

## Beyond Modernism Toward a New Myth Criticism

Ted R. Spivey

### Introduction:

The most important single document concerning myth and literature in twentieth-century writing in English is undoubtedly T. S. Eliot's review of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in *The Dial* of November, 1923. In it Eliot announced that something he called "the mythical method" would replace the narrative method and would lead to a new order and form in literature. Eliot and Joyce both used myth to give form and meaning to their own sometimes disordered experiences and impressions of the modern world as they sought to shape these experiences and impressions into works of literary art. What they did with myth in their writing has in fact set the pattern for much of mythic criticism that has appeared since the twenties. Yet by the sixties one phase of myth criticism had begun to decline, as new critical movements emerged. The chief reason for this was that most myth critics plowed the same old ground as they continued to point to ways that authors used myth to achieve form in their works and as they recorded different myths found in individual works.

In the seventies some myth critics were beginning to find new ways to relate the depth psychology of Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung to myth in order to discover the psychological function of myth in modern literature. After all, Eliot in his review of *Ulysses* in *The Dial* had said that psychology, ethnology, and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* should all be taken into account in the attempt to understand the

uses of myth in the writing and study of literature. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, along with the work of his various disciples, would continue, however, to be the major source of knowledge about world mythology. The problem that many authors had with Frazer was that his valuable and multi-volumed work was based on a vision of the world that grew out of the mechanistic and materialistic world view of nineteenth-century science. It was difficult, if not sometimes impossible, to link Frazer's work with that of the new twentieth-century depth psychologists. And even the leader of these new psychologists—Freud—was often mechanistic in his viewpoint. Jung, in fact, broke with Freud largely over the latter's interpretation of dreams, based as it was on a theory of sexuality that was essentially mechanistic in nature. Jung believed that many dreams could only be explained in terms of mythology, and the burden of much of his work from 1909 until his death in 1961 was to reveal how myth is related to the development of that area of human existence called at various times the unconscious, the psyche, or the soul.

Jung would influence major modern writers and critics, yet the difficulty of much of his writing on myth, symbol, and archetype has kept his work from having a central place in myth criticism. What has been needed since the twenties is a school of myth criticism that could provide a comprehensive view of both the findings of modern depth psychology and the new science of mythology that Jung, Campbell, and others like Mircea Eliade

believed could be brought into being through the careful investigation of the world's many mythic systems. Joseph Campbell, with various works culminating in his four-volumed *The Masks of God*, completed in the late sixties, provided a valuable synthesis, the first real synthesis since Frazer's work. By the decade of the seventies the work of Campbell and Eliade had begun to influence some myth critics. What these two scholars offered myth critics amounted in effect to a renewed understanding of the relationship between myth, literature, and human consciousness. From the rise of some of the ideas presented by these two scholars as well as from concepts found in Jung and other depth psychologists like R. D. Laing, Otto Rank, and Abraham Maslow may in time emerge as a revitalized myth criticism.

The chief contribution of both Campbell and Eliade to a renewed myth criticism might well be to place the study of myth, literature, and religion on a footing with certain aspects of modern science. Jung, Campbell, and Eliade all posit energy as the basic element of the universe instead of mechanism. If matter is essentially energy for Einstein, then for Campbell, Eliade and Jung the human being is essentially a unity of what Campbell, following Jung would call psychic energy. For both Campbell and Eliade there is in fact a mythic realm of energy which Eliade, echoing Rudolph Otto, calls the sacred. For Eliade a myth is then a story recording the breakthrough of the sacred in to the life of an individual or society. Eliade's use of the terms *sacred* and *profane* is basic

to his work, which has particularly influenced not only the study of religion but also theology. For Eliade the sacred, leaving aside its theological implications, is a form of creative energy connected with the concept of wholeness, or totality, that is given in various measures to the individual who searches for it. The *searcher*, the *quester*, the *pilgrim* are words describing a single figure in myth who sets out on a journey, or quest, in which he struggles against the destructive energies blocking his path in order to find, if he continues his search, increasing amounts of creative energy. Campbell sees this creative energy in terms of Jung's archetypes, which are at once symbols and energies, one of the most important of which is the power of creativity associated with an essence of the unconscious mind called by Jung the self, but sometimes referred to by Campbell as the hero within. The energy associated with the archetype of the self must be sought and found, Campbell tells us, if an individual is to experience growth and development of the whole personality. Not to find inner creative powers is to become the victim of either a loss of energy or of destructive energies. Thus in Campbell and Eliade there is a dualism of the creative and the destructive, of the sacred and profane energies, but underlying both energies is an undifferentiated energy which sustains both, and in one sense, is both. For both scholars the most important myths in all societies are about the encounter of the quester with the undifferentiated power which makes it possible for that figure to overcome destructive or profane forces.

