dwarfing** of the space-time coordinates of the protagonist to their material dimension.

The status of the modern hero has changed. The broad spatial and temporal developments inherited (ten years, the Mediterranean) have been reduced to more modest dimensions (one day, one city); the extent and brilliance of his adventures, to a tired and dull wandering. The singular protagonists of yesteryear, authentic cultural actors who served as a demiurgic voice, now dissolve into social types anchored in a particular historical framework, into sarcastic caricatures whose bourgeois heroism barely exceeds the meagre framework of their fanciful imagination.

Reduction of space, time, and the vicissitudes of everyday life: to the grandiloquent and promising inflation, Joyce responds with an ironic and sceptical deflation. It is not possible to create or recreate the world anew; it can only be parodied. *Ulysses* is a literary exercise in modernity: the rejection of all pretensions to extraordinary worlds preaches the self-sufficient character of art; but it also heralds postmodernity: the mockery of all pretensions to understanding this world affirms the liberating character of insignificance.

3. SPACE AND TIME COORDINATES

3.1. STRABO, [GEOGRAPHY](#)

Polybius, in his account of the geography of Europe, says he passes over the ancient geographers but examines the men who criticise them, namely, Dicaearchus, and Eratosthenes, who has written the most recent treatise on Geography; and Pytheas, by whom many have been misled; for after asserting that he travelled over the whole of Britain that was accessible **Pytheas reported that the coast-line of the island was more than forty thousand stadia, and added his story about Thule** and about those regions in which there was no longer either land properly so-called, or sea, or air, but a kind of substance concreated from all these elements, resembling a sea-lungs — a thing in which, he says, the earth, the sea, and all the elements are held in suspension; and this is a sort of bond to hold all together, which you can neither walk nor sail upon. Now, as for this thing that resembles the sea-lungs, he says that he saw it himself, but that all the rest he tells from hearsay. That, then, is the narrative of Pytheas, and to it he adds that on his return from those regions he visited the whole coast-line of Europe from Gades to the Tanaïs (bk II, chapter 4 (1-2), and “[Perseus](#)”).

3.2. VIRGIL’S [GEORGICS](#)

*an deus immensi uenias maris ac tua nautae (29)
numina sola colant, tibi seruiat ultima Thule,
teque sibi generum Tethys emat omnibus undis; [...]
da facilem cursum atque audacibus adnue coeptis
ignarosque viae...*

or whether you come as god of the vast sea, and sailors
worship your powers, **while furthest Thule serves you,**
and Tethys with all her waves wins you as son-in-law [...]
Vouchsafe a prosperous voyage, and smile on this
My bold endeavour... (bk 1, lines 1-42, and “[Perseus](#)”)

3.3. SENECA’S [MEDEA](#)

*Venient annis saecula seris,
quibus Oceanus vincula rerum
laxet, et ingens pateat tellus,
Tethysque novos detegat orbes
nec sit terris ultima Thule.*

There will come an age late in time
when Ocean will loose the bonds of the world
and the earth lie open in its vastness,
when Tethys will disclose new worlds
and **Thule will not be the farthest of lands** (act 2, sc. 3, lines 310-364, and “[Archive](#)”)

a) 1st rock in Columbus Square (Madrid):

*VENDRAN EN LOS TARDOS AÑOS DEL MUNDO / CIERTOS TIEMPOS EN LOS CUALES / EL MAR OCEANO / AFLOJARA LOS ATAMIENTOS
DE LAS COSAS / Y SE ABRIRA UNA GRANDE TIERRA / Y UN NUEVO MARINERO COMO AQUEL QUE FUE / GUIA DE JASON / Y QUE HUBO
DE NOMBRE TIPHYS / DESCUBRIRA NUEVO MUNDO / Y YA NO SERA LA ISLA THULE / LA POSTRERA DE LAS TIERRAS / SENECA*

IN THE LATE YEARS OF THE WORLD THERE WILL COME TIMES WHEN THE OCEAN WILL LOOSE THE SEALS OF ALL THINGS, AND A VAST EARTH WILL BE OPEN, AND A NEW SEAMAN, LIKE TIPHYS —JASON’S HELMSMAN—, WILL DISCOVER A NEW WORLD, AND THE ISLAND THULE WILL BE NO MORE THE FARTHEST OF LANDS. SENECA

b) Columbus’ *Book of prophecies*:

VERNÁN LOS TARDOS AÑOS DEL MUNDO CIERTOS TIEMPOS EN LOS CUALES EL MAR OCÉANO AFLOXERÁ LOS ATAMENTOS DE LAS COSAS Y SE ABRIRÁ UNA GRANDE TIERRA; Y UM NUEBO MARINERO, COMO AQUEL QUE FUE GUÍA DE JASÓN, QUE OBE NOMBRE TIPHI, DESCOBRIRÁ NUEBO MUNDO Y ESTONÇES NON SERÁ LA ISLA TULLE LA POSTRERA DE LAS TIERRAS.

THERE WILL COME TIMES WHEN THE OCEAN WILL LOOSE ITS SEALS AND A NEW EARTH WILL BE OPEN; AND A NEW SEAMAN, LIKE JASON’S HELMSMAN, TIPHI, WILL DISCOVER A NEW WORLD, AND THE ISLAND THULE WILL BE NO MORE THE FARTHEST OF LANDS.

c) Columbus’ son annotation in the margins of his copy of *Medea*:

«Haec prophetia expleta est per patrem meum Christoforum Colon almirantem anno 1492»

«This prophecy has been accomplished by my father, admiral Christopher Columbus, in 1492».

[Monument to the Discovery](#) (Madrid).

[Sigrid de Thule](#) (*El Capitán Trueno*).