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Some Reflections on Myth, History and Memory As Determinants of Narrative

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Abstract: Against a background of theoretical reflections on myth, history and memory this paper will discuss their use as narrative strategies in texts from Australia and New Zealand. Scholars differ as to the meaning of myth whether it is formed by "contradictory narratives, which become involved in one another like threads of a tapestry, too intertwined to summarize adequately, and endless" as Bidermann and Scharfstein suggest (1993, 9); "a system of communication" (Barthes 1972); or the expression of "man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives." (Bultman 1993). I shall argue that in Malouf`s *Remembering Babylon* the myth of Aborigine life is central to an understanding of Gemmy, and memory gives a false almost mythical picture of life in the old country, a situation found in many postcolonial texts from settler countries. That myth is not only associated with the past is evident in Oodgeroo´s *Stories from the Old and New Dreamtime* which raises some interesting questions about the use of myth.

The boundaries between history and memory are often blurred and fluid in fiction, as is evident in the work of the New Zealand writer, Yvonne du Fresne. Historical memory is a determining feature of her texts, where the boundaries between historical facts and memories of life in Denmark haunt her protagonists. In *Frederique* this intertwining becomes a strategy for investigating Frédérique d'Albert's situation, a young woman of both French and Danish origin whose memories, fictional and real, determine many of her actions and show the tenuous link between memory and dreams.
Keywords: myth and memory, history and memory, literature

Words mean exactly
what you want them to mean,
exactly what you see in them
Keri Hulme
(Sarti1998:59)

This quote from Keri Hulme illustrates clearly the links between myth, memory and history for as Bo Stråth writes, "Myth and memory is history in ceaseless transformation and reconstruction" (2000:19). The link between history, memory and myth lies at the

heart of much literature from Homer right through to the twentieth century. All three concepts have been determining for narrative form. Originally myth was closely linked to orality and often expressed in verse, spoken or written, as we see in Beowulf, Chaucer, Milton and the Romantic poets, and contemporary indigenous writing. History by and large has been in prose, though there are examples of its expression in verse in the Middle Ages. We can ask whether history is memory, or myth, or a combination of both. The Ovidian and Virgilian myths, for example, have often been the intertext in works by contemporary writers such as Salman Rushdie (*Satanic Verses)* or by David Malouf *(An Imaginary Life)*. Ovid's exile demonstrates the appropriation of narration and language in the Child, and the myth of Ovid's exile is the determinant of the narrative.

What is myth?

The word 'myth' is derived from the Greek word 'mythos' meaning fable, story-telling, or fictions to make sense of the world. It is as Hayden White states "a mode of discourse" (2000: 149). The *Oxford Illustrated Dictionary* defines myth as "a fictitious (primitive) tale usually involving supernatural persons, some popular idea or historical phenomena" (1965: 542). Myth can, however, also be a distortion of memory. Mythology is that which we do not think is necessarily true, whereas memory is thought to be more precise. According to Graves myth has two main functions:

> The first is to answer the sort of awkward questions that children ask, such as 'Who made the world? How will it end? (...) The answers, necessarily graphic and positive, confer enormous power on the various deities credited with the creation and care of souls - and incidentally on their priesthoods.
>
> The second function of myth is to justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs. (1972: v)

Other scholars support both these views. According to White, "myth emplots stories about specific actions and sets of events as manifesting the consequences of violations or observances of the rule of propriety" (2000: 51). Bultman defines myth as the expression of "man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives" (1961: 46). Julie Sanders has pointed out that a culture's mythology is its body of traditional narratives appropriated to diverse circumstances.

> Mythic paradigms provide the reader or spectator with a series of familiar reference points and a set of expectations which the novelist, artist, director, playwright, composer, or poet can rely upon as an instructive shorthand, while simultaneously, twisting, and relocating them in newly creative ways, and in newly resonant contexts. (2008: 81)

Keri Hulme, too, says in an interview with Antonella Sarti we "accrue myths to make sense of things" (Sarti 1998: 61), and Bidermann and Scharfstein suggest myth is formed by "contradictory narratives, which become involved in one another like threads of a tapestry, too intertwined to summarize adequately, and endless" (1993: 9). However,

myth is also a metamorphosis of themes which are not limited by cultural or historical boundaries. Our knowledge determines our understanding of mythological texts. Thus, for some readers, texts take on other meanings, so that the old story is changed into a new one seemingly related and read as if it had not existed previously, a view endorsed by Graves (1972: vii), and Sanders (2008: 81).