It is still too early to write a comprehensive work relating fully the concepts of Campbell and Eliade to modern literature. I am not, in the essay that follows, primarily concerned with the sometimes obvious use of individual myths by writers, but instead I seek, with the help of Eliade, Campbell, and Jung, to explore aspects of their work related to what I will call their mythic vision. A poet like Yeats, for instance, did not know the work of Jung—nor Eliade or Campbell for that matter—but, as several scholars in the past twenty years have shown in detail, both the exploration of many myths and their poetic use by Yeats is remarkably similar to viewpoints often found in the work of Jung. A study of Jung as well as of Eliade and Campbell can be of great help in understanding how Yeats and similar writers were in their personal and intuitive ways presenting mythic visions in their work. What in Yeats, for instance, often seems strange or even incomprehensible can be made clear by studying in detail the underlying mythic viewpoint found in his work. Jung, Campbell, and Eliade thus can help us elucidate individual works of literature, which is what Eliot called the main task of literary criticism.

More than any other two poets of our time writing in English, Yeats and Eliot, in their reflections on poetry, reveal the power of that continuing mythic vision which is reflected in much of the world's literature. . . . The Shaman, as Eliade writes about him, presides over the tribe's rituals and renews them when necessary. In doing so he invokes the archetype of paradise residing within all individuals and

allows them through ritual to participate for a time in the paradisiacal experience. In one sense, Eliade, seconded by Yeats (who did not know his work), points to the meaning of a participation in literature and the other arts as being essentially the same as participation in a ritual, involving as it does all the faculties of the participant. The ritual experience is one way individuals encounter the power of what Jung called the chief archetype, the mandala, which stands for the one underlying energy which unites all existence, the undifferentiated energy beneath all opposites. . . . The aspects of shamanism I am most concerned with have to do with the renewal of language itself. Two of the writers, Saul Bellow and Walker Percy, seem to find new sources of literary inspiration after 1970 and by the eighties were exploring many facets of possibly the profoundest of all contemporary problems, the virtual death of language itself as a carrier of a form of communication that is both mental and emotional.

. . . There are two forms of modernism. One movement, based primarily on an elevation of science and technology to positions of supreme importance, uses the term *myth* to mean an untrue story. The other movement, mainly literary and artistic in its outlook, uses myth to mean a story that makes important statements about the nature of human beings. Myth for this tradition also suggests a means of participation in an activity that has important consequences for the individual and social existence. C. P. Snow, of course, for several decades has made differences

between these two "cultures," as he called them, the center of an important debate among scholars and intellectuals. But figures like Jung, Campbell, and Eliade make us aware that we cannot separate science and literature as easily as Snow tried to do. For instance, in the late twentieth century when it seems that there is too much science in modern education, calls regularly come forth for more of the arts and humanities to balance the doctrines of the instructors of hard facts. Also, increasingly, the arts all over the world are considered to be nearly as important for the health and prosperity of a great city as the sciences, and the arts are now regularly made use of in medicine and industry, for instance, to humanize a process that has become sometimes too mechanistic. In fact I suggest . . . that literature, far from being segregated from life, has drawn much from modern history and has had a powerful effect on modern times.

