Introduction : the Effacement of Myth

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Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu
être triste pour ressusciter Carthage.[1]

This issue of the *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities* is comprised of seven compelling articles whose heterogeneous reflections on the notion of myth take in Homer and Hesiod, the druids and the Virgin Mary. What's more, they address the rewriting of various myths across a broad range of research areas, from medieval Irish to Scottish Modernism, and from incipient Romanticism to French feminism of the 1960s. Each avoids the pitfalls of seeing literature as a passive relayer of myths or as a simple debunker of them, instead engaging in complex debates on the reception and historicity of various strands of myth. These are some of the reasons why each article deserves to be read in its own right.

The notion of myth as a reinscription of the past *in the present*, of the other *in the same* is relevant across the articles, for instance for Ken Keir, who shows how 'modernist mythical writing thus becomes modern through the past'. This can be seen in the recurrence of myths both through retelling and the (re)appearance of archetypal figures. Both Keir's and Mark Ryan's contributions touch upon the concept of the archetype, a phenomenon with a strangely double nature as its significance is open to questioning and re-appropriation, while it nonetheless retains a certain timeless quality. Jung elaborates on this paradox:

> The archetype in itself is empty and purely formal, nothing but a *facultas praeformandi*, a possibility of representation which is given *a priori*. The

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[1] Flaubert quoted by Walter Benjamin in the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 245-55 (p. 248).

representations themselves are not inherited, only the forms, and in that respect they correspond in every way to the instincts, which are also determined in form only.[2]

This tension between archetypal form and original creation means, for example, that even the purported timelessness of the figure of the Virgin Mary (in Thomas O'Donnell's article) or of the utterly primal 'drame solaire' (in Barnaby Norman's piece) serves to express the contemporaneity of the texts that these contributors address.

What's more, modern issues can be viewed through the lens of classical, medieval or even ancient myth, and the reinsertion of such myths into a new historical context allows for a new level of critical engagement. For instance, Ryan's reading of William Blake as arch myth-maker claims that 'in order to develop a new creative system it was necessary to clear away the classical mythological remnants of the past and challenge some of the more ancient systems of belief'. And as Yvonne Reddick's article shows, Ted Hughes's reference to the Grail legend in his river poetry subtly reflects ecological concerns, as well as providing a veiled response to the poet's feminist critics. The question of myth and feminsim is approached head-on in Catherine Burke's piece, which explores a reinscription of patriarchal Homeric myth for the purposes of female empowerment.

These approaches to myth respond to the thought which lies behind the quotation featured in our call for papers: 'l'écriture commence, c'est sa *condition,* avec l'effacement ou la disparition des noms mythiques' (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe).[3] When referred to by the contributors, this statement was most often rejected, taken to be an assessment of literature's

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[2] Carl Gustav Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster,* trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 12 – 13.

[3] In 'Agonie terminée, agonie interminable' in *Maurice Blanchot: Récits critiques*, ed. by Christophe Bident and Pierre Vilar (Tours: Farrago/Leo Schéer, 2003), pp. 439-49 (p. 448). Emphasis original. It should be noted that an alternative position is developed elsewhere in Lacoue-Labarthe's thinking apropos of the relation of literature to the gods (a relation not unlike that to myth). Discussing Jean-Luc Nancy's work *'Un jour les dieux se retirent...'* (Bordeaux: William Blake, 2001), he states orally (hence the ellipses): 'j'ai dit que ce n'est pas vrai, que les dieux ne s'en vont jamais, et la littérature ne commence pas quand ils sont… les dieux *sont* la littérature' (emphasis original). This section features at 1 hour 38 minutes of the film 'Entretiens de l'île Saint-Pierre' with Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Christophe Bailly, by Christine Baudillon and François Lagarde (Hors oeil, 2006), which can be found on the DVD *Proëme de Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.*

relation to myth, a level on which they rightly demonstrate it to be inaccurate. What's more, when seen as a simple rejection of myth as the other, this statement has dangerous implications, which are brought out elsewhere by Lacoue-Labarthe's regular co-author Jean-Luc Nancy, who warns against any self-affirmation of a non-mythical, atheist or secular mode of writing or thought.[4]

