Kenneth Burke — Pioneer of Ecocriticism

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Please note:

1. I have here taken the opportunity of revising the first paragraph.

2. As presented here, the footnote numbers are given in brackets and in normal font after the given reference.

Among the sciences, there is one little fellow named Ecology, and in time we shall pay him more attention. He teaches us that the total economy of the planet cannot be guided by an efficient rationale of exploitation alone, but that the exploiting part must eventually suffer if it too greatly disturbs the balance of the whole. (1)

Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (1937)
Nearly every handbook of critical theory acknowledges Kenneth Burke (1897-1993) to be the twentieth-century North American critic who was most ahead of his time. Yet he seems to have been so ambitious that we still do not know how to place him. Indeed, it would require the space of a whole book to trace the extensive but barely acknowledged impact which he has had. Concepts for which many other critics became famous may be traced back to him: ‘the rhetoric of fiction’ (Booth), ‘blindness and insight’ (De Man); ‘narrative as a socially symbolic act’ (Jameson); ‘the anxiety of influence’ (Bloom). Indeed, it may well be that very anxiety which has led so many contemporary critics to repress his memory. But there is a change in the critical climate, corresponding to the global. This article is written in the hope that Burke will shortly be recognised as the first critical theorist systematically to analyse culture and literature from an ecological perspective. As the dating of our epigraph indicates, he began this project over half a century before the rise of what is sometimes called ‘ecocriticism’ and sometimes called ‘green studies’ – the latter term having the advantage of being more comprehensive, and so more Burkean. Moreover, this was no passing phase for him: his whole career may be understood as a pioneering project – an adventure in green thinking.

But before we pursue Burke's ecological trajectory, perhaps we ought to consider first how his contribution has been understood, where proper attention has been paid prior to the emergence of a green theory. For convenience, I will single out two laudatory accounts by two important critics, both of whom seek to enlist a neglected genius for their causes. The first occurs in a chapter of Geoffrey Hartman’s *Criticism in the Wilderness* (1981), where Burke is celebrated for his resistance to the ‘model of transcendence’. Despite having influenced Northrop Frye, Burke is praised in particular for offering an alternative to Frye’s tendency to translate literature into the terms of religious vision, to move smoothly from ‘words’ to ‘Word’. That is, whereas Frye regards all texts under the aspect of the one, inclusive ‘sacred book’, subsuming secular diversity under sacred unity, Burke wishes to ‘demystify spiritual concepts by a “thinking of the body” that does not devalue them.’ Instead of imposing order, he engages with ‘the duplicity of words’; he does not strive for ‘final synthesis, conversion, or its scientific equivalent: a postulate, like Frye’s, separating the study of art from the immediate experience of art’. For Burke, writing criticism is itself ‘a way of establishing an immediate relation to words: the words of others, which remain words about words, the words in oneself, which also remain words about words.’ Indeed, Hartman wishes to go beyond the illustrative contrast with Frye to claim that Burke’s whole enterprise constitutes ‘a critique of pure thinking as well as of pure poetry’. Order must be open to irony. For the urge towards purification is a ‘visionary disease’, the cure for which is demonstrated by Burke’s careful attention to ‘the peculiarly human tools called symbols, of which the “verbal principle” is recognized even in religion by the term “Logos”.’

Hartman’s is a useful, succinct summation. However, in order to enlist Burke for his own secular hermeneutics, he perhaps lays too much stress on his hostility to the transcendental impulse: as we shall see, Burke’s dialectic involves a constant play of immanence and transcendence. Moreover, despite arguing against pure poetry, he in effect commends Burke as a purely literary critic, thus missing the full extent of his radicalism. By contrast, Frank Lentricchia attempts in his *Criticism and Social Change* (1983) to effect a wholesale political recuperation of his achievement. If this has the disadvantage of converting Burke’s highly independent way of thinking too readily into Marxist terms, it has the advantage of situating his contribution to North American theory in a wider context. For example, while acknowledging that a disposition towards irony, together with a stress on linguistic performance, might suggest an anticipation of the New Criticism, and while detecting evidence of ‘formalism’, he demonstrates that a consistently social concern redeems the early Burke’s apparent aestheticism. This allows Lentricchia to argue that Burke’s overall importance is as a model of political insight:
The real force of his thinking is to lay bare, more candidly than any writer I know who works in theory, the socially and politically enmeshed character of the intellectual. To put it that way is to say that Burke more even than Gramsci carries through the project on intellectuals implied by parts of the *German Ideology*. (3)

This explicit association with Marx will perhaps turn out to have been misplaced, once we look at Burke’s thinking in more detail. But the emphasis on his sense of historical situation, and of literature as a strategy for engaging with that situation, is well made. For Lentricchia goes on to propose, persuasively, that this kind of responsible criticism, unorthodox in its day, has found itself almost entirely marginalised with the triumph of deconstruction in the United States. To illustrate his point, he contrasts Burke with one highly representative theorist, Paul de Man. This is particularly interesting because, as indicated above, the former bequeathed the concept around which he built a critical career. As Lentricchia implies, when Burke speaks of ‘blindness and insight’, he does so in a context which is more than literary, whereas for de Man it provides a way of sealing off the text from the vulgarity of non-literary existence. What the two theorists have in common is irony; what separates them is the function they see it serving. For Burke it is a strategy of engagement; for de Man it is a rationalisation of evasion. Burke’s ‘exemplary effort’ as a ‘humanist intellectual’ is the ‘linkage’ of ‘the theoretical, the philosophical, and, in the broadest sense, the literary’ with ‘the political process’. In de Man Lentricchia sees ‘something like an attempt at the ultimate subversion of what Burke stands for’. The ‘insidious’ effect of his work, with its tone of ‘resignation and ivory tower despair’, is ‘the paralysis of praxis itself’. That is, de Man represents the dead-end of the formalism sponsored by the New Critics. Burke, on the other hand, knows from the outset the limits of the aesthetic dimension even as he seems to espouse it; and his work as a whole is a testimony to the importance of historical ‘intervention’. (4)

We may or may not agree with Lentricchia’s own political agenda, but his account of how the principles of a manifestly engaged critic came to be neglected, even while his name remained resonant, may clarify for us the complex fate of Burke’s legacy.

If de Man had come to represent North American critical orthodoxy by the time *Criticism and Social Change* was written, then Burke was bound to find himself excluded from meta-critical debate. But since then, we have witnessed a ‘greening of the humanities’ which has made de Man’s mandarin textualism seem rather irrelevant. The ‘paralysis of praxis’ is one thing; putting the planet in parenthesis is another. Yet that is what de Man may well be remembered for, now that an ecologically orientated theory has challenged his assumption that the one poetic theme is the power of the human imagination to refuse the claims of nature. (5) If this is the case, then Lentricchia is right that de Man and Burke are diametrically opposed. As we shall see, Burke it is who denies the possibility of ever making such a refusal, and whose career represents the first major environmental turn in North American theory. For, from his early to his very last writings, his view of literature as a mode of participation in both culture and nature informs his critique of ‘technological psychosis’. We still have much to learn from him.

How much has yet to be agreed. For it is a source of some wonderment that, if the conventional treatment of Burke has been to acknowledge him but rewrite him, American ecocriticism has scarcely begun to recognise him. Here we might refer briefly to Lawrence Buell’s monumental work, *The Environmental Imagination*, whose 560 pages of text contain not one reference to Burke. Perhaps we can understand why if we consider the general drift of the book’s argument. Buell is concerned mainly with the question of mimesis, of how nature is represented in ‘environmental nonfiction’ (or ‘nature writing’). This is not Burke’s concern, as green theorist: he foregrounds the question of praxis, of how human beings act in relation to the natural world. Buell regards the main challenge as the legacy of anthropocentrism: while accepting that this legacy must be negotiated rather than
negated, he wants to propose a transition from the ‘egological self’ to the ‘ecological self’, by way of an ‘aesthetics of relinquishment’ (an approach to art that forgoes the privilege of human priority). Burke accepts that a human view of the world will inevitably be anthropocentric, but argues that human beings have the ability and the responsibility to become as critical as possible of their own motives, insofar as they conflict with the planet’s. If Buell is asking that people rethink how they regard nature, Burke’s concern is with how they behave towards or within it. Hence he finds drama to be the most useful literary model, since it is about interaction. It is, of course, mimetic in origin, and Burke does not deny the importance of representation; but his own emphasis is, as I say, pragmatic, being concerned with effect, consequence, impact. The two orientations are not incompatible, and it is worth noting how far his and Buell’s interests converge. After all, Buell’s own definition of ecocriticism might be applied to Burke’s enterprise as well as his own: ‘the study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis’. But it is worth insisting that it is Burke more than anyone who has demonstrated what such a relation, such a commitment and such a praxis might involve. This is not surprising, given the extraordinary length of his career, as compared with the recent phenomenon of environmental humanities courses. Perhaps once that discipline has become fully established, his ambitious, exploratory work will be recognised. Then there might be the opportunity to trace in detail the continuity between Burke and Buell. For a missing name will have been restored to the syllabus.

There is an indirect indication of the need for Burke’s influence to be recognised in a pertinent but general observation made by Cheryll Glotfelty, struggling to consolidate ecocriticism in the States in the mid-1990s:

If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth’s life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know there was an earth at all. In contrast, if you were to scan the newspaper headlines of the same period, you would learn of oil spills, lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contaminations, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate…

Her list goes on tellingly for the duration of a sizeable paragraph; but here her point may assume to have been made. Nor should its relevance to our discussion be lost. For, though Burke has been cited in many articles written from post-colonial, Marxist and feminist perspectives, it may yet be acknowledged that his most important contribution lay in his foregrounding the earth itself as the ultimate setting of critical activity. In short, his ultimate significance is as a pioneer of green thinking.

Which brings us, by way of an extensive but necessary prologue, to our central task. Given that Burke seems so seldom to be studied, the rest of this article will consist of what might be called corrective exposition: the record has to be set straight. As our epigraph indicates, Burke started using the word ‘ecology’ in 1937, in his *Attitudes Toward History*. That is one fact that cannot be emphasised enough. However, if we are to be accurate, we should also note that Burke himself points out in his afterword to the third edition of the book (1984) that when he first began using the phrase ‘ecological balance’ he did so ‘figuratively’, applying it to the workings of culture while seeking to bear in mind the wider context of the relationship between culture and nature. (9) Thus, in proclaiming Burke as a pioneer of ecocriticism – or, better still, green studies – I am not simply saying he was one of the first to suggest that literary theory ought to be aware of ecology; I am also saying that his value lies in the example he sets of a consistent willingness to cross boundaries and to challenge assumptions in pursuit of a new understanding of humanity’s place on the planet. If he has a ‘lesson’ for us, William Rueckert has suggested, it is twofold:
‘everything implies everything else, and everything is more complicated than it seems.’ (10)

**Metabiology**

To get our bearings, we should establish the context in which his very earliest speculations on the relationship between art and nature were made. His first critical work, *Counter-Statement* (1931), might seem at first glance (in the light of Lentricchia’s misgivings) to be advocating a pure aestheticism, in line with certain modernist tendencies and in anticipation of the formalism of the New Criticism. Situating the book historically, however, one realises that it is more appropriately regarded as a riposte to the rise of fascism: that is, it repudiates the attempt to identify nature with ‘blood and soil’, with racial purity, with the triumph of the will. Thus, we should note the pointed phrasing of his ‘Program’ for a projected ‘Art Party’: ‘Experimentalism, curiosity, risk, dislike of propaganda, dislike of certainty…’(11) However, Burke’s case for aesthetic resistance to contemporary totalitarianism may be seen to merge with the wider paradigm of art which he is trying to establish, and upon which he will elaborate throughout his critical career. Thus, though he probably has contemporary right-wing ideology in mind when he further pronounces that ‘art may be of value purely through preventing a society from becoming too assertively, too hopelessly itself,’ he is tentatively positing a general principle. (12) That is, what remains constant in Burke is the refusal of dogmatism; what fascinates the reader is his tireless attempt to decide what that involves: to decide, that is, how exactly ‘certainty’ and ‘propaganda’ are to be countered without surrendering to a chaos of individualistic impulses.