In relationship to changes even now occurring in the various types of modern movements, . . . all of which have been affected by what is traditionally called culture, modern culture, in fact must be taken into account to explain many events that an understanding of science alone cannot clarify. For instance, at no time in the twentieth century have the sciences and technology totally dominated the modern mind, as some people once thought they might. The arts, philosophy, and religion have continued to maintain a hold on millions of people. In fact, what I believe to be a collective heroic action by leading artist and thinkers like Picasso, Stravinsky,

Joyce, and Russell defeated the decaying powers of a late Victorianism that sought to impose permanently on western civilization an intellectual regime of narrow moralism and mechanistic rationalism which denied those aspects of humanity that the arts in particular appeal to. The period of classic modernism in literature—roughly 1890 to 1950—was heroic in its efforts to give at least that part of Western society not strangled by repressive dictators a new chapter of creativity in both the arts and sciences as well as in philosophy and religion. Since 1940 we have seen the development of an anti-heroic view along with a rationalism that has put too much emphasis on analysis and to little on synthesis. In fact the interpretation of classic modernism from the viewpoint of analysis and anti-heroism has obscured much that was heroic in the early modernism and much that still continues to amaze nations whose civilizations have been stagnant for several centuries. A nation like China, . . . has not sought cultural renewal since Mao's death so much in Western philosophies of collectivism as it has in the music of Beethoven or even in the drama of Arthur Miller.

While distinguishing in this century at least two modern periods—classic modernism and post-World War II analytic modernism—I would like to suggest the emergence of a third period. Since 1970 the concept of postmodernism has received ever increasing attention. I do not believe we have yet entered a postmodern period, but . . . preparation for this new period may even now, as I write, . . . be

under way. Thus I agree with a significant book of the mid-eighties, Frederick R. Karl's *Modern and Modernism*, that a genuine postmodernism has not yet evolved so that it can be properly identified as such. I agree with Karl that works which some critics call postmodernist represent a return to an earlier modernism. Karl also believes that modernism concerned itself primarily with a revolt against all authority and fragmenting of out-worn world views. Yet he also notes that there is a modernism in search for "some totality missing elsewhere":

*The contemporary stress on performance as to which we discussed above is part of that acceleration—not something new but an outgrowth of ideas intrinsic to both early and high modernism—the need to seek in art forms some totality missing elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>*

I suggest...that the quest for totality as Karl puts it, grows more intense in certain literary artist like Yeats, Eliot, Bellow, and Percy as we move into the late modern period. Yet this awareness of a need for totality, Karl suggests, was always there. The sense of totality takes the form for Eliot of a need for order, and in his first approach to *Ulysses*, Eliot noted that Joyce through using myth had found a way to give order to a seemingly chaotic modern experience. Peter Ackroyd in biography of Eliot, also a work of the mid-eighties, states that order was the central concept in Eliot's life and work<sup>2</sup>. But contrary to to what many critics have believed, Eliot's search for order was quest for a hidden, occasionally glimpsed, sense of wholeness and not for an order imposed on experience by one standing above it.

The growing interest since 1950 in Jung and in his concept of the archetypes is related to the problem of a quest for at least an awareness of a hidden wholeness inhering in experience. For Jung the mandala, a symbol among other things of totality, was the basic archetype, and for Jung the mandala and other archetypes were the building blocks of myth itself. As Jung himself has suggested, it is difficult for individuals to live forever with fragmentation, and in a late work like *The*

*Undiscovered Self* he suggests that modern art, with all its fragmentation, points toward the possibility of world renewal: "The development of modern art with its seemingly nihilistic trend toward disintegration must be understood as the symptom and symbol of a mood of world destruction and world renewal that sets its mark on our age.<sup>3</sup> The movement form awareness of disintegration to a sense of renewal is, according to Eliade, the pattern of all sacred stories that he calls myths. The awareness of disintegration, even the need for it, provides at least some of the momentum for deconstructionist criticism in the forms it has taken in the seventies and eighties. Although authorities like Campbell, Jung and Eliade have continued to point toward the awareness of totality existing in myth, they also, as students of modern art and literature, have been aware of the need to deconstruct old and dying patterns, or more often in their work, to accept the death of old logocentric forms of art and thought.