Another aspect of this topic is the relation of myths to dreams. In an article entitled "Mythic Discourse" Lenn Goodman equates the logic of myth with that of dreams, suggesting it is therefore "[s]mall wonder that the Aborigines of Australia set their mythic tales in the Dreamtime. For the logic of myths is the logic of dreams" (1993: 56). Even in the Dreamtime there is change. This we can see in Oodgeroo's *Dreamtime: Aboriginal Stories* (1994), which raises some interesting questions about the use of myth, and is illustrative of Luquet's comment that in Oceanic mythology in general each deity rules only over a part of Nature where it habitually lives (1972: 430). In this text Oodgeroo distinguishes between presenting traditional tales from the past, and then adding a section entitled "Stories from the Old and New Dreamtime" (1994: 61-95). This acknowledges the non-static nature of the Dreamtime, as of myths and dreams. Can there be a New Dreamtime and how does that differ from the Old? Celebration is more important than explanation, as Oodgeroo's work typifies.

Like dreams myths seldom mean exactly what they appear to say as "[they] characteristically license fusions of categories and identities normally held discrete" (Goodman 1993: 56). To Barthes "myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (2000: 124). In other words myths are never transferred identically, they always undergo some kind of metamorphosis, allowing an author to investigate the artistic process by transferring events from the everyday world to that of the supernatural. The creative function of such myths makes them a determinant of the narrative, for as Goodman states: "Myths are fictions and the men and women who make them know it. If this were not so, there would be no role for imagination in mythmaking and myths would be undistinguishable in idiom and setting from literal narratives, whether factual or erroneous" (1993:73). In other words myths are a narratalogical way of explaining the world around us, either celebratory or explanatory, also when retold to later generations.

This can be linked to the second definition of Graves that myth is sometimes used as a disguised political message or comment on the contemporary world. It is usually connected to a reality already familiar to people. A story by Hyllus Maris in *Paperbark* could illustrate this, as it draws on traditional and universal legends of things coming out of the sea and changing society. In "The Way Forgotten" a strange thing appears in the sea and is brought ashore by Kuringai and Parramatta.

> Days passed. The people still wondered about the strange thing that seemed to be growing, getting bigger day by day. The elders were concerned. 'This thing has had a strange effect on Kuringai and Parramatta! Look how they sit around, not wanting to join in the activities of the tribe.

The rest of the tribe follow the example of Kuringai and Paramatta, and all become sick. This 'thing' can be construed as a Western way of life, which

> (...) made them believe that The Way that had been laid down for them by their ancestral heroes was stupid for children to follow, to play. And so the people turned their backs on The Way and followed this thing.
>
> And it led them into confusion. (1990:123)

Here Maris is commenting not just on the importance of retaining one's culture, but also the danger inherent in thinking of oneself as inferior and marginalized. We should not believe that what comes from the outside must, per se, be better.

Another interesting example of such a comment is Patricia Grace's story "Sun's Marbles" in *The Sky People*. Earth and Sky, one undivided unit, were pushed apart by their obstreperous children to become earth and sky as we know them. Maui's actions are attributed to the fact that "[he] must have learned Irresponsibility from the human side of his genealogy" (Grace 1994: 14), and the children's separation of their parents is attributed to the parents lack of discipline. "They were indulgent parents inclined to put unacceptable behaviour down to teething problems, hyperactivity, high intelligence or precocity. But later they asked themselves where they had gone wrong" (Grace 1994: 16). This story can, thus, be seen as a contemporary take on a Maori legend interspersed with comments on twentieth century child upbringing.