Between espousing a literary programme that might resist totalitarian views of nature and of society, and taking up the term ‘ecology’, Burke wrote the book that may be regarded as his seminal statement: *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (1935). It might be said to stand in relation to the rest of his work as does *Being and Time* to the rest of Martin Heidegger’s. (13) Indeed, the very terms of the title invite comparison: ‘permanence’ is to ‘Being’ as ‘change’ is to ‘time’. Moreover, just as Heidegger might be misunderstood, his terms being taken to form a stark opposition, so Burke has over the years been accused of an essentialism which simply affirms ‘permanence’ and denies ‘change’. (14) In fact, here as elsewhere, he is concerned with the inextricable relation between the two. The human ‘purpose’ which the book anatomises is one that proceeds dialectically.

In order to think at all, Burke suggests, we human beings must have an initial ‘orientation’, and this will necessarily involve a paradoxical mixture of ‘insight’ and ‘blindness’: in other words, a ‘way of seeing’ which is simultaneously ‘a way of not seeing’. An orientation will imply a reverence for certain principles, without which it could not function – what Burke calls ‘piety’. If this position is not to lead to dogmatism, it needs to be challenged by a process of ‘disorientation’ – what he calls ‘impiety’ or, more specifically, ‘perspective by incongruity’. (15) This opens up possibilities which the initial orientation excludes, forcing us to conceive that there might be other ways of looking at the world. Only then may we achieve ‘reorientation’, a chastened wisdom offering the basis of a new, richer ‘simplification’: this involves a ‘poetry of action’, an ‘ethical universe-building’ informed by a spirit of cooperation. (16)

Thus abstractly put, the Burkean dialectic might seem to offer only a footnote to the Hegelian. But – and here is the crucial point – the triad of orientation, disorientation and reorientation is designed to explain cultural life without entailing a heavily schematic historicism. For we are to understand that such a process is something in which the human species is continually involved. There is ‘change’ in Burke’s model, but there is no telos, no closure, no end that does not imply a new beginning. As for
‘permanence’: he sees his ‘science of symbolism’ as leading back to ‘a concern with “the Way”, the old notion of Tao, the conviction that there is one fundamental course of human satisfaction, forever being glimpsed and lost again, and forever being restated in the changing terms of reference that correspond with the changes of historic texture’. (17)

Here again, the charge of essentialism, or even idealism, might be made; nor would detailed repudiation be easy. By way of reply, and in anticipation of my later argument, I would simply point out here that for Burke thinking is always and necessarily attitudinal, and that the invocation of an ancient Chinese principle of fidelity to nature is at least as legitimate methodologically as Marx and Engels’ reliance on the hypothesis of ‘primitive communism’. Moreover, the circumspect manner in which Burke invokes the Tao should warn us against a facile debunking of his position. When he makes his case for a ‘philosophy of being’ as opposed to a ‘philosophy of becoming’, he is anxious that it will not be conveniently dismissed as a naïve reaction against historical thinking. As he explains: ‘In subscribing to a philosophy of being, as here conceived, one may hold that certain historically conditioned institutions interfere with the establishment of decent social or communicative relationships, and thereby affront the permanent biologic norms.’ (18) Thus, the air may be full of talk of social reform, but this will prove narrow and futile unless there is a sense of the wider relation between human society itself and its non-human context:

… for always the Eternal Enigma is there, right on the edge of our metropolitan bickerings, stretching outward to interstellar infinity and inward to the depth of the mind. And in this staggering disproportion between man and no-man, there is no place for purely human boasts of grandeur, or for forgetting that men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss. (19)

Nor should we assume that Burke’s appeal to ‘permanent biologic norms’ and ‘the Eternal Enigma’ is evasive: he really is trying to provide a basis for situating and studying cultural life which might avoid empty progressivism. Though he is not afraid to call this ‘nature’, at this stage he often resorts to feigned inarticulateness, as when, in the introduction to Attitudes Toward History, seeking to persuade his readers that the most important task ahead is to help forestall ‘the most idiotic tragedy conceivable: the wilful ultimate poisoning of this lovely planet’, he appeals to them to ‘give thanks to Something or Other not of man’s making’. (20) Seeking to prevent such a tragedy and to promote such a sense of gratitude, Burke propounds a new discipline, ‘metabiology’, which will study the human organism in relation to its environment. (21) Though Burke has here not yet taken note of the science of ecology, he is no longer distracted by the fascist ‘blood and soil’ from trying to gain an overview on the relation between culture and nature. Indeed, he is proposing here what he will spell out subsequently, that human beings are ‘bodies that learn language’; he is exploring what language adds to bodily life, what culture adds to nature, without opposing the two and without privileging the former and denigrating the latter. Nature, perceived in human terms as non-language, is necessarily the context or referent of the orientation, disorientation and reorientation which are the elements of his ‘dialectical biologism’. In particular, he is trying to get some purchase on that ‘technological psychosis’ which is the reduction to absurdity of ‘trained incapacity’: for it rests on the assumption that there is only one way of perceiving nature, and that is as an object to be exploited.
The comic frame

*Attitudes Toward History* may not seem a very promising title for the those interested in the natural environment. But even though Burke is being largely ‘figurative’ in his application of ecological principles, as he himself admits, the book does extend the insights of *Permanence and Change* into the dialectic of nature and culture, of biological energy and its symbolic expression. Indeed, his overriding aim is to affirm the physical, animal basis of all symbolisation. Above all, *Attitudes* offers a more detailed account of what is involved in human beings’ obsession with ‘becoming’ at the expense of ‘being’: that is, it explores what happens when the non-human environment is not only subordinated to the claims of human autonomy but also treated as raw material for human ambition.

The book’s premise is that each literary genre implies a ‘frame’, whether of ‘acceptance’ (epic, tragedy, comedy), or of ‘rejection’ (elegy, satire, burlesque); either way, the frame implies an act of ‘transcendence’, the attainment of a stance beyond contingency. This is, of course, impossible to maintain, which is precisely Burke’s point. Similarly, each age has its dominant ‘attitude’, some spiritual ‘motive’ which offers to contain and inform historical experience. This might be conceived as a ‘collective poem’, a work of ‘folk art’; as such, it is open to ‘folk criticism’, a ‘collective philosophy of motivation’. For the ‘attitude of attitudes’ is a ‘comic frame’ that takes up all the implications and complications of the genre of comedy, as evident in social existence: it offers ‘the methodic view of human antics as a comedy, albeit a comedy ever on the verge of the most disastrous tragedy’. (22) Here ‘tragedy’ refers to non-generic, material disasters, such as war and pollution; but Burke is also trying to alert us to the symbiotic relationship of the two literary forms. Hence, when he expands on his use of comedy as a model, he refers to its complementary genre:

> Like tragedy, comedy warns against the dangers of pride, but its emphasis shifts from crime to stupidity. … The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as vicious but as mistaken. When you add that people are necessarily mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy. (23)

Having coined the phrase that de Man will appropriate for other ends, he goes on to draw his conclusions and make his commendations:

> … the comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness. One would ‘transcend’ himself by noting his own foibles. …[It] considers human life as a project in ‘composition’, where the poet works with the materials of social relationships. Composition, translation, also ‘revision’, hence offering maximum opportunity for the resources of criticism. (24)

According to Burke, human beings have to be particularly careful when they put their principles into practice. Critical alertness is necessary if ‘the bureaucratization of the imaginative’, the attempt to ‘translate some pure aim or vision into terms of its corresponding material embodiment’, is not simply to replace the living spirit with the dead letter (as might be evinced by comparing the message of Jesus with the established church, or Marx’s early writings with Stalinist totalitarianism). Only by subjecting cultural activity to what Burke has already proposed in *Permanence and Change*, namely ‘perspective by incongruity’ (a perspective implicit in the very
The phrase ‘ecological balance’ is certainly pertinent. In his 1984 afterword to Attitudes Toward History, Burke stresses that his project, even in these earlier writings, is to warn against the current mental construction of the non-human world, which amounts in effect to its material destruction. A superficial reading might infer that his position is anti-technological: that he is, in short, the Luddite of caricature. But as one ponders his position more carefully, one discovers that his object of attack is a particular ‘attitude’, one of naïve faith in the capacity of unbridled ‘industrialism’ to save humanity even as it wastes and pollutes humanity’s earthly household. Thus, if the modern era dismissed the ‘Super-Nature’ of previous, more ‘superstitious’ times, then the task of the modern ‘folk critic’ is to challenge the monstrous ‘Counter-Nature’, the product or expression of the ‘technological psychosis’, which replaced it. (26) In both cases, a framework of ideas is implied as well as an observable world.

For, just as the ‘comic frame’ of ‘folk criticism’ may draw attention to what human beings are up to, and (to persist in this appropriately colloquial idiom) where they are coming from, it can also remind them what they have missed out. All ‘attitudes’ imply the remorseless completion of a model: this was true of medieval theology, which sought to situate everything in nature as pointing towards the perfection of God; but nature is far more threatened by the modern ‘attitude’, which attributes absolute status to technology and which reduces everything to the level of ‘instrumentality’ in the name of this new, streamlined perfection, whose full realisation would necessitate the wholesale destruction of the planet. The dogmas of ‘hyper-technologism’ are to be countered by the ‘comic corrective’, the reminder that human life is a project continually in ‘composition’. For ‘the comic frame’, in making people ‘observers of themselves’, will demonstrate that, whatever ‘attitude’ is adopted, it is likely to offer as much ‘blindness’ as ‘insight’. One strikes an ‘ecological balance’ when one acknowledges what has been excluded, draws the appropriate conclusions and begins to take the appropriate remedial action.

Marxism, technology and ‘logology’

Phrases such as ‘folk criticism’ and ‘bureaucratization of the imaginative’ have encouraged some commentators to view Burke chiefly as a left-wing political thinker. We have referred to Frank Lentricchia’s valiant effort to recuperate Burke’s enterprise for a neo-Marxist theory that might resist the formalism of de Man’s deconstruction. Certainly, if Burke’s thinking is incipiently green, it is not to be confused with that kind of ecological speculation which denies the claims of society, revering nature to the detriment of culture. However, what needs to be emphasised in any just estimate of Burke’s own socially-oriented criticism is his willingness to suspect the ‘piety’ of Marxism, and in particular his mistrust of its ‘technological psychosis’.