Karl insists that deconstruction in many forms has been a powerful element in modernism from the beginning of the movement in the eighteen-eighties: "In the arts, Modernism almost always corrupts ideas of social cohesion. For its aesthetic imperatives, warring against content and community and society, mean a perilous reorientation."<sup>4</sup> To remove old "centers," or what Derrida calls logocentricity, is at the heart, Karl says, of the philosophy of Jacques Derrida: "Decentering—Derrida's alternative—opens up, allows freplay, creates indeterminacy, and emphasizes anxiety."<sup>5</sup> Yet even Derrida in defining deconstruction as decomposition suggests, at least for some, that he is moving toward a kind of affirmation that for Derrida himself is seen in Molly Bloom's "Yes" in *Ulysses*. For Karl also, modern literature represents a movement toward what he calls "perilous reorientation." And in explaining Jean Moréas's symbolist manifesto of 1886, he speaks of modernism as a "kind of Hegelian journey that defies Hegel." For Karl the essential concept in the Moréas manifesto is the attack on "declamation," "false sensibility," and "objective descrip-

tion" so that what may be manifest on the poet's journey is "esoteric affinities with primordial ideas."<sup>6</sup> Arthur Symons in the first book in English on the symbolist movement, in 1899, speaks of the modern poet's "dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible."<sup>7</sup> As the poet and critic who first named Yeats the chief symbolist writing in English, Symons and the new Irish literary movement were in complete agreement with what Karl tells us is the central concept of Moréas's manifesto:

*Spiritual truths, legends, myths, all those aspects of supranatural belief are the true matter of symbolism. Eschewing the real, it uses reality solely for purposes of presentation, as a means of gaining entrance into a world we can comprehend only with our senses.<sup>8</sup>*

Yeats above all other English poets first comprehended the connection between the poet's necessary journey into legends and myths as well as into visions of the supersensible on one hand and, on the other, the inevitable need to attack Victorian morality and the forms of a society that was essentially repressive. Thus he held in one vision the beliefs of Symons, who sought esoteric, rarified states of being, and the counter-beliefs of a Maud Gonne, who worked for the overthrow of British authority in Ireland.

Mircea Eliade, growing up in a Europe in turmoil, himself a novelist as well as a scholar, saw the necessity of searching out the underlying meaning of myth along with experiencing various esoteric visions for the very reason that European civilization was collapsing. Thus he writes in a deconstructionist mood in his autobiography:

*... The myths, the symbols and the behavior of the archaic world and the Oriental world are fascinating because of their primitive and exotic character, but perhaps even more because they could furnish a point of departure for a new vision of the world which would replace the images and values, out-*

*moded today, to which the preceding generations were attached. I could write an entire book on this phenomenon of regression toward the amorphous and the chaotic which is discernible in the history of all the arts in modern times. Its significance is clear, it seems to me we are rejecting the world and the meaning of existence as known and accepted by our forebears. We are expressing the rejection by abolishing the worlds of the past, by shattering the forms and leveling the rough places, by dismantling all forms of expression. Our ideal would be to demolish everything down to ruins and fragments in order to be able to return to full, unlimited formlessness, in short, to the unity of the primeval chaos.<sup>9</sup>*

In this passage Eliade, approaching the end of his career, expresses at once a yearning for myth, a longing to deconstruct dying systems, and a sense of a quest for a totality he called "the unity of the primeval chaos." Here we see an attack on an outmoded logocentricity as profound as any in Derrida's work; at the same time there is an attempt to find an experience that is truly Eliade's own, containing that quality of difference, in at least one of Derrida's meanings of the term, which the quester seeks in our time. Yet even as one grapples with Eliade's deconstructive mood, one is reminded of an extremism of the sixties, a time when Eliade was first discovered by large numbers of Americans. Modernism in the eighties cannot be grasped in terms of a sixties' view of a total revolution leading to some vague counterculture, because of the time for full emergence into a postmodern age has not yet arrived. Yet it would seem from the later remarks of Eliade, Campbell, Jung, and similar thinkers of the second half of the century that one should in concluding two decades of the century be able to observe some of the directions that the path toward postmodernism could take. Eliade's journal of the fifties and sixties suggest this, pointing as it does not to the immediate emergence of a new age but rather to signs that a new age will begin to emerge in various avant-garde movements

such as our present dying modernism began with the avant-garde efforts of figures like Baudelaire and Wagner as early as the 1840s and '50s