Such dangers are very real, and Nancy's vigilance should certainly be retained. However, the value of Lacoue-Labarthe's statement can perhaps be seen in another type of vigilance, if we approach it on a level going beyond the merely descriptive level where writing can, does, and will continue to engage with myth. This second level consists in the notion that myths should not be taken at face value, but rather approached as instances of rewriting and reinscription. This means that if a myth is stripped of its purportedly timeless qualities, historicized, and analysed, then it is already brought into relation with the contexts in which it is presented and received, and its singularity is diminished accordingly. Whilst this might appear to be little more than a question of readerly or critical procedure, the issue becomes more fraught when we realize the difficulty of fixing a stable boundary between such a diminishing and the effacement that Lacoue-Labarthe mentions. In other words, whilst rejecting myth risks being a violent gesture of exclusion, not doing so risks being an abdication of the responsibility to think critically. Matthew Moyle's article brings the latter risk into sharp focus with an exploration of the dangers inherent in blind attachment and adherence to a myth which resists the possibility of recontextualisation or modification. Lacoue-Labarthe (often together with Nancy, revealing the complexity of their relationship) wrote extensively on moments in literature and thought when this risk came to the fore, not

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[4] He writes: 'la Réforme et les Lumières, avec et malgré toute leur noblesse et toute leur vigueur, se sont aussi accoutumées à se comporter vis-à-vis du passé de l'Europe comme les ethnologues de naguère le faisaient envers les "primitifs"' in *La Déclosion (Déconstruction du christianisme, I)* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), p. 19.

least in Nazism,[5] in which he sees any resurgence of particular myths (of the god Odin or the corpus of Old Norse Edda texts, for instance) as less important than the people's self-identity (and auto-formation by itself) in the myth of Nazism, without the bonds and the relativizations of history.[6]

To conclude these brief introductory remarks, the value of Lacoue-Labarthe's approach can be glimpsed in the realization that, in proposing the effacement of myth, he does not propose a wholly new mode of discourse, either. Such a utopian mythlessness would be – and indeed has been – the most potent of myths. His words in a different context can be of use in further defining this complex position:

> Déconstruire [...] n'est pas non plus, de l'extérieur, avec un autre langage, abattre l'édifice pour reconstruire autre chose: nous n'avons plus, personne n'a plus, d'extériorité ni d'autre langage […]. Il s'agit donc d'habiter l'édifice, puisqu'il n'y a nulle autre part où habiter. Mais il s'agit d'habiter l'édifice, pour, de l'intérieur [...] le laminer jusqu'à ce que l'une ou l'autre de ses parois devienne suffisamment diaphane pour laisser deviner la fragile image d'un dehors.[7]

The complex, deconstructive mode of effacement that Lacoue-Labarthe is proposing instead, then, can be found in and as the proliferation of literary reinscriptions of myth. For it is by repeating and deepening the act whereby myth is inscribed in the present that that very act might become exposed, exhausted, and effaced.

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[5] A further and not unrelated moment is that of early German Romanticism, especially in its relation to a mythologized antiquity, that of a golden age. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write that for the *Athenæum* group (which formed around the journal of that name created by the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, et al.), 'il s'agit de faire mieux ou plus que l'Antiquité: à la fois surpasser et compléter l'Antiquité dans ce qu'elle a d'inachevé ou d'inaccompli, dans ce qu'elle n'a pas réussi à effectuer de l'idéal classique qu'elle entrevoyait. Ce qui revient en somme à opérer la "synthèse" de l'Antique et du Moderne' in *L'Absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), pp. 20-21, 20.

[6] See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Le Mythe nazi* (1980; La Tour d'Aigues: Aube, 1991). These issues are explored in terms of Nancy's thinking by Ian James in 'On Interrupted Myth', *Journal of Cultural Research*, 4:9 (October 2005), 331-49. He writes: 'Myth [...] refers not simply to fabulous tales transmitted by tradition and should not be understood in the way we might more usually understand mythology. Rather myth, in this context, is that to which a political community appeals in order to found its existence as such and to perpetuate that existence as the intimate sharing of an identity or essence' (p. 340).

[7] Lacoue-Labarthe in 'La philosophie fantôme' (1991) in *Lignes*, 22 (May 2007), 205-14 (pp. 213-14).