Let us go back to the sentence quoted earlier from Permanence and Change concerning the need to maintain a ‘philosophy of being’ in order to criticise ‘certain historically conditioned institutions’ which ‘interfere with the establishment of decent social or communicative relationships, and thereby affront the permanent biologic norms’. Now let us note briefly how that particular argument develops: [One] may further hold that certain groups or classes of persons are mainly
responsible for the retention of these socially dangerous institutions.' For a 'philosophy of being' may commit one to 'open conflict with any persons or class of persons who would use their power to uphold institutions serving an anti-social function'. (27) If Burke is here providing encouragement for a Marxist critique of capitalism, he is also indicating that Marxism runs the risk of confining itself to the presuppositions of capitalism. Sharply distinguishing his 'philosophy of being' from a 'philosophy of passivity, or acquiescence', he argues that it has an advantage over Marxist historicism, since it allows for a more radical perspective on modernity:

Our antihistoric position does not in the least imply surrender to historic textures through failure to consider their importance. On the contrary, we believe that in many respects it is the historical point of view which leads to such surrender on the grounds that one must adjust to temporal conditions as he finds them (teaching himself, for example, to accept more and more mechanization simply because the trend of history points in this direction). (28)

Thus Cary Wolfe is surely right to justify Burke's challenge to Marxism as follows:

What Burke is getting at is that the full critical act must take into account a double dialectical relationship … The politically engaged critic must now confront not only the dialectic of human history and sociality itself, but also the dialectic between that realm and the environment which gets its nature or meaning from the demands we make of it. (29)

Burke trusts that his 'metabiology' offers the grounds for a more complete and more complex dialectic than afforded by Marxism, which seems unable to break with the 'piety' of capitalism in order to gain 'perspective by incongruity'. As he himself puts it:

The Marxian perspective presents a point of view outside the accepted circle of contingencies. Or, more accurately stated: the Marxian perspective is partially outside this circle. It is outside as regards the basic tenets of capitalistic enterprise. It is inside as regards the belief in the ultimate values of industrialism. (30)

But this 'rephrasing of the interactive principle (known in the language of Marxists as dialectical materialism) in terms of 'dialectical biologism' is meant to extend, not deny, its potential for critique: the common emphasis is on 'the need of manipulating objective material factors as an essential ingredient to spiritual welfare'. The Marxist industrial model falls short in that, like Nietzsche's 'will to power', it is 'insufficiently methodical'. (31) The latter resting content with viewing nature as a jungle, and the former resting content with viewing nature as so much raw stuff to be processed, they both have an impoverished sense of 'spiritual welfare'.

If 'dialectical biologism' is to be preferred to 'dialectical materialism', it is because its understanding of the culture-nature relationship is more comprehensive. Much hinges on the definition of the human species. In Attitudes Toward History Burke explicitly states his preference, in traditional Aristotelian terms, for ‘talking animal’ over ‘tool-making animal’; but the term he offers of his own is ‘symbol-using animal’. Put starkly, his argument is that if you define human beings by technology, you are unnecessarily exaggerating their rights and underestimating their responsibilities in relation to the planet. If you define human beings by terminology, you are allowing for the permanent possibility of self-critique, since there can be no system, attitude, orientation or frame that does not proceed from the capacity for language. Nearly thirty years after Attitudes Toward History, we can still find Burke working at his linguistic definition. Here he sets it out line by line, phrase by phrase:
the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal

inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)

separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making

goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)

and rotten with perfection. (32) [Italics as in original.]

We will return to this striking catalogue of human attributes; but meanwhile, we obviously cannot let that final, provocative phrase pass without comment. Burke is at once acknowledging that the urge towards completion, fulfilment or 'perfection' is in itself a cause for celebration: after all, it has produced, to use the convenient 'desert island' conjunction, the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. But his concern is to prevent this urge from spoiling, or even destroying, human and non-human life in the course of its 'bureaucratization'. Specifically, the task of the 'folk critic' in our day is to resist arrogant perfectionism by countering it with a method which is alert to those implications and complications ignored by 'technological psychosis' – perfectionism gone mad, as it were.

In denying excessive claims for technology, Burke rejects any account of humanity which accepts rampant ‘industrialism’ as its highest achievement. Querying the definition of the human being in terms of labour and advocating a definition in terms of language, Burke early on opposes the Marxist tendency (not evident in the early Marx) towards the unquestioning acceptance of technology, in the name of the discipline he calls ‘logology’. His argument is that if we confine human expectations to the level of production, we will inevitably underplay other possibilities of human culture and overlook the disastrous consequences for non-human life. Marxism for Burke has become too restrictive a vision of temporal fulfilment. What he proposes instead, since we cannot avoid following things through to ‘the end of the line’, is a sense of the future that is genuinely open while remaining responsible to human and non-human needs:

…no political order has yet been envisaged, even on paper, adequate to control the instrumental powers of Technology. Even if you granted, for the sake of the argument, that ('come the Revolution') the utopia of a classless society becomes transformed from an ideality to a reality, there would remain the ever-mounting purely instrumental problems intrinsic to the realm of Counter-Nature as 'progressively' developed by the symbol-guided ‘creativity’ of technological prowess itself. (33)

‘Logology’ – literally, ‘words about words’ – allows Burke that provisional, sceptical transcendence which he elsewhere refers to as ‘the comic frame’. Thus, the Marxist ‘bureaucratization of the imaginative’ stands in need of a meditative overview which can comprehend the ‘unintended by-products' of technological progress.

The tragic ritual

In seeking to find and develop a ‘method’ adequate to all the implications and complications of being a ‘symbol-using animal’, Burke constantly returns us to the question of literary genre. As I have already indicated, all Burke’s speculations, no matter how wild and wonderful they may seem, are the ‘matters arising’ from his
account of comedy and tragedy, of their connections and connotations. We have
already considered his case for the ‘comic frame’; now, finally, we must
acknowledge what is involved in the ‘tragic ritual’.

The earlier Burke speaks vaguely of the ‘collective poem’; the later Burke is much
more precise about society as a drama. His theory of ‘dramatism’ complements his
‘logology’: it pursues the practical implications of the definition of humanity offered
earlier, in particular the phrases ‘inventor of the negative’ and ‘goaded by the spirit
of hierarchy’. Burke argues, no doubt following Hegel, Bergson and others, that
human language introduces the capacity for negation into nature. This capacity is
not just a matter of saying ‘no’ as well as ‘yes’, or ‘it is not’ as well as ‘it is’. Such
denotative usage is far less significant than the ‘hortatory’ – that which offers strong
advice about conduct. Moreover, within the language of exhortation, he is especially
interested in what follows once ‘thou shalt not’ is understood as the dialectical
accompaniment to ‘thou shalt’. ‘Dramatism’ analyses how a society, in being ‘moved
by a sense of order’, will be ‘moralized by the negative’. In other words, in seeking
the reassurance of ‘hierarchy’, human beings need some explanation when order is
not maintained. The explanation tacitly accepted is the inability to keep the
collective commandments (‘thou shalt not’). The device for simultaneously
alleviating the consequent remorse and purging the error is the discovery of a
’scapegoat’ to stand in for the group and take away its sense of pollution. Thus, the
genre of tragedy, while no doubt being derived from a founding social ritual, is the
key to a continuing social ritual:

…a dramatistic analysis shows how the negativistic principle of guilt implicit in
the nature of order combines with the principles of thoroughness (or
‘perfection’) and substitution that are characteristic of symbol systems in such a
way that the sacrificial principle of victimage (the ‘scapegoat’) is intrinsic to
human congregation. The intricate line of exposition might be summed up thus:
If order, then guilt; if guilt, then need for redemption; but any such ‘payment’ is
victimage. Or: If action, then drama; if drama, then conflict; if conflict, then
victimage. … Dramatism, as so conceived, asks not how the sacrificial motives
revealed in the institutions of magic and religion might be ‘eliminated’ in a
‘scientific’ culture, but what new forms they might take. (34)

For the later Burke, it is no longer a difficulty to move from the figurative to the literal
sense of ecology; indeed, it is inevitable. Thus, he proceeds, within the scope of the
same page, to reflect as follows:

This view of vicarious victimage extends the range of those manifestations far
beyond the areas ordinarily so labeled. Besides extreme instances like Hitlerite
genocide, or the symbolic ‘cleansings’ sought in wars, uprisings and heated
political campaigns, ‘victimage’ would include …the ‘bulldozer mentality’ that
rips into natural conditions without qualms, the many enterprises that keep
men busy destroying in the name of progress or profit the ecological balance on
which, in the last analysis, our eventual well-being depends, and so on. (35)

Thus, the tragic ritual turns out to be the key to that ‘technological psychosis’ which
Burke seeks to diagnose, once a ‘dramatistic’ philosophy of human motives is
brought to bear upon it. Firstly, we have to recognise that the ritual of ‘congregation
by segregation’ involves ‘identification’ of members of the group by finding their
common cause against ‘the enemy, who serves a unifying function as scapegoat’. (36) Secondly, we have to understand where ‘victimage’ ends:
It would be much better for us, in the long run, if we ‘identified ourselves’ rather with the natural things that we are progressively destroying – our trees, our rivers, our land, even our air, all of which we are a lowly ecological part of. For here, in the long run, a pious ‘loyalty to the sources of our being’ (Santayana) would pay off best, even in the grossly materialistic sense. For it would better help preserve the kinds of natural balance on which, in the last analysis, mankind’s prosperity, and even our mere existence, depend. But too often, in such matters, our attitudes are wholly segregational, as we rip up things that we are not – and thus can congratulate ourselves upon having evolved a way of life able to exhaust in decades a treasure of natural wealth that had been here for thousands of years. (37)

In his final years Burke became preoccupied with this logic, which he increasingly understood was the theme implicit in his earlier work. In a retrospective article written in 1972 he reflects:

...in studying the nature of order, I became more and more involved in the conviction that order places strong demands upon a sacrificial principle (involving related motives of victimage and catharsis). Thus, while still opting for comedy, I became fascinated by the symbolism of ritual pollution in tragedy. But during the last couple of years my engrossment has shifted to the evidence of material pragmatic pollution in technology. I loathe the subject, even as I persist in wondering what can possibly be done about it. Men victimize nature, and in so doing they victimize themselves. This, I fear, is the ultimate impasse. (38)

At which point we could bring our account of Burke to a close, acknowledging him to be a prophet of environmental doom. However, he was always a resilient thinker. Significantly, only two years after his acknowledgement of ‘the ultimate impasse’, he made his case for the power of literature to not only reflect but also resist the insane logic of ‘hyper-technologism’. It is worth considering here briefly for the way it deepens and extends the earlier view of the form and function of literature in the face of imminent catastrophe.