In his journal Eliade records what is deepest, in his belief, concerning the immersion of leading avant-garde modernist figures in myth and legend—a “return to full, unlimited formlessness,” or, as he puts it in the same passage: “it [the turning myth] is yet another way to protest against the world as it is to day and to manifest a nostalgia for another world, dawnlike, fresh, untouched.” Along side this nostalgia, he places the rejection of our now largely used up poetic language: “It’s very clear: a coherent, poetic language no longer has any interest for those who are put off by any form that would simply be a reminder, however vague, of the spiritual universe in which they no longer believe.”<sup>10</sup> What Eliade is doing here is invoking a new poetic language and a “dawnlike, fresh existence” along with the awareness of a paradisiacal existence he describes in one of his pivotal essays, “The Yearning for Paradise in Primitive Tradition,” an essay I use in this collection to illustrate the shamanic elements of Yeats’s poetry. Clearly Eliade is speaking of that longing for the intrusion of Being in time and is even suggesting that there must be another such intrusion to launch a new age. Yet though Eliade himself expresses vibrantly this modern need for a totality which Karl tells us once again during the eighties is emerging, particularly in the performing arts, he does not in his life’s work show us the actual emergence of a new age. The burden of his life’s work as scholar and novelist is mainly historical, conducted within the structures of modernism. Thus Karl rightly distinguishes between avant-garde movements and the cultural structures created by modernism, which were originally made possible by the avant-garde movements. Modernism has helped to create a culture that has leaned heavily on the avant-garde movements, yet it has denied, as it inevitably has to in order to maintain itself as a culture, the possibility of radical new movements leading to a new age.

Thus we see mainstream Anglo-American poetry in the seventies and eighties rejecting earlier avant-garde attempts to fracture language in, for instance, the elevation of Robert Penn Warren as the first American poet laureate. In America in the eighties a kind of poetic intelligibility was thus enshrined as a hopefully “permanent” classicism. And what of Eliade? By 1970 he would achieve a place of honor in modernist culture by having his definitions and discussions of myth become those of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. Thus in a section called “Toward a Definition of Myth,” Eliade’s voice in the Britannica speaks clearly: “The definition that seems least inadequate because most embracing is this: Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of ‘beginnings.’”<sup>11</sup> Myth is “always an account of a ‘creation’” and using his d“ In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the supernatural ) into the world.”<sup>12</sup> Like Eliade, Jung and Campbell would also find honored places in modern culture, being accepted as scholars and thinkers who held together the fabric of a seemingly enduring modernist culture. One reason they and major avant-garde figures like Joyce, Yeats, and Eliot received their place of honor is that their works would be seen in an intertextual framework. It turns out they and other modernist innovators often took their stand with traditionalist, that they were in their ordinary functioning quite aware of their own place in history and in the web of the many texts from which their work sprang. But greater than any texts from most avant-garde poets and scholars is an awareness of the realm of the totality or, that is, of the sacred.

In an interview at the end of his life Eliade, clearly defines the term basic to all his scholarship, the *Sacred*: “For me, the sacred is always the revelation of the real, an encounter with that which saves us by giving meaning to our existence.”<sup>13</sup> In His conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet, Eliade speaks mythically of “origins” by stating that the shamans, the inspired and ecstatic mystics he calls them, are “the primal sources of

religion and art and metaphysics.”<sup>14</sup> He also indicates how he differs from Jung, a man he admired and influenced. Jung’s approach to Being was largely through the archetypes, which he writes about chiefly in terms of dreams and the unconscious mind. Like Jung, Eliade attaches great importance to dream, but for him it is in the consciousness that man chiefly encounters Being: “Sleeping contributes a great deal; but I believe that the fundamental experience is that of man awake.”<sup>15</sup> Campbell is like Eliade a generation removed from Jung but is also a collaborator with him, yet he too has put more emphasis on waking life than on dreams. For Campbell and Jung it is not so much the total realm of the sacred but the individual’s conscious quest for the powers of creativity in his own soul that is of central importance in the study of myth. These two, as I will continue to suggest, put more emphasis on heroism as such than does Eliade. Eliade, on the other hand, puts his chief emphasis on the shaman who rediscovers that Being which is, he believes, the basis for all the stories we call myth. But for all three Being and its visionary encounter are associated with the creative act.

