

Modernism, Personal Myths and the Condition for Poetry

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Abstract:

Modernist authors found their literary pursuit a challenging task as the new century wore on, ravaging lives through two world conflagrations. In an attempt to make poetry possible in this new world, they often turned to mythical materials and created their own private myths. This paper suggests that the ensuing new ways of dealing with the mythical in poetry which Modernists developed along this timespan gave poetry fluidity and a new degree of approachability. Rather than finding poetry in crisis because of the decline in religious faith and human values, we find a desire for poetry uttered and transmuted by the works of poets such as W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens. The manifestation of this desire in Modernist poetry creates the condition of poetry both within the poem and for times looked forward to. Their poems do not display mythical structures but fluid and vivid frameworks that can be interacted with and reinvented by the future readers.

Keywords: Modernism, fluidity, myths, absence, desire.

The Modernist Movement in literature saw Western writers and artists working upon mythical material and tapping on the mythical dimensions of life. The use of myths has been a constant feature of literature in general but, in Modernist literature there is a new dynamics and a new urgency in the use and adaptation of myths. Why is this new sense of relevance regarding the mythical in Modernist literature? What was so contemporary in myths for the Modernist authors? We shall find differing answers for these questions, as well as different takes on the mythical by different Modernist authors.

While reviewing Joyce's *Ulysses*, T.S. Eliot opines that the mythical method is better suited than the narrative method as "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" (Eliot 1975 [1923]: 177). Thus, the 'mythical method' is of utmost necessity in Modernism as "a step toward making the modern world possible for art". On the other hand, Wallace Stevens finds that anarchy and the decay of faith in the modernist era are hostile to myths and religion. Hence, "all the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies" (Tobin 1999: 185). If we look at Joyce's *Ulysses*, we find the mythological materials made functional by being localized and thereby made new.

In this way, Modernist writers and poets were able to extend the applicability of myths beyond the orthodox associations in literature. In response to the crisis faced by art and faith alike in the post-World War I era, poetry found new use in myths and the mythical mode of narration. While Joyce and Eliot thus revamped and personalized the Classical myths in their works, poets like W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens would also indulge in the creation of a private mythology in

their poetry. The creation of private myths within one's works is not itself a new phenomena – William Blake pioneered this in his Prophetic Books. But, there is a new solubility or fluidity in the private myths of Modernist poets that grant their work relevance.

Seamus Heaney is one of the later poets who attempted the same in his poems – his series of bog poems do create a framework of archetypes by delving into the hinterlands of history from which the bog mummies of Ireland and Denmark supposedly arrive from. Daniel Tobin observes that in his works Heaney indulges in the mythical dimension with the same purpose that Wallace Stevens has:

Indeed, there is something of Wallace Stevens's desire to see poetry as a way of constructing an "idea of order" in Heaney's acknowledgement that in an age of disbelief the arts "in their measure are a compensation for what has been lost," and so "we have become more aware, maybe through the popularization of the insights of anthropologists, of the deep value of some kind of disbelief, of the deep value some kind of belief, of some kind of ritual."... Through he stops short of labeling poetry as a Supreme Fiction, Heaney clearly maintains that art ideally must create an idea of order out of a deep human necessity. (Tobin: 6-7)

When, in *The Tower*, Yeats looks towards his Byzantium as the locus of artistic order that makes poetry possible, he was not only seeking the possibility of poetry under the crisis of the aging process, he was also seeking in art in general "a compensation for what has been lost" (6). This makes his Byzantium more than a Romantic locus – 'Sailing to Byzantium' responds to the modernist crisis and gives an amazing new turn to the predicament of the ravaged condition of the modern human condition:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium. (Yeats 80)

Yeats finds the possibility of poetry in the very absence that the ravages of history and aging have created. As again he writes in 'Meditations in the Time of Civil War',

We are closed in, and the key is turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house burned,
Yet no clear fact to be discerned:
Come build in the empty house of the stare. (90)

Poetry is the very yearning for aesthetics created by the absence in the house; the call of “Come build” (90) is the very song that the “tatter in the mortal dress” (80) sing out. Against the closing in of houses and minds, Modernist poetry generates a fluidity that populates the empty houses with sounds that, in Yeats’s case, are mythic and prophetic in dimension. With reference to Heaney’s ‘The Tollund Man’ (one of the bog poems), Thomas Docherty writes:

The reading of Heaney as a Modernist has to view this text as one in which there is an established homogeneity – a late symbolist ‘correspondence’ a la Baudelaire – between Jutland and Ireland which, as [Seamus] Deane has pointed out, can only be maintained by some ‘forceful straining’. Such a reading, further, has to ignore the literal movement of the text, which delineates not the past but the presence of the past as a living present and the mutability of that present, its fluidity or flux. (Docherty 1997: 211)