Myth and History

One commonly held view is that myth represents a past phase of history. This idea has been supported as a way of explaining why we no longer accept certain myths. But it is a fallacy. They are still with us, albeit often in a different form. To quote Baudrillard: "history has transmuted into myth in the modern era. (...) History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth" (1982: 24). Oodgeroo expresses a similar view in her poem "The Past "

> Let no one say the past is dead.
> The past is all about us and within.
> Haunted by tribal memories, I know
> This little now, this accidental present
> Is not the all of me, whose long making
> Is so much of the past. (1990: 86)

Mythological concepts are often confused and ambiguous. and "it is precisely because they are historical that history can very easily suppress them" (Barthes 2000: 120)

> it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language. (...) Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by

> history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things. (Barthes 2000: 110)

That history has become myth in our ahistoric contemporary world is no doubt, in part, a result of increasing individualism, and the growth of global capitalism. In a globalized world does the history of a nation have significance? Is it something we hold on to as proof of our existence as a nation and part of centuries of time? Derek Walcott in "Writers in the 'New World' says we should " reject the idea of history as time (...) for its original concept as myth (...) history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory" (1974: 64).

The interaction of myth, memory and history is a key element in much of David Malouf's work, often closely linked to issues of identity. In *Remembering Babylon* the myth of Aborigine life is central to an understanding of Gemmy. Gemmy is portrayed and spoken of as a 'white' Aborigine – a non-existent identification – but he epitomizes the then current view of the Aborigine. This is emphasized by the manner in which Mr. Fraser writes down what Gemmy thinks is his life, using it as scholarly proof of Darwinian theories. He is of scientific interest to the minister Mr. Frazer, both as an individual human being who has been influenced by his stay with indigenous peoples, and for his information about native plants, but to the other settlers Gemmy is a threat. The myth of the black people in Australia is very much alive to the Scottish settlers. "From the beginning there were those among them, Ned Corcoran was the most vehement, for whom the only way of dealing with blacks was the one that had been given scope elsewhere," that is to eliminate them once and for all. Others saw this differently, "They had secretly, some of them, a vision of plantations with black figures moving in rows" (Malouf 1994: 56). The myth of Aborigine life is part of Malouf's narrative strategy to take Gemmy back to his life with the tribe. He indicates in the text that Gemmy has become so influenced by Aboriginal life that he cannot live in a settler society, and his spirit is lost when trying to conform:

> Gemmy – as he recognised one and then another feature of it, the site of old happenings, strange encounters, or stories, or lean feasts – felt the energy flow back into him, and saw, in the sudden access of it, how weak he had grown in these last months. (1994:107)

The settlers' view is a classic example of fear of the unknown, a fear underscored by the colonial attitude to people of colour, and the idea of an underclass of human beings. The issue comes to a head when Andy, having seen the blacks visit Gemmy, for personal gains exaggerates the story (1994: 88-92). But as Malouf points out the members of the tribe had come to reclaim Gemmy, suggesting Gemmy's only identity can be with the tribe, a point disproved in the text by the telling of Gemmy's past in London, yet reverted to at the end of the book. Malouf thus takes an ambiguous stance.

In *Remembering Babylon* memory gives a false, almost mythical, picture of life in the old country. The settlers, not just in this book, but in other Australian texts as well, glorify the country from which they came.

> Janet listened to all this in a kind of dream, (...) She was in love with this other life her parents had lived; with Scotland and a time before they came to Australia, before she was born, that was her time too, extending her life back beyond the few years she could actually recall, and giving reality to a world she had need of; more alive and interesting, more crowded with *things*, with people, too, than the one she was in. (Malouf 1994: 49)

This exaggeration of a world left behind is not unusual, but as a literary feature it is dominant in texts from settler countries rather than other texts of transculturalism, often in cases such as the above, where life in the home country was, in fact, one of poverty and servitude.

In New Zealand literature, the linking of myth and history with contemporary issues such as land, and the role of Maori within New Zealand society, illustrates Barthes statement that myth is "a system of communication" though not necessarily limited to indigenous mythology (cf. Barthes 2000: 109-159). Such texts not only underline Maori myth, but also illustrate how myth evolves into history, an understanding of which is essential for finding one's own place in the contemporary world. In *Potiki* (1987), Grace uses the myth of the carver and its importance in understanding Maori history to confirm Maori identity. Likewise the myth of the whale and the importance of traditional myths and ways of life is central in Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* (1987).