Being, indeed, may be the central concept for understanding the emergence of new ages. For Being to break through there must also be deconstruction, the decomposing of dead logocentric forms that stand in the way of Being’s emergence so that there can be a sense of the creator’s uniqueness, his difference, in Derrida’s terminology. Also there must be the kind of affirmation Nietzsche so desperately sought, that “Yes” which Derrida perceives in Joyce. It is to be expected that Derrida, the significant philosopher of the eighties for literary critics, would draw heavily from Nietzsche and Heidegger, the two great modern philosophers of Being, men who also sought new beginnings and a new language from the gods themselves. Yet for critics who seek to prepare the way for what lies beyond modernism, philosophy alone is not sufficient. What is needed is a new grappling with the text itself, a new hermeneutics. But hermeneutics now must take into full

account the concept of origins if it is to have an influence on the next age. To write of the next age one can only be an essayist in the original sense of writing as an “attempt” indeed a tentative attempt. What follows are “attempts” to launch expression about origins. Fraught with repetition and failed insights as these are, I would hope they could be accepted as part of the general purpose Eliade has said his work on myth and literature has: “It may be that my research will be regarded one day as an attempt to rediscover the forgotten source of literary inspiration.”<sup>16</sup> For anyone who stands on tiptoe to peer over the wall that separates this modernist age from an age beyond there must be a discernment that asks how a new life can come into existence, a discernment, that is of new glimpses of Being.

Finally, what follows I hope will make the points that we cannot yet speak, as some glibly do, of a true postmodernist period because we have not yet experienced such a period and we cannot accept any school of criticism now as one that might dominate a new period. Nor can we, I believe, accept deconstructive criticism, for all of its importance, as an end in itself. In fact, there is no criticism that is an end in itself because the times dictate the kind of criticism that is necessary to help bring new ages into being or to help to sustain established movements or even, as in the case of deconstruction, help to demolish worn-out systems. What is needed as the century closes are new forms of criticism that will help establish a real postmodernist age. Among these forms, I suggest, will be a new myth criticism which involves itself deeply with problems related to heroism, shamanism, and language.

### Toward a New Age

... [A]s this is being written, the insistence on the inevitability of all types of deconstruction continues more strongly than when the movement first began to emerge in the seventies. Deconstructing and demythologizing, as I have continued to suggest, are inevitable activities in an

end-of-the-century period like ours, even though counter-movements against deconstruction will continue to spring up. But, as I have also suggested, the insistence on the need to deconstruct and the fact that many texts now seem to deconstruct themselves are, in fact, signs we are where Nietzsche was at the beginning of modernism in the late nineteenth century, a time when only a series of new visions can push aside the heavy weight of historicism. In fact, it is the very nature of historicism, with its emphasis only on historical fact, that has made all myths seem superfluous. The attempt to maintain old myths only leads to what Joseph Campbell in many of his speeches called “mythic inflation,” the process of expanding existing myths until they explode, a process that may well bring on the continuing deconstructing and demythologizing work of many scholars and thinkers, who seek to rid the world of myths that have already blown apart.

The spirit of deconstruction is inevitably strong in new poets and novelists of the eighties. David Bottoms, for instance, writes in the poem “Speaking Into Darkness” that “all systems shatter like dropped glass” and “mythologies peel away like layers of an onion.”<sup>17</sup> There are various responses to this mood of deconstruction. Bottoms, for instance, echoes many new writers as well as older writers working in the French existential tradition with a line like this: “Speaking into darkness is the closest I can come to prayer.”<sup>18</sup> Yet other writers who achieved creative peaks with their work of the seventies and eighties—Saul Bellow, Walker Percy, and John Fowles, to name three—have found sustenance in that aspect of the modernist tradition that points toward the rediscovery of powerful creative forces within the inner self, or to what Bellow calls a discovery of the “primordial person” which is “something invariable, ultimately unteachable, native to the soul.”<sup>19</sup> These figures are following in the tradition of older modernist writers who pushed beyond pessimism and dark moods springing in part from an earlier deconstruction. In periods of decon-struction, a sense of nothing-