‘Why Satire, with a Plan for Writing One’ is a defence of the literary genre associated with ‘rejection’ rather than ‘acceptance’. Here what is to be rejected is the world we now have, with its implications for the world that we might shortly have. If the human mind always wishes to takes projects through to ‘the end of the line’, and if it proves impervious to ‘perspective by incongruity’, then it will not rest until technology realises its full potential, even at the expense of the complete pollution and degradation of the planet. Burke’s proposed ecological satire would expose the unacknowledged agenda of our ‘culture of waste’: in its bid to create a technological heaven on earth, it will inevitably produce a hell. The dystopia would hence be called ‘Helhaven’. It would be a variant upon the traditional apocalyptic vision, as may be encountered in the Book of Revelation and in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, with an appropriate shift of emphasis from sacred to secular. The saved would be the rich: that is, the very people whose material enterprises were responsible for the destruction of the earth would be the only ones able to separate themselves from its effects, by inhabiting a luxurious ‘culture bubble’ on the moon. The damned would be the poor, who would be forced to stay for the duration of the terminal phase of the planet’s life. Burke gets no further than sketching the vision of ‘Helhaven’, though he does find space to give ironic praise to Walt Whitman, whose pioneer
spirit and meliorism would prove to be the inspiration behind the declarations of ‘the Master’ presiding over the demonic paradise. What is interesting is that he advocates satire as the appropriate genre for our age not only because there is so much that needs rejecting but also because it too goes to ‘the end of the line’, imaginatively, exaggerating what is already the case so that we might be alerted to its consequences: its terminological ambition parallels and parodies the technological. (39)

If both comedy and tragedy are ‘frames of acceptance’, then satire, according to Burke’s model of literary creation, arises from radical disaffection. Yet, dedicated as it is to ‘rejection’, it cannot in our time retain its traditional privilege of superior wisdom: ecological catastrophe implicates us all. The very idea that those who had profited from pollution might yet survive its effects, idling their time away in a ‘haven’ or ‘heaven’ built from the rewards of building a ‘hell’ on earth, is close enough to the existing situation (in which the rich have their rural retreats away from the urban noise and squalor they create) to be momentarily credible, but is absurd enough to remind us that that the future will most likely be inclusively infernal. Thus, the satire is intended to provoke us into the ‘collectivist’ spirit which his earliest writings had commended. As such, it gestures, paradoxically and painfully, beyond tragic resignation and towards the potential of the ‘comic frame’.

For, if tragedy is a way of accepting ‘some natural sorrow, loss, or pain’, in Wordsworth’s phrase, and ultimately death itself, it should not be allowed to countenance systematic oppression. In the face of such a challenge, the comic sense of incongruity is the preferable mode; it reminds us of the value of what tragic resignation might exclude from the picture. Satire, in Burke’s sketch for a dystopia, might serve as a reminder of the radical power of the comic attitude, even or especially when it is informed by anger. Certainly, despondent as he became in his later years, he never finally abandoned his central statement of preference, which he had once provided, typically, in the form of a footnote (nearly half of which is in parenthesis), in the course of talking about other things:

… Aristotle mentions the definition of man as the ‘laughing animal’, but he does not consider it adequate. Though I would hasten to agree, I obviously have a big investment in it, owing to my conviction that mankind’s only hope is a cult of comedy. (The cult of tragedy is too eager to help out with the holocaust. And in the last analysis, it is too pretentious to allow for proper recognition of our animality.) (40)

In the light of our previous discussion, we may take ‘comedy’ to comprehend ‘tragedy’ and to imply a sense of ‘ecological balance’, to which ‘the cult of comedy’ would be dedicated. We may then see ‘the cult of tragedy’ as a way of conniving in wilful imbalance. But of course, if we take the full force of the reference to ‘the holocaust’, that way of putting it seems rather too weak. The writer and analyst James Hillman takes the Nazi programme of extermination to be emblematic of all the ‘devastating enormities’ of our era, of the ‘vast displays of totalitarianism’:

‘burning cities, burning forests, homelessness and hunger. Gargantuan consumerism. Garbage barges, garbage dumps, dead fish, dead skies, and ageless species extinguished en masse.’ (41) In such a context, we may conclude that it is not only exponents of ecocriticism and green studies who should take very seriously indeed the ‘comic corrective’ of Kenneth Burke, as a demonstration of how the ‘victimization’ of both people and planet might be resisted.
References


4 Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change*, p. 40


9 Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, p. 411.


12 Burke, *Counter-Statement*, p 105.

13 For a comparison of the two thinkers, see Samuel B. Southwell, *Kenneth Burke and Martin Heidegger* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1987).

14 For a sophisticated version of this charge, as applied to the early work, see Robert Wess, *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1987).


20 Burke, 'Introduction', *Attitudes Toward History* (no page given).

22 Burke, ‘Introduction’, *Attitudes Toward History* (no page given).

23 Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, p. 41.


40 Burke, ‘Definition of Man’, p. 20.


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**Hughes and Myth**

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Laurence Coupe

Though it is widely acknowledged that Ted Hughes’s work is ‘mythic’ in its breadth and depth, confusion may arise as to what exactly we mean by that word. This chapter sets out to clarify Hughes’s own understanding of mythology, to demonstrate his prowess as an interpreter of specific mythic forms, and to explore the connection he makes between myth and literature.

‘Blueprints for imagination’

The word ‘myth’ comes from the ancient Greek *mythos*, meaning ‘story’. A myth is a traditional story that is handed on over the years – sometimes centuries, sometimes millennia – and keeps being retold. It is a narrative that helps human beings to make sense of themselves and their relation to one another, to the natural world and to the spiritual realm. It is a founding narrative, an essential plot, which cannot be credited to any one individual but rather belongs to the whole community. Myths combine together to form a mythology, a body of stories that define a culture. This collective narrative is not to be assessed on grounds of truth or falsity: the point is whether it has power for its community.

Perhaps Hughes’s most straightforward statement on myth comes in the course of his extensive account of the mythology underlying the work of the most famous of English writers. Early on in his *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, he draws attention to the strongly ‘mythic’ strain in both the poems and the major plays. In doing so, he pauses to explain that the same word is applicable also to such diverse works as John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, William Blake’s prophetic books, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘Ancient Mariner’, W.B. Yeats’s *Wanderings of Oisin* and T.S. Eliot’s poetry generally, ranging from ‘The Death of St Narcissus’ to *The Waste Land*.
In each of those poems listed, the whole subject matter is the image of a subjective event of visionary intensity [...] It is only when the image opens inwardly towards what we recognise as a first-hand as-of religious experience, or mystical revelation, that we call it ‘visionary’, and when ‘personalities’ or creatures are involved, we call it ‘mythic’. (SGCP 35-6)[1]

In this light, we might say that ‘mythic’ for Hughes implies, firstly, vision, that is, the capacity to imagine that the world is charged with sacred grandeur, and secondly, a narrative unfolding of that vision.

As for Shakespeare’s ‘mythic’ interest, Hughes is not primarily interested in the use of myth as a standard mode of allusion. What interests him is the way we can trace a dual narrative lying hidden beneath his total oeuvre:

[he] strips the myth[s] of all identifiably mythic features, and secretes its mechanism within his plot[s], as he does with the two myths – of the Great Goddess and of the Goddess-destroying god – which are the theme of my argument here. (SGCB 2)[2]

Myth, for Hughes, is a mediation between the external and internal worlds, and between the material and spiritual dimensions, though often not recognisable at first reading. For Hughes, this is the basis and mode of operation of much of the greatest literature. Gods and goddesses may come in disguise, but their presence and power will always be felt.

So consistent was Hughes’s interest in myth and his conviction of its importance that he wrote two essays entitled ‘Myth and Education’. In the second of these, published in 1976, he argues forcefully that children should be introduced to their culture’s mythology as early as possible because myths are our ‘blueprints for imagination’ (WP 151). A blueprint is a plan of action; a myth, then, is not just some dusty old text, but the indispensable format for those symbolic acts by which we keep in touch with the sources of life. For Ted Hughes the works of art which we call ‘great’ are those in which that contact is felt most compellingly. Myth, as blueprint for imagination, has a healing power. Whenever the inner world has become divorced from the outer we experience ‘a place of demons’. Then myths demand retelling by the poets, whose function is far more than entertainment or diversion, but an imaginative reconciliation of both outer and inner worlds in a creative narrative (WP 151).

Kinds of myth

By my reckoning, there are four broadly different kinds of myth. They are sometimes hard to separate, but it is as well to bear them in mind as they each tell us something important. They are: creation myth, which tells us where we come from; fertility myth, which tells us how we relate to the natural cycle; deliverance myth, which tells us where we are going; and hero myth, which tells us what human qualities we value.[3]

It is not to be expected that any one poet will consistently refer by name to the four categories of traditional plots just listed. For one thing, each of them has variant titles: for example, creation myth might also be known as ‘myth of origins’, or even
paradise myth'; again, deliverance myth might also be known as ‘salvation history’. But what I want to demonstrate here is that Hughes’s use of myth is comprehensive, and that each of the four kinds which I’ve listed does figure in his own theory of myth, which will help us understand their enactment in his poetic work.

Hughes and creation myth

Creation myth tells us how everything began. According to the late historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, humanity has been driven by the impulse of ‘eternal return’: we tell ourselves stories about how things were in the beginning, when the gods were in close contact with humanity. Given that it seems to be a universal conviction that the newly created world was in the beginning idyllic, human beings have always felt a deep ‘nostalgia for paradise’. In other words, myth is about the regaining of ‘sacred time’, known to the ancient Greeks as the Golden Age; in complementary fashion, it is also about the regaining of ‘sacred space’, known to the Greeks as Arcadia.[4] Hughes conveys the power and beauty of this vision of the newly created world in the opening poem of his translation of Metamorphoses, written by the ancient Roman poet Ovid (see CP 865-79).

Hughes’s writing on myth returns again and again to the biblical creation narrative and its momentous influence on English culture: the creation of the cosmos in six days and the serpent’s role in the temptation of Adam and Eve and their subsequent fall from the Garden of Eden. In his study of Shakespeare, he is particularly interested in the way the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, and the subsequent rise of Puritanism in the seventeenth, drew on the idea of a righteously omnipotent God who was not slow to take revenge on those who flouted his law. Repudiating what they saw as the pagan goddess-worship of Catholicism – with its reverence for the figure of Our Lady, mother of God, also known as the Virgin Mary – fundamentalist reformers and dissenters appealed to the masculine might of Jehovah. He was a transcendent figure whom they took to be ‘far removed from the sensational, dramatic adventure of what is thought of as “myth”’ (SGCP 13). And yet, Hughes reminds us, their God was in many ways reminiscent of Marduk, the mythic sky warrior of the Babylonians, who had defeated and destroyed the primordial goddess of the waters, Tiamat, thereby establishing cosmos and overcoming chaos. Given that the Babylonian creation myth casts its shadow over the Hebrew, Hughes surmises, ‘Shakespeare was aware of the feelings behind this myth through the Bible’ (SGCP 16). It is a bold chain of association which Hughes is forging: from the Babylonian Marduk, to the Hebrew Jehovah, and to the aggressively fundamentalist Puritan religion of the early modern world, and so to the greatest writer of that or of any other era who responds to this goddess-destroying lineage in his plays. One does not read Hughes on myth if one wants a conventionally comfortable guide. But it does offer an insight into the function of myth in his own work, where goddess-denial can lead to trouble, for example.