Representations intertwining history and myth are frequent, from Hogarth's portraits of black servants so skilfully satirized by David Dabydeen in *A Harlot's Progress* (2000) to Conrad's portrayal of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. Are authors in such texts attempting to indicate the need for racial groups to determine their own lives, and that attempts at assimilation are futile? Or is it a broader comment on the problems of exile from one's origins and the creation of subsequent myths?

History and memory

History and memory are, in my opinion, a different critical category, since all history is memory as perceived by the author, or, an interpretation of the past. There are many examples of the deliberate misinterpretation of history to satisfy certain political ends or used to change people's memories. Memory is only valid for the person who experiences the historical event, and is always a synthesis of facts. For example, after traumatic incidents there are often very different accounts of what happened.[1]

[1]These views came up in a discussion on the topic with Dr. Marion Gibson - consultant psychiatrist and trauma specialist, Queen's University, Belfast.

Memory is a collective myth shared by a group and prevalent in postcolonial writing. These memories are not personal, but inherited through storytelling with its concomitant distortion of detail. Memory and history are constructions of the past, though the factual elements of mythological memory are often difficult to identify. Such myths, by a 'glorification' of the past, contribute to linking past and present in the formation of a contemporary stance, and can have a therapeutic effect. We can ask whether our identity is dependent on our history, tempered by memory and myth? Hayden White has suggested there is a tension between what he defines as the two aspects of memory, the 'traditionalised memory' which is "information about, and accounts of the past that are latently stored in its corpus of traditional lore" and 'rationalised memory' which is about "the community's past" - written and accessible (2000: 53). Both of these we find in Australian literature, which often uses memory of the past in a rewriting of history or to fill in the gaps in previous historical fiction. Two obvious examples are Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) and *Jack Maggs* (1997) as well as some of Mudrooroo's texts, such as *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991). The use of the word 'true' in the Kelly text is significant as no history is really true, as Carey knows, but always an assessment or interpretation of certain events. Is Carey questioning the mythology of Australian history? In the author's note to *Jack Maggs*, a palimpsest on Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Peter Carey writes: "The author willingly admits to having once or twice stretched history to suit his own fictional ends" (Carey 2000). Just as Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* palimpsets *Jane Eyre,* Carey here fills in the missing detail in Dickens, yet knowledge of the text palimpsested is a prerequisite for interpretation of both texts.

The blurred and fluid boundaries between history and memory are apparent in texts by the New Zealand writer, Yvonne du Fresne, where historical facts and memories of life in Denmark haunt her protagonists. Most of them reveal an almost obsessive longing for home—home being Denmark, but a Denmark which exists largely only in the imagination. Du Fresne takes Danish-Huguenot history and uses it to alternate between the historical past and the fictional present. In *The Book of Ester* (1982) the protagonist, Ester, dreams constantly of her namesake ancestor, Ester, who lived in the seventeenth century during the Franco-Prussian wars, and the family history of the time as told by her grandparents. In *Frederique* (1987) this intertwining becomes a strategy for investigating Frédérique d'Albert's situation, a young woman of both French and Danish origin whose memories, fictional and real, determine many of her actions, and also show the tenuous link between history, memory and dreams.

As we see memory and history take very different forms in postcolonial writing. For countries and peoples exposed to violent and traumatic events such as slavery, displacement, representation necessitates a coming to terms with the trauma. Particularly in the field of myth and memory we can thus ask whether memory is selective, leading to amnesia. Do myths and memories become a symbol of subjugation, and a way of dealing with traumas of the past? For settler emigrants, on the other hand, memory and history become conflated, and the glorification of a former life, by oneself or one's ancestors, is a key to present belonging. The act of remembering is positive for some, whereas for others it is traumatic, as we see in Naipaul's fiction which explores the complexities of truth.

History, memory and myth are thus intertwined in various ways, yet at the same time they are independent concepts. The problematization of the links, however, is a fruitful contribution to postcolonial and transcultural studies. The link to a 'lost' home or culture may, I suggest, be determining for the narrative strategy chosen in such texts—a linking of myth with history or the present, and memory, with all its fallibility, with history. In the twentieth and twenty-first century's search for cultural identities we do this by interpreting history, re-telling our myths and using our memory.

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