ness becomes such a powerful element in societies that many artists seek to build their work on it. For many individuals deconstructive attitudes seem to threaten the integrity of both the individual self and of that community within which the self must exist. These individuals are often driven not to new systems of thought or new mythologies but to make powerful efforts to bring forth from within themselves new visions of the sacred and a new encounter with creative, heroic energies generally associated with any sacred encounter. From a new awareness of the sacred and from a new growth of heroic energies, manifested often in obscure ways and in obscure places, there emerges new language embodied in new rituals. Owen Barfield, for instance, in his book *Poetic Diction* examines ways in which myth, language, and the vision of the sacred are inseparable. Drawing on the thought of Rudolf Steiner, as Bellow did when he wrote *Humboldt's Gift*, Barfield demonstrated how a new sense of both individual words and of human communication must grow out of a rediscovery of a mythic world view. For Barfield, the artist seeking a new awareness of language and myth is in fact acting upon the belief that what he is doing is necessary for both individual and social survival.

A desperate and painful awareness of personal and social collapse can be observed in the work of the founders of modernism. In fact, some of the founders did not survive the pain they suffered—Nietzsche among them. They were overcome on their quests for a continuing vision of the sacred by madness or early death. Or some who lived on into old age became sidetracked or so mentally confused, like Ezra Pound, as to be a menace to themselves and others. Frederick Karl writes of Pound's descent into virulent antisemitism as an example of what he calls “the crisis of Modernism,” an event that he links to a failure in many modern artists of early modernism:

*the lack of a human factor in the avant-garde has several potential dangers . . . We saw in early Modernism that*

*French poets made themselves into human bombs whose explosions were their works, with disregard for their own personal safety.*<sup>20</sup>

What is most important in certain major figures of a later modernism—the period from 1920 to 1980—is in fact their ability to survive with minds and souls intact and with even a developed and renewed humanity. In what amounts to the achieving of a partial shamanism, modernists like Yeats, Eliot, Stevens, Hemingway, and Joyce pointed the way to younger writers who should, if the development from Romanticism to modernism can be taken as a guide, be links to the postmodernist age now upon us.

The beginning of this new age can now only be glimpsed; therefore in regard to it we can and must heed Derrida's warning against logocentricity. A new age does not come into being through the erection of detailed thought systems but through new glimpses of what Nietzsche called “the dream-worlds.” In concluding his most influential work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell discusses the way in which the symbols of a new age, from which spring new language, can come into being:

*consciousness can no more invent, or even predict, an effective symbol than foretell or control tonight's dream. The whole thing is being worked out on another level, through what is bound to be a long and frightening process. . . .*<sup>21</sup>

The value above all else of the researches of mythologists like Campbell and Eliade is that they reveal a pattern in many societies of the quest for new visions. Their work shows that from an awareness of isolation there grows again, even as individuals grapple with fragmentation and alienation, a new relationship with a primal, non-fragmented essence that Eliade has called the sacred. Thus much modern and contemporary writing, in spite of the modern emphases on form and later on deep structures and signs, inevitably follows this course in an age when shamans and seers no longer exist. Many modern

writers have felt and still feel called to discover in themselves a shamanic voice even though most may well fail in this effort, which is a difficult one.

The writer in the West at the end of the twentieth century has not yet established himself as a true shaman; but, at his best, he points the way toward the coming of shamans. The reason the shamanic aspect of modern literature is often not very well understood is that we still in many ways cling to the great classic tradition of the Renaissance as the guiding light for all literary endeavor in our time. Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton all wrote out of and accepted mythology embedded in the spiritual traditions of their time. The form and power of their works, springing from these traditions, make the autobiographical element of negligible importance. We really do not need to know much about Shakespeare's life to grapple with his work, though we very much need to know the myths that governed his mental and emotional make-up. In our own time we need to know, along with the traditions of the sacred that Geoffrey Hartman tells us the rediscover, the deepest struggles of modern poets to discover the sources of mythic power within themselves. Thus I would second Hartman's basic ideas about the necessity of encountering various traditions of the sacred and add the idea of encountering individual writers in their own painful search not so much for an older mythic system as for the powers associated with mythic images discovered within the individual.