Docherty puts forward this as an argument for the fact that Heaney is not a late Modernist but a Postmodernist author. This is not the place to carry the debate on. But, if we follow the reasoning so far, it is obvious that Modernist poetry too does not always function through framed homogeneous correspondences of their symbolism. Rather, it may be argued that the fluidity or flux that we observe in Heaney’s poetry is learnt from Modernist poetry. After all, behind the iconic line “That is no country for old men” (80), there lies Yeats’s personal discontent with the turn Ireland had taken after attaining Home Rule in 1918. But the poem nowhere mentions the ‘country’ by name, and it does not strictly correspond to any particular political entity. This absence of a clear location makes the poem fluid and relatable to the general condition of modernism.

So, perhaps we should not seek the strength of modernist poetry only in the strength of the associations its symbols bring to the fore but also in the suggestive expansion of creative horizons that the symbols bring about. In Wallace Stevens’s case, we see that what he furnishes us with is not the Supreme Fiction itself, but “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction”. Yeats finds his spiritual parallel in Hanrahan – his own creation – an itinerant poet who, like him, is suffering from old age, and serves Yeats in “The Tower” with “his mighty memories” (84). Just as Hanrahan is providing material for Yeats, Stevens’s “Notes...” appear to set the material before the reader:

The monastic man is an artist. The philosopher
Appoints man’s place in music, say, today.
But the priest desires. The philosopher desires.

And not to have is the beginning of desire.
To have what is not is its ancient cycle.
It is desire at the end of winter, when

It observes the effortless winter turning blue
And sees the myosotis on its bush.
Being virile, it hears the calendar hymn. (Stevens 382)

This is virility at not having or having what is not – desire comes at the present absence of what is desired. Beyond their immediate tasks, the philosopher and the priest desire something that has been rendered abstract and nameless by its absence. This absence is the sign for the reader to come and fill in.

This desire comes out at the end of winter, we find. Beyond the ‘today’ that is in the immediate view of the philosopher, desire is placed at the extreme point of withering, the point of death, which is again the point where spring begins, the point of birth. This life is there on the other side of the poem. In the second part of “The Tower”, Hanrahan, ‘the ‘Old lecher’, is asked by Yeats to

Bring out of that deep considering mind
 All that you have discovered in the grave,
 For it is certain that you have
 Reckoned up every unforeseen, unseeing
 Plunge. (Yeats 84)

Like Stevens, Yeats finds a different form of desire, lechery or virility in the proximity of death. Only a spirit dying can experience this new creativity. In fact, this is also the progressive aspect of Yeats’s poetry according to Heaney:

[I]t is not this vaunting of the special claims of art and the artist that is finally to be saluted. Rather, it is Yeats’s large-minded, wholehearted assent to the natural cycles of living and dying, his acknowledgement that the ‘masterful images’ which compel the assent of artist and audience alike are dependent upon the ‘foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart’, the humility of his artistic mastery before the mystery of life and death. (Heaney 2002: 117)

However, the second section of ‘The Tower’ ends with a promise not entirely materializing. Hanrahan

...turned aside
 From a great labyrinth out of pride,
 Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought
 Or anything called conscience once... (Yeats 84)

Nevertheless, the fact that Hanrahan cannot take the purpose to its end also keeps the end of the poem open with a future promise. The poem now turns towards prophetic, it speaks of the future time of the reader as “The Tower” becomes the prophecy of a return – “that if memory may recur, the sun’s / under eclipse and the day blotted out” (84). The poem hence attains a fluidity in time as well. One cannot say for sure if it is a promise or a prophecy of the apocalypse. This other being whose touch memory shall bring is located in the space of the neuter where no light enters. As Maurice Blanchot says, “the narrative voice is a neuter voice that speaks the work from that placeless place in which the work is silent” (Blanchot 1990: 467). The return can happen only in that place of placelessness, the silent beyond of the poem where the reader shall enter the poem. So, Yeats trains his voice in the Tower to be prophetic, bequeathing his will to “upstanding men” (Yeats 84) who would climb the mountain in darkness, as it shall be before the light of the dawn.

The poem thereby becomes both prophetic-mythical and mortal in tone. This is a motility and absence that can be felt on one's skin here and now. And yet, we also feel the prophecy of an aesthetic order of things that shall provide for this absence and sense of an ending. This combination is not new, especially if we look into Dante's *Divine Comedy*. But there is a new intensity with which we encounter such a treatment in modernist literature. Modernist authors developed personal mythical structure or personalized common myths by making them personal to the reader as well. Paradoxically, it is the dissolution of faith experienced with the coming of modernism that made the artistic myths now available to the reader in a less structured and more fluid and interactive form.

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