In offering a new perspective on the imaginative logic of Genesis, and in justifying the rough and ready approach to scriptural authority and religious orthodoxy of the protagonist of his most famous mythic volume, Crow, Hughes draws on an alternative mythic tradition, that of the ‘trickster’ tale. The mischievous male, usually priapic, protagonist of this kind of story participates in the creation of the world, but is also associated with all the disasters which plague human existence. He straddles the boundary between cosmos and chaos. Thus many of these tales feature a marginal creature who survives against the odds on the fringes of human culture: for example, crow, coyote, wolf, fox. The mythology of the Haida people of the northwestern coast of North America features the exploits of ‘Raven’, a figure
who is constantly causing trouble in his endless search for food, but whose very persistence enables him to lay out the land, establish the clan and bring light to both – all by accident. A parallel trickster is the West African (and then Caribbean) figure of ‘Anansi’: taking the form of a great spider, he is usually out to cause trouble but, as in all trickster myths, he inadvertently brings about the natural order of things.

Hughes is always very clear that he regards trickster mythology as a necessary corrective to the biblical narrative, which seems to present us with a thoroughly tamed nature. In his essay on his poem ‘Crow on the Beach’ he explains the background to his Crow volume and he presents the trickster as the agent of the energetic and unpredictable life-force (‘his high spirits and trajectory are constant’) that tests our cultural constructions to destruction (‘Cultures blossom round his head and fall to bits under his feet’), and so wholly appropriate to any attempt to revitalise the mythology of our civilisation (WP 240-1).

Hughes and fertility myth

Creation myth is implicitly cyclical. It suggests that humanity cannot help but dream of a return to the beginning, when a perfect creation emerged out of chaos. Both Hebrew and Babylonian myths are the source of ‘nostalgia for paradise’. (As we shall see in due course, later books of the Bible bring a more progressive pattern into play, but Genesis certainly encourages a desire for a return to Eden.) With fertility myth, the cyclical model is emphatic, as is the role of the female deity. This kind of narrative is particularly associated with the invention of agriculture, about 12,000 years ago. Before then, there had indeed been an idea of the earth as a nurturing mother, from which human beings emerged and to which they returned at death. However, it was with the practice of sowing and reaping crops that there developed a myth based on the cycle of vegetation, with the goddess at its heart.

The pattern is as follows. The fertility goddess is immortal, but her male consort, the fertility god, has to die annually in order to ensure the renewal of the cycle. He is killed in his prime, by order of the goddess; his body is dismembered and the parts scattered across the land; he is then born again in order to fertilise the goddess once more, thus ensuring that the crops flourish for another year. This pattern persisted with the rise of urban civilisations, the goddess and god taking on different forms throughout the ancient world: Isis and Osiris (Egypt), Inanna and Thammuz (Mesopotamia, Babylonia), Aphrodite/Venus and Adonis (Greece/Rome). The very title of Hughes’s second collection, Lupercal, refers to a Roman fertility festival, and perhaps its most celebrated lyric is ‘Hawk Roosting’ – a poem which Hughes has related to the Egyptian myth of Isis, the implication being that the hawk is Horus, the son and successor of Osiris the dying god.[5]

The fertility goddess, representing the essential power of nature, necessarily has a dual identity. As the source of both life and death, light and dark, spring and winter, fruition and drought, she may be seen as both a benign and a malign force, as both lover and destroyer, both mother and murderer. This double part is well understood by those with an investment in the myth, the natural cycle making little sense to them otherwise. Hughes, we might add, was early on inspired by the poet Robert Graves’s account of the complex nature of this female deity in The White Goddess.[6]

Gaudete is a poetic narrative offering a variation on fertility myth, with the dying and reviving god played by one Nicholas Lumb in the village where he is vicar. Lumb is abducted into the underworld where he is asked to revive a dying goddess. The substitute wooden vicar back in the village has a rather literal idea of spreading the gospel of Love and in a comic parody gradually turns the Women’s Institute into a
kind of coven. The original Reverend Lumb was mistaken for shamanic healer when he was abducted (not the role of a Church of England vicar, apparently), but when he merges in the west of Ireland he has acquired shamanic wisdom and insight, as revealed in the book of poems he has brought with him – the closing lyrics of the ‘Epilogue’ addressed to the elusive goddess.

The fertility god’s death guarantees the continuity of the natural cycle, ensuring that the community survives. But also, according to Sir James Frazer in his classic work of myth theory, *The Golden Bough*, he functions as a ‘scapegoat’. That is to say, by departing and disappearing into the realm of death he serves to carry off all traces of disease, corruption and pollution that might otherwise blight that community.[7]

In seeking to situate the underlying mythology of Shakespeare’s body of work, Hughes is particularly interested in the Graeco-Roman version of fertility myth, given that it is the subject of one of Shakespeare’s early poems. In an early rehearsal for the full-length study, namely the Introduction to his *Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse*, Hughes expounds the significance of ‘Venus and Adonis’, which he relates to another long poem, ‘The Rape of Lucrece’. Here we might pause to summarise these two works before seeing what Hughes makes of them. ‘Venus and Adonis’ retells the Roman (originally Greek) myth of the fertility goddess falling in love with a beautiful youth, who resists her advances, fleeing from her only to be savaged to death by a wild boar – this creature being the incarnation of Persephone, Venus’s shadow-self, her underworld other. ‘The Rape of Lucrece’ is Shakespeare’s version of another ancient Roman tale (not strictly mythic, but becoming so by association in this context). It concerns the sexual assault made by Prince Tarquin upon the chaste wife of his fellow-commander in the Roman army. Lucrece (or Lucretia) kills herself; Tarquin is banished, and the Roman monarchy comes to an end.

Hughes argues that the two texts provide the basis for the mythic ‘equation’ that runs through the major plays. He calls the four characters of these poems, Lucrece, Venus, Tarquin and Adonis, Shakespeare’s ‘four poles of energy’ that provide the focus for the stages of Shakespeare’s complete narrative cycle. Venus confronts Adonis, whereupon Adonis is killed by boar and is reborn, through a flower death, as Tarquin, whereupon Tarquin destroys Lucrece, and in doing so destroys himself and all order (WP 116). Hughes argues that Shakespeare’s plays explore these ‘poles of energy’ in all sorts of combinations, ultimately attempting to resist the deaths of Adonis and Lucrece.

The mythic equation is also the ‘tragic’ equation; and the tragedy is the result of the competing myths which were acted out in Shakespeare’s era. Tarquin represents the Jehovah-worshipping Puritan, whose creation myth tells him that it the transcendent, omnipotent God who is in charge, not the pagan goddess of nature. In his zeal he sets out to destroy her and the plays gradually tell the agonising story of the gradual defeat of Venus and her boar. But the shifting protean puritan forces through the plays (as through the whole nation in Shakespeare’s time, suggests Hughes) are ultimately self-destructive. Shakespeare’s tragic hero, the puritan Adonis, is possessed by the demon he rejects. He struggles to reconcile in himself the tensions between the four principles represented by himself, Tarquin, Venus and Lucrece and is inevitably torn apart (WP 116). We are not here interested in the details of Hughes’s account of Shakespeare’s mythic project; we are chiefly concerned with Hughes’s own preoccupation with the nature of myth, and with the myth of nature. His focus is on the way the male believer in the absolute male God seeks to destroy the female principle which, according to the model of fertility, informs the whole of the natural world.
Hughes and deliverance myth

Here we need to focus mainly on the Bible, as the kind of deliverance myth relevant to Hughes’s work is almost exclusively Judaeo-Christian in form and meaning. While creation and fertility myths honour the cyclical conception of time, deliverance myth offers a linear, progressive view. Jehovah may punish Adam and Eve by expelling them from the garden, and leave them to make their way through the wilderness, but he has a grand plan for their salvation. What we know as ‘the fall’ is only the beginning of a long collective adventure. In a later book of the Bible, namely Exodus, we read how Moses, guided by God, leads the Hebrews out of Egypt, where they have been enslaved, and guides them towards a ‘promised land’. The Christian Gospels of the ‘New Testament’ extend this deliverance myth by presenting Jesus as the fulfilment of the Exodus story: through his crucifixion and resurrection he frees all humanity from the constraints of sin and death. Hughes’s poem sequence *Adam and the Sacred Nine* is a moving version of the paradise/fall myth, with Adam learning from various birds how to love, and finally to be at home on, the earth.

True, some theorists of myth see Christianity as having associations with fertility myth. Jesus may be seen as a dying and reviving god, born in the winter (Christmas), sacrificed and reborn in the spring (Easter). The parallel is not coincidental: Christianity clearly has roots in some sort of nature cult. But the difference also needs emphasising: the resurrection of Jesus is once and for all, and the result is not merely that the vegetation cycle succeeds (though we can see the link to this pagan model in various festivals of the Christian calendar), but rather that humanity is ‘delivered’ into the safety of the heavenly city of Jerusalem, as described in the final book of the Bible, namely Revelation. In other words, the Jesus story in its entirety belongs to that category of deliverance myth which we call ‘apocalyptic’ (from the Greek word for ‘revelation’).

Hughes throughout his work shows himself to be deeply suspicious of the biblical idea of salvation as coming about through history rather than through a renewal of our contract with nature and the goddess. If he may be said to subscribe to his own ‘fall’ myth, the Judaeo-Christian project is very much part of it, together with the modern cult of progress, which for him is only a secular variant of the myth of deliverance (though one that does not know itself to be mythic). In this case, a crucial moment in the protracted fall from what Hughes calls ‘complete being’ is that of the Reformation. For it was the fundamentalist reading of apocalypse which inspired the Protestant reformers, and still more dramatically, their Puritan heirs to wage total war against the goddess. In support of Hughes’s thesis, we might remind ourselves of the main scenario of the Book of Revelation. Most of the earth is laid waste, in preparation for the establishment of the heavenly city of Jerusalem, which is built out of gold and other precious materials and which is lit neither by sunlight nor moonlight but by the light of God. Though we are told that the ‘tree of life’ and the ‘river of life’ will flourish, it is quite clear that these have a strictly symbolic existence, serving chiefly to represent the spiritual transformation of the earthly paradise depicted in the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis. Natural trees and rivers will have disappeared, or been transformed beyond recognition: ‘And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea […]’ (Revelation 21:1). With a fundamentalist reading of this text, the way was open for the legitimisation of a fiercely other-worldly faith, and with it that ruthless manipulation and exploitation of the earth which climaxes in modernity. So it is no surprise to find that there are several parodies of Genesis in *Crow* (‘Lineage’, ‘A Horrible Religious Error’, ‘Apple Tragedy’, ‘Snake Hymn’). There are also ironic meditations on the crucifixion (‘The Contender’) and on the apocalypse (‘Notes for a Little Play’, ‘Crow’s Account of the Battle’, ‘Crow’s Last Stand’). Interspersed with these are reflections on our abusive
relationship with the great goddess (‘Crow and Mama’, ‘Revenge Fable’).