Finally, as one seeks to understand the modern quest for myth, it becomes necessary to take into account, as Joyce was always doing, the sea of myths in which we are always afloat. The growing interest in the origins of culture, in science fiction and fantasy literature, in film, and in the idea of creative writing as something everyone is capable of is an indication of an ever increasing quest for myth by large numbers of people. Thus many are led to agree with Ernst Cassirer in *Language and Myth*, quoting Max Muller: “Mythol-

ogy is inevitable, it is natural, it is our inherent necessity of language..."<sup>22</sup> For instance, we must take into account the growing readership of F. Scott Fitzgerald. When readers are moved by the last page of *The Great Gatsby* and the description of Gatsby's lost dream, they are experiencing the shamanic voice of a modern poet. When they read, as many continue to do, Thomas Wolfe's words in *Look Homeward, Angel*, "Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language," they are experiencing their own shamanic yearning for the language of revelation dwelling in everyone. Yet many still fear this perennial human interest in mythic symbols of power and in a living language of revelation, and often for good reasons. Cassirer himself in his last great work, *The Myth of the State*, speaks of the forces of myth overcoming the powers in intellect and culture. He spoke, for instance, against the Nazis, who used what he called pseudo-myths. And yet they too used powerful, though destructive, language, as George Steiner has pointed out. The Nazis invoked human energies by using the shadow archetype and, as Mann made

clear in *Mario and the Magician*, the effect of this use is that of an evil lover who sucks the blood from those he woos. It is no wonder, for example, that the gothic novel *Dracula* since 1945 has become a landmark of popular culture. But myth properly understood points the way beyond the shadow to a unifying power at the center of the soul and of the cosmos that makes culture and all civilized existence possible. Only that spiritual tradition, Eliade tells us, which puts the sacred at its center can overcome this inevitable growth in influence of the shadow power. The way beyond the shadow, Eliot tells us, is that of continuing rebirth.

For Campbell, Eliade, Jung, and many other recent authorities on myth the concept of death and rebirth is at the heart of the experience of both the individual and the mythic work that he creates. Modern writers at their best have sought this experience for themselves and through their works have found a way to impart it to others who involve themselves with their work. What is now needed is a literary criticism that takes into account both the struggles of

the mythic writer and the experience and meaning involved in his work as well as the continuing rewards of the mythic experience. With a criticism that perceives the struggles of the modern literary artist in relationship to the present period of world destruction and world renewal, we may involve ourselves more deeply than ever before in the work of those modern writers who have sought to bring us again to the creative power found within those stories that are called myths. And through these artists we may learn what it means to move into a new age which some of their best work seems to forecast, an age not only of the renewal of criticism but a renewal of both mythology and language. A close study of how certain modern writers have in their lives and works recognized and integrated the powers of the human spirit which are common to us all may well lead to a kind of myth criticism that will bridge the gap between modernism and a new age even now coming into being, an age that should be fully manifest by the opening decades of the next century.

#### NOTES

1. Fredrick R. Karl, *Modern and Modernism* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), p. 418.
2. Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 335. "His [Eliot's] predilection for order, as well as his susceptibility to disorder, were immense and in the jarring, crushing equilibrium between the two his life and work were formed." In these and other statements Ackroyd often suggests that Eliot's search for a sense of totality, which he needed to overcome his awareness of disintegration, was paramount in his life and work.
3. C. G. Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*, (New York: New American Library, 1959), pp. 122-23.
4. *Modern and Modernism*, p. xvi
5. *Ibid.*, p. 402.
6. *Ibid.*, p.46.
7. Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1947), p. 5.
8. *Modern and Modernism*, p122.
9. Mircea Eliade, *No Souvenirs: Journal, 1957-1969*, trans. Fred H. Johnson, Jr. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 14-15.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
11. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 15 (Chicago and London, William Denton, 1970), p. 1133.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 1133-34.
13. Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth, conversations with Claude Henri- Rocquest*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 162
14. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
17. David bottoms, *Shooting rats in the Bibb County Dump* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), pp.57-58.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
19. Mathew C. Roudané, "An interview with Saul Bellow," *Contemporary Literature* xxv, 3 spring 1984, p. 276.
20. Frederick R. Karl, *Modern and Modernism* (New York: Atheneum, 1985 ), p 336.
21. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, (New York: Meridian, 1956), p 384
22. Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth* trans. Susanne K Langer (New York: Dover Publications, 1946), p 43

#### EDITORS NOTE:

Reprinted from *Beyond Modernism: Toward a New Myth Criticism*, By Ted Spivey, Copyright 1988, University Press of America. Lanham, New York, London