It is in the Shakespeare study that Hughes makes his case against the myth of deliverance, though not named as such. Being clear about Christianity’s debt to fertility myth, he is clear also that ultimately it represents a severing of our bond with nature. It is the destruction of the goddess, first by Jehovah to preside in Heaven, then by his and her son, the Puritan Christ, that sets in train the essential tragedy of Shakespeare’s narrative cycle: ‘What Shakespeare goes on to reveal is that in destroying her he destroys himself and brings down Heaven and Earth in ruins’ (SGCG 18). Christianity in this context may be seen as a religion rooted in fertility myth which eventually became divorced from those roots and began a long process of dissociation from the natural world, spurred on by an increasingly literal interpretation of its founding text, the Bible.

Hughes, then, repudiates what we are calling the myth of deliverance, and in particular its impact within modernity – early on with the Reformation and later on with the cult of progress, with unrestrained industrialisation, and what is euphemistically called ‘development’. His definitive statement is ‘The Environmental Revolution’, his review of Max Nicholson’s book of the same name. It is here that we see how his knowledge of myth and his passion for ecology inform each other. Hughes suggests that Western Civilization is still dominated by Old Testament notions that ‘the earth is a heap of raw materials given to man by God for his exclusive profit and use’. Because man is alienated from Mother Nature, the goddess, he is also alienated from his own inner nature. While Hughes uses the word ‘quest’ to describe the basic myth of the ideal life (WP 129), and while ‘quest’ is a word we would normally associate with hero myth – of which more very shortly – he is thinking primarily of that violent and destructive journey undertaken by God’s chosen people, with no sense of reconciliation or return, that we have referred to as the myth of deliverance.

There is hope, however. The artist – or, by analogy, the poet – may see something else, and guide us to it, whether in images that remind us of Eden, or the world of animals, or Pan, or nature’s force for regeneration even in the face of being poisoned by human activities (WP 130). All Hughes’s writing, whether directly or indirectly related to myth, is dedicated to ensuring that the germ of nature’s life not only survives but also flourishes. River is his celebration of the fertile natural world as the paradise (continually restored by death) that we thought we had lost – a vision of the given world as our one and only Eden.

Hughes and hero myth

I have left this category of narrative to the last because it is the most ambiguous: while it has a very specific, historically determined meaning, it can also be applied to a whole range of stories from different eras. On the one hand, then, it may be narrowly defined as that kind of myth which celebrates the rise of a warrior class in the later years of the second millennium BC. It represents the human ideal of that class, that culture. A male hero sets out on a quest, facing terrifying obstacles on the way, and proves his courage in combat, eventually returning home. Ancient Greece affords us many such tales: for instance, that of Perseus, slayer of Medusa, the Gorgon; or again, that of Hercules (or Herakles), famous for undertaking twelve labours, which included slaughtering not only the fabulous many-headed monster, the Hydra, but also a ferocious lion and a dangerous boar for good measure. Thus does a male hero prove himself in a patriarchal culture. More complex is the figure of Prometheus, the Titan who befriends humanity and steals fire from the gods on their
behalf, thus facilitating human culture. As a punishment, Zeus has him chained to a rock, where he is perpetually tormented by a giant eagle tearing at his liver. His heroism lies in his refusal to give in or show signs of weakness. Hughes’s poem sequence *Prometheus on his Crag* is a visceral retelling of the famous myth, with the emphasis on not only what the hero endures but also on what he learns about the natural order.

On the other hand, however, hero myth is the most general kind of narrative we could possibly imagine. After all, every myth that has ever been narrated has one or more central characters who we might describe neutrally as ‘heroes’. Creation, fertility and deliverance myth: all are ‘heroic’, in that some figure, whether divine or human, achieves something. Thus, in the previous section we have noted Hughes’s account of ‘the Quest’, which may imply hero myth but which the poet can legitimately use to refer to that collective and progressive project which derives from the biblical myth of deliverance.

Less legitimate might appear Hughes’s application of the quest structure to that crucial role of every North American tribe, that of the shaman. Here again, though, he is strictly speaking accurate. For it is the shaman’s function to adventure in the spirit world – the dangerous flight of the imagination – to return with the healing gift of stories and poems and songs, and thereby restore the balance between culture and nature. In so doing, he may have affinity with the fertility god, but he may also be celebrated as the archetypal hero, the soothsayer of his tribe. This, Hughes, argued, was the basic experience of the poetic temperament we call ‘romantic’ and would, in a shamanizing society, give the role of shaman to the authors of *Venus and Adonis*, some of Keats’s longer poems, W.B. Yeats’ *The Wanderings of Oisin* and T.S. Eliot’s *Ash Wednesday*. The shamanic flight also ‘lies perceptibly behind’ many of the best fairy tales and behind myths – Hughes singles out those of Orpheus and Herakles – and behind such poetic epics as those of Gilgamesh and Odysseus (*WP* 58).

Moreover, if the shaman makes sense in terms of hero myth as well as fertility myth, the trickster makes sense in terms of hero as well as creation myth. Indeed, the trickster’s endless adventures, whether in aiding the construction of the world or in wreaking havoc, seem to Hughes to conform to the pattern of the hero’s journey. Taking up his idea that this is a character which represents the life force itself, Hughes concludes that the quest of the trickster is like ‘a master plan, a deep biological imprint, and one of our most useful pieces of kit’. Hughes sees trickster tales as a form of Tragicomedy in which this ‘demon of phallic energy’, carrying the spirit of the sperm, suffers for his misunderstandings, but is also capable of experiencing tragic joy (*WP* 241). It is not that Hughes is confusing categories of myth and blurring different mythic roles. Rather, he is demonstrating that mythology is a complex web of stories – as complex as that great web of being that we call ‘nature’.

Moreover, Hughes is writing as someone who has understood that we are living in extraordinary times, having lost our bond with the earth and our sense of the sacred. Hence, any mythmaking poet has, as it were, to start from scratch, building up the mythic connections as best he can. In the interview given on the occasion of the publication of *Crow*, he explained that he believed that Eliot, Joyce and Beckett were suffering and portraying the last phase of the disintegration of Christian civilization. After them came some writers who did not seem to belong spiritually to Christian civilization at all.

In their world Christianity is just another provisional myth of man’s relationship with the creator and the world of spirit. Their world is a continuation or a re-emergence of the pre-Christian world . . . it is the world of the little pagan religions and cults, the
primitive religions from which of course Christianity itself grew.[8]

*Cave Birds* is an extension of the *Crow* myth, and a revision of the dying and reviving god featured in fertility myth, with the hero on a quest which involves the necessary disintegration of his ego before his reintegration in ‘Bride and Groom Lie Hidden for Three Days’ and his rebirth as a falcon. Thus it is that, in coming to write *Crow* and its extension *Cave Birds* – what we might call Hughes’s gesture towards the kind of myth that might be appropriate for our desolate, disconnected state of soul – he finds it appropriate to redefine what we mean by ‘hero’. The arrogance of the ancient warrior class, the fundamentalist conviction of the reforming Christian, the triumphalism of the modern progressive mind: these no longer suffice. Our hero must be the stripped-down figure of a creature with nothing left to lose. And finally there remains the question of whether the myth will be understood in its full healing potential. Will the newly humble, powerful, transfigured falcon, for whom ‘the dirt becomes God’, connect with and empower readers? ‘But when will he land / On a man’s wrist’ (CP 440). Here Hughes the reader of myth becomes inseparable from Hughes the writer of myth; but in both capacities, he makes us see how much myth matters because there is always a need for a retelling, a new version, an unanswered question about the mystery of the universe: ‘At the end of the ritual / up comes a goblin’ (CP 440).


[2] In quotations from Hughes throughout this essay I have respected his capitalisation, even where it may seem inconsistent.


Contributions to the *Times Higher Education* ‘What are you reading?’ column, in which regular reviewers report on books they are currently interested in …

*Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*, edited by Scott L. Newstok (Parlor Press, 2007)

9 July 2009

Concentrating mainly on the tragedies, Burke demonstrates how they work as symbolic acts that force us to recognise and reconsider the motives of sacrifice, scapegoating and social hierarchy. For the sheer range of ideas, together with his capacity for audacious insight, he can be matched only by Coleridge. The introduction is one of the best short overviews of his thinking that I’ve read.


29 April 2010

I’ve been prompted by the recent death of Thomas Berry, the Christian ecologist who described himself as a ‘geologian’ rather than a theologian, to re-read *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (Three Rivers Press, 1999). Here he guides us into the ‘Ecozoic Era’, during which we will take our modest and respectful place within the Earth community after centuries of destructive arrogance. The keys to our transformation will be not only imagination but also the rediscovery of ancient and native wisdoms. His chapter on the function of the university should be compulsory reading for vice-chancellors everywhere.

*Steven Heine, Bargainin’ for Salvation: Bob Dylan, A Zen Master?* (Continuum, 2009)

29 July 2010

Heine’s central idea is that for most of his career, Dylan has oscillated between two radically different world views: one based on duality, the other on non-duality. The latter is reminiscent of Zen – hence the subtitle – but Heine doesn’t want to leave things there. He demonstrates that in his more recent work, Dylan has found a ‘middle way’ that brings him closer to Zen than ever. This book could have been reductive, but I’m pleased to report that it is genuinely enlightening.


4 November 2010
This is not an easy read. I don’t mean it’s difficult to follow the argument; I mean the argument is deeply disturbing. Attempts to deal with wildlife extinction by focusing on poachers and small traders are doomed, says Duffy, because the problem is Western consumerism. And it’s no use trying to salve our consciences with eco-tourism: that’s part of the problem, too. Everyone who cares about conservation should read this to discover an alternative model.


23 December 2010

Amazingly, this is the first sustained study of Hopkins’ work from an eco-critical perspective. Parham’s general argument is that, if we are to confront the ecological challenge of our own age, we must stop fixating so much on Romantic ecology and start taking into account Victorian ecology, especially the ideas of Ruskin and Morris. He contends that Hopkins’ work is so complex and vital that it comprehends different strains of ecological thought with which we’re still coming to terms. A thoughtful and thought-provoking book.


17 March 2011

Leo Marx, in *The Machine in the Garden* distinguished between ‘popular and sentimental’ pastoral on the one hand, and the ‘imaginative and complex’ pastoral on the other. Ingram queries this distinction, and is certainly loath to make it within ‘pop’ itself. For instance, he refuses to dismiss the apparently naïve nostalgia for a rural past which informs the harmonies of folk, of country and of country rock, even while drawing our attention to the more discordant, and potentially more ecologically challenging, sounds of avant-garde dystopian rock, of indie music and of hip-hop. This book works both as survey and speculation. As such, it invites us to rethink music that is all too often taken for granted.


25 August 2011

This significantly expanded second edition is more helpful than ever. It demonstrates that without addressing the question of human overpopulation, without educating ourselves in traditional ecological wisdom and without developing a ‘post-secular’ spirituality, we’re likely to produce only more and more hot air (pun intended). Ultimately, it all comes down to whether we accept the intrinsic worth of non-human nature, and how we need to behave once we do. Indispensable.

Faye Hammill, *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (Liverpool University Press, 2010)
From Jane Austen to Sofia Coppola, Hammill traces the shifting meanings of an elusive quality. I've been impressed by her astute discussion of the paradoxes involved in the attempt to live artfully, not least the way artifice implies authenticity and vice versa. Relating her theme to topics as various as sensibility, pastoral, nostalgia, decadence, glamour and camp, she has made me realise just what an unsophisticated notion of ‘sophistication’ I had.

Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches, edited by Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (University of Virginia Press, 2011)

Ecocriticism is often regarded as something that Americans do best. But in Europe, ‘green studies’ is becoming much more confident, and conscious of its rich tradition. This useful and significant volume reminds us how much we still have to learn from European Romanticism: a point made by Kate Soper with her usual clarity. It also makes some fascinating connections: for instance, between Blake and Deleuze, and between D.H. Lawrence and Heidegger. With material both by and on Irigaray, plus musings on Bakhtin, we have here a useful and significant volume.

David Blakesley, The Elements of Dramatism (Longman, 2002)

Kenneth Burke is the only literary theorist I’ve read who has transformed my way of looking at the world. His central theory of ‘dramatism’, which treats language as ‘symbolic action’ and literature as ‘equipment for living’, is presented here in clear prose with a range of thought-provoking examples. I return to this book regularly: it’s the most accessible exposition of Burke’s ‘comic corrective’ to human folly which I know.

Grevel Lindop, A Literary Guide to the Lake District (Sigma, 2005)

Visiting this area is so much more interesting when you think, for instance, about Coleridge’s moonlight walk over Helvellyn to read Christabel to the Wordsworths at Grasmere … or Dickens and Wilkie Collins’ ascent of Carrock Fell (Collins managing to sprain his ankle) … or Ruskin’s purchase of Brantwood without having seen it because he loved Coniston Water so much. Both erudite and entertaining, poet Grevel Lindop makes an ideal travelling companion.

Alan Watts, The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are (Souvenir Press, 2009)

I always go back to Watts with a sense of relief, and I always come away with a sense
of wonder. Way ahead of his time (the book was first published in 1966), he moves with ease between Eastern religion and Western science in order to convey what it might be like to see through the ‘hallucination’ that one is ‘a separate ego enclosed in a bag of skin’. Writing without jargon and wearing his learning very lightly, he is a joy to read.


20 September 2012

The author contributes to the greening of literary theory by showing how Jung’s ideas can help us celebrate the human imagination as an aspect of the endless creativity of more-than-human nature. Exploring works as diverse as *The Tempest*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Secret Garden*, she reveals how literature may serve to keep us in vital connection with the body and the unconscious, and so with the Earth itself. A fascinating book, it is also beautifully written.

Peter Barry, *Literature in Contexts* (MUP, 2007)

18 October 2012

The author challenges a prevailing tendency in recent literary theory: to reduce the ‘text’ to a ‘context’ of historical associations which takes one further and further away from the imaginative challenge of the work itself. This ‘contextualism’, by subordinating the intrinsic merit of the text to endlessly extrinsic speculation, ends up missing the point of what is being studied. Barry demonstrates his alternative: to focus on the text, while bringing in contexts which are genuinely literary. A bracing argument, well sustained.

Jeffrey Wainwright, *The Reasoner* (Carcanet, 2012)

16 May 2013

I’m not one for self-consciously intellectual verse, but this isn’t that. Rooted in the everyday stuff of existence, it’s a series of meditations on the discrepancy between words and world which revitalises our most common clichés and in doing so offers a sustained defamiliarisation of experience. Like King Lear, Wainwright’s ‘reasoner’ is someone driven to take upon himself the mystery of things, and the result is deeply affecting. This is a volume which I’d recommend to the very people who might be put off by its title.


3 October 2013

In these essays, Burke offers his most accessible account of the way human beings use words to cope with situations, and how they so often abuse them in their attempt to subdue nature, to maintain hierarchy and to pursue perfection – with
literature usually, but not always, offering the necessary corrective.

John Hughes, _Invisible Now: Bob Dylan in the 1960s_ (Ashgate, 2013)

14 November 2013

Hughes rejects the familiar idea of a Dylan who adopts a series of ‘masks’, behind which he hides his true motives. Rather, we are told, the singer enacts a continual sense of indeterminacy and contingency, so that in refusing all identity he challenges our own. His creativity is a form of radical evasion, by which self and substance are deconstructed. In this light, Hughes offers an intriguing account of the key albums of Dylan’s first and most fruitful decade of invention.

Philip D. Beidler, _Scriptures for a Generation: What We Were Reading in the 60s_ (Georgia UP, 1994)

12 December 2013

I wish I’d discovered this fascinating handbook before I wrote *Beat Sound, Beat Vision*, my study of the influence of the Beat movement on songwriters of the 1960s. It would have, firstly, assured me that I was on the right track with the Beat connection (there are entries on Kerouac, Ginsberg & co) and, secondly, confirmed my instinct that the ‘counterculture’ owed a great deal to that visionary tradition which, including the Beats, goes back to William Blake.

John Williams, _Stoner_ (Vintage, 2012)

7 March 2014

This novel made little impact when it was first published in 1965, but deservedly it is now a best-seller. Never has the malice, hypocrisy and pettiness of the academic world been more painstakingly delineated; but never has the importance of reading, learning and teaching been more powerfully conveyed. Though many of us find it increasingly hard to function in the current university system, Williams’ celebration of a decent, dedicated lecturer makes it seem worthwhile.

Robert Macfarlane, _The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot_ (Hamish Hamilton, 2012)

20 March 2014

I’ve been thinking a lot about the poet Edward Thomas lately, trying to come to terms with his subtle, intriguing insight into the relationship between humankind and the natural world. Macfarlane’s book about walking is also a book about Thomas, and it captures his spirit more vividly than a conventional critical study could do. An absorbing meditation on how we make contact with the landscape, it deserves to be read alongside Thomas’s own nature writing, which in turn deserves to be read alongside Thomas’s verse.
Nicholas Royle, *First Novel* (Jonathan Cape, 2012)

April 2014

Having only just finished reading this book, I feel as though I ought to go back through it to make sure I’ve not missed a trick. This is an absorbing tale which mixes metafiction, mystery and murder. It’s certainly a gripping read, but it also arouses critical curiosity. Though I don’t usually like novels about writing novels, I was hooked by this one.


30 October 2014

It’s thirty years since I read this, and if anything it seems more relevant than ever. Berman outlines the ‘disenchantment’ which set in with ‘the Cartesian paradigm’ and which has only deepened since – separating mind from body, humanity from nature, knower from known. We need, he argues, to rediscover the holistic vision of animism, the earliest form of religion. But ‘reenchantment’ cannot be a simple return, and Berman makes a convincing case for ecology as the unifying model for our era.


9 April 2015

Initially put off by the sheer length of this novel, I soon realised that it was going to be as rewarding as my favourite monuments of fiction, whether by Dickens or by Dostoevsky. The title alludes to a 17th-century painting of a beautiful bird chained to its perch: a work of art that dignifies, illuminates and redeems the life of such a fragile, suffering creature. The novel does likewise in recounting the struggle of a contemporary American teenager to survive amid the chaos and cruelty of circumstance. Stunning.

Tim Lott, *The Last Summer of the Water Strider* (Scribner, 2015)

20 August 2015

Set in the early 1970s, the story concerns a 17-year old, significantly called Adam, who is forced to enter the world of experience when he witnesses his mother’s death. He is then sent to stay with his uncle Henry Templeton – a character whom Lott bases on the self-proclaimed ‘spiritual entertainer’ of the hippie era, Alan Watts. Despite being deeply flawed, Henry helps Adam awaken to a whole new way of seeing the world. An absorbing and atmospheric read.

David Shields and Shane Salerno, *Salinger* (Simon & Schuster, 2014)

27 August 2015

This study is unconventional in format, consisting as it does of a vast variety of
anecdotes and assessments of the fiction writer J.D. Salinger, most famous for The Catcher in the Rye. About 200 interviews have been conducted, and together they paint a much more complex picture of the man than a conventional biography might manage. His traumatic wartime experiences, his absorption in the philosophy of Vedanta, his unwitting influence on Mark Chapman, the murderer of John Lennon: it’s all here, but with no forced coherence.

Martin Amis, *Experience* (Jonathan Cape, 2000)

28 January 2016

This unconventional autobiography essentially consists of three alternating narratives. The first is a remarkably good-humoured account of the author’s dental ordeals, which the press took so much pleasure in misreporting. The second concerns his troubled, often embarrassing, relationship with his famous father. The third is a commemoration of the short life of his favourite cousin, who was murdered by the diabolical Fred West. The way that the author moves between these interspersed stories without misjudging the tone is remarkable.

This article offers an overview of the relationship between writer and reader, as understood from the ancient world to the present day. It traces this relationship through Greek philosophy, Elizabethan poetics, eighteenth-century criticism, and so to Romanticism and its legacy. It then addresses the twentieth-century attempt to put the writer and reader in their place, before commending the contribution of one particular thinker—a Christian philosopher—to the debate.

The relationship between reading and writing might seem natural and inevitable: writers write so that readers can read. Over the centuries, however, secular literary theory in the West has returned again and again to the issue of what that relationship involves and, more specifically, what effect the writer's efforts have on the reader.

Early Views

Our starting point must be ancient Greece, and the radical disagreement between the philosopher Plato and his pupil Aristotle. One of the reasons that Plato banished poets from his ideal republic was that their works encouraged indulgence in emotions rather than a state of contemplative reason. Aristotle's response was his theory of “catharsis”, which he formulated in the course of his account of the structure and function of tragic drama. Tragedy, he proposed, necessarily aroused two main emotions—"pity" (for the suffering protagonist) and "fear" (of the power of the gods who administered his or her punishment)—but with the very purpose of purging the audience of those emotions by the end of the play. Even though the events performed on stage were illusory (an actor playing a king in a story that may never have happened, for example), the result had a healing effect on the lives of those who witnessed them. This impact was succinctly summarised in the words of the English poet John Milton, who produced his own Christian version of classical tragedy in *Samson Agonistes* (1671): the desired state was “calm of mind, all passion spent.”

It might be said that the whole history of literary theory goes back to the disagreement between Plato and his pupil. Certainly, Aristotle’s defence of literature on the grounds that it has a beneficial impact on the reader has been repeatedly invoked in various forms over the millennia. The Elizabethan poet Sir Philip Sidney may have been conveying the wisdom of his own age when, in his *Defence of Poesy* (1595), he stated that the point of poetry was “both to delight and to teach” (Sidney 1968: 9); but he was also invoking classical authority, given that his statement was based on sentiments uttered in the ancient world by the poets Ovid and Horace, themselves very much aware of Aristotle’s thesis.

Of course, the very claim that literature improves readers by presenting them with an inspiring illusion only begs the question of how far literature tells the truth about reality. We are not here directly concerned with this issue of “mimesis”, or representation, but it relates to the reader’s dilemma: How much trust should she or he place in the author’s words? Sidney believed that that trust should be absolute, for the poet improves upon the reality we know: “Nature never set forth the earth in so rich a tapestry as divers poets have done, neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden” (Sidney 1968: 7). Hence it will be a foolish reader who looks to the writer for factual, as opposed to
imaginative truth: “Now, for the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth” (Sidney 1968: 733).

The principle at which Sidney is hinting here is what he refers to elsewhere in his *Defence* as “feigning”. That this was a popular notion of the period is evident from the fact that four years later, Shakespeare had one of his comic fools, Touchstone, declare: “the truest poetry is the most feigning” (*As You Like It*, III.iii.15). That creative writers ‘feign,’ that is, invent or pretend, means that their works have to be taken on faith by the reader, with the hope that the benefits will be sufficient to make the act of reading worthwhile. In the words of the Romantic poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose admiration of Shakespeare’s art knew no bounds, it is necessary to adopt “that willing suspension of disbelief … which constitutes poetic faith” (Coleridge 1971: 248).

Before the Romantics, however, English criticism of the earlier eighteenth century—what we often refer to as the neo-classical period—had produced its own model of literature, rather more measured and sober than Sidney’s. “The only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it”: so wrote Samuel Johnson, the great spokesman for critical common sense in that period (Johnson 1984: 536). His own preoccupation being endurance rather than enjoyment, Johnson famously objected to Shakespeare on the grounds that he did not offer improvement for his readers: in short, that his plays lacked “moral purpose”. This in turn prompted Johnson to state what he took to be a general truth: “It is always a writer’s duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent of time or place” (Johnson 1968: 71). Through those words we can intuit the confidence which the neo-classical period had in the idea of a culture of shared values, a public sphere of agreed assumptions—what Johnson encapsulated in his famous phrase, “the common reader.”

However, there being in most cases a considerable distance between the author sitting down to write and the reader sitting down to read—in some cases, several centuries—the problem had to be addressed of how far the reader’s interpretation may legitimately depart from the author’s text. Writing not long before Johnson, the poet Alexander Pope gave the following advice in his versified “Essay on Criticism”: “In every work, regard the writer’s end / Since none can compass more than they intend” (Pope 1963: 152). It sounds eminently reasonable to say that readers should not, for example, read Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in order to find out about gardening (though the descriptions of the garden of Eden might please them); but is the reader always to be constrained by what he or she knows of “the writer’s end”?

**Romanticism**

The era of Romanticism, which departed so radically from the critical assumptions of the earlier decades of the eighteenth century, was if anything even more preoccupied with the notion of the ‘authority’ of the author than the neo-classical era had been. This in turn had implications for the way the reader should regard him or her. With the Romantics, the idea of the author as solitary genius came to the fore; and with it, the idea of the reader as initiate worshipping at the shrine of creativity. The poet and painter William Blake famously declared to a correspondent in 1799: “You say that I want somebody to Elucidate my Ideas. But you ought to know that What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men” (Blake 1988: 702). Only those of strong disposition, who are willing to make the effort to follow the trajectory of the author’s majestic imagination, need apply for the role of reader.

How far that imagination should follow its own laws is another matter. If it is given total freedom, the result may be confused and obscure; if it is constrained too much by form and decorum, the result may be dull and obvious. The Romantic poets pondered this dilemma at some length. When William Wordsworth joined with his
friend Coleridge to produce a volume called *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, it met with incomprehension. This was due to their refusal to imitate the “poetic diction” of their predecessors, and their desire to celebrate the earthy, passionate life of rural folk. Their audacious decision to explore the psychological depths of their subjects, and of themselves, produced some unsettling verse which was received badly by the critics. Wordsworth felt obliged to set out the two authors’ intentions in his preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, which appeared two years later. In doing so, he developed his ideas about the relationship between writing and reading.

It is in this preface that Wordsworth famously defines the poet as “a man speaking to men.” This definition in itself would hardly have offended Pope and Johnson. However, he has no sooner offered it than he qualifies it significantly: “He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than one supposed to be common among mankind…” (Foakes 1968: 35). What Wordsworth is trying to do is reconcile a model of linguistic communication, whereby the writer addresses the reader directly as an equal, with a model of imaginative consummation, whereby the writer’s genius moves him or her to use language in a way that the reader never could. The import of the latter model is that, if that reader is prepared to surrender to the writer’s spell, she or he may catch something of that “spirit of life” which informs the poem.

Imaginative consummation is what Wordsworth’s friend Coleridge came to believe was the more important characteristic of poetry. Indeed, the figure of the “man speaking to men” did not feature significantly in the latter’s extensive speculations in the years following *Lyrical Ballads*. His preoccupation in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) is with the very name and nature of ‘imagination.’ What he meant by it may be briefly conveyed by a phrase from one of his most famous poems “Dejection: An Ode,” which he wrote fifteen years earlier. Here he laments the decline in his own loss of formative creativity, even while seeking to define that power: Every moment of despair that he experiences “Suspends what Nature gave me at my birth, / My shaping spirit of Imagination” (Coleridge 1971: 107).

The idea that great poetry works according to a quasi-divine force (“Nature” for Coleridge being a sacred totality), which enables us to find pattern and meaning in our experience, is at odds with Wordsworth’s more modest claim. Wordsworth may regard the writer as possessing superior faculties, but he assumes that he has a duty to speak as directly as possible to the reader. Coleridge may believe that all human beings are capable of imagination, but he does not believe that the poet’s privileged access to the “shaping spirit” should be compromised due to an assumed demand for immediate sense. Hence his two most famous poems, “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan”, are celebrated not for their communicative power so much as for their elusive and haunting beauty. The reader of these poems must not expect an easy journey or a conveniently packaged message. For the poet’s obligation is to his “shaping spirit,” which moves in a mysterious way, not to the casual reader seeking diversion.

Coleridge’s “shaping spirit” and Wordsworth’s “man speaking to men” each fostered a strain of nineteenth-century thinking about literature. The “shaping spirit” led ultimately to the aesthete who practises “art for art’s sake.” The “man speaking to men” led to the Victorian sage who offers moral advice to his age. The poet and critic Matthew Arnold united both strains. In “The Study of Poetry” (1880), he argued that the decline of religious faith meant that literature itself was filling the void, both as moral guide and as aesthetic refuge: “More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us.” (Arnold 1964: 47). There could not be a more explicit case for the idea that the writings of great minds had a beneficial effect on its readers.
The relationship between writers and readers, far from being hereafter taken for granted, was debated at length in the twentieth century. In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), the Anglo-American poet and critic T.S. Eliot suggested that the “individual talent” meant nothing without the “tradition” to which it belonged, even while that talent might extend that tradition, or else help us appreciate it anew. On this basis, he advocated a doctrine of “impersonality”, which stated that the person who writes the poem should be of no interest to the reader. Speculation about the state of mind, heart or soul of the author was futile: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (Eliot 1975: 43). Effectively, Eliot had offered a rebuke to the Romantic manifesto articulated by Wordsworth in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Eliot was also implicitly querying Arnold’s idealistic claims for the impact of poetry, even though he himself revered “tradition” in a quasi-religious manner.

By the time we get to the North American movement of the mid-twentieth century known as the New Criticism, all talk of the writer’s aims in writing and of the reader’s benefits in reading was becoming suspect. W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley produced two uncompromising essays: “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) and “The Affective Fallacy” (1949). The first of these argues that the intention of the author is “neither available nor desirable” as a standard for judging the success of a work of literature. The work should be read objectively, in its own right, and should be assessed only on intrinsic grounds (see Wimsatt 1954: 3-20). If the author’s life is banished from his own poem in that first essay, the second essay banishes the reader’s life from the act of reading: to equate the meaning of the poem with its psychological impact on the reader is to surrender to “impressionism and relativism.” It does not matter what various people of different times and places have discovered in a poem; what matters is the poem itself (see Wimsatt 1954: 21-39).

Though New Criticism was based in the USA, it had been anticipated in England by such works as I.A. Richards’ *Practical Criticism* (1929), which resulted from Richards’ experience of seeking responses from his Cambridge students to poems that were provided without attribution of author, or even date. Richards had been shocked by a general failure to understand what the poems were about, let alone recognise the importance of tone, imagery, and so forth. He set himself the task of outlining a proper method for analysing literature, which this and other books of his laid out. A younger Cambridge academic, F.R. Leavis, was initially much influenced by Richards’ “practical criticism,” but subsequently recuperated the Romantic idea of the great author. The genius who expressed his or her affirmation of ‘life’ (a word Leavis never tired of using), would thereby encourage in the reader a parallel affirmation. Taking his career as a whole, we may say that Leavis owed far more to Arnold than he ever did to Richards.

Leavis died in the 1970s, at about the time when French literary theory had begun to encroach upon English academic criticism. No doubt due to an entrenched empiricism, the latter had been slow to respond to structuralism, which offered a highly abstract key to all possible sign-systems. It saw all language, including the literary use of it, as a self-perpetuating system of signification rather than as a means of individual expression. Roland Barthes, who had early on been an exponent of structuralism, did not begin to have any impact in England or the United States until he took the structuralist approach to its limit, thus indirectly providing a manifesto for what became known as post-structuralism. In his essay “The Death of the Author” (1968), he might seem to be simply restating the New Critical orthodoxy that the writer is not a legitimate reference point for the reader who wishes to understand the writer’s work. Again, to demonstrate how an individual author relies
on the collective code of language was already acceptable structuralist practice. However, here Barthes is going much further.

Echoing the “deconstruction” of Jacques Derrida, which challenges the idea of a fixed meaning, and anticipating the “reader-response theory” of Stanley Fish, which challenges the idea of a fixed text, he subverts simultaneously the idea of fixity and the idea of authority, which he sees as synonymous. As the writer disappears from view, readers are free to engage with the language of the text in any way they choose; there are no constraints, because there is no author/authority. Instead of a stable text, the product of the writer’s mind, we are dealing with unstable ‘texture’ – with ‘writing,’ a tissue of signs which has no hidden ‘secret’ to reveal: “To give a text an Author [sic] is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.” The reader, by contrast, is a far less predictable entity, and so a more promising figure altogether: one who may reconstruct the text just as he or she wants. Thus: “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Newton 1988: 157).

If we no longer feel obliged to “regard the writer’s end,” in Pope’s words, then an obvious danger is an anarchy of interpretation; Barthes was fully prepared to run that risk. Anglo-American criticism was not prepared to go all the way with Barthes, however. In *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), Jonathan Culler seemed to concede a good deal to post-structuralism by focusing on the reader, but he did so only in order to seek a new sense of order: the need, as he saw it, to delineate the nature of “literary competence”, which meant formulating the legitimate “conventions” by which readers made sense of texts (Culler 1975: 258). However, Culler’s assumption was that these readers were affiliated to an existing, stable institution, namely a university, in which consensus was essential to the well-being of the academic community. In his later work, Culler made much more allowance for the variety of interpretation, and the fact that readers of different times and places would read the same text differently.

Ricoeur’s Discourse Theory

Legitimacy and variety of interpretation are issues that have long since been addressed in the study of the Bible, but rather than provide a lengthy overview of the development of biblical study in relation to secular literary theory, it might be useful to look briefly at one particular contribution to secular literary theory which is informed both by scriptural scholarship and religious faith. I am referring to the work of the Christian philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). Ricoeur more than anyone addressed the relationship between the writer and the reader, and the status of the text which lies, as it were, between them.

Reacting against the structuralist model of language as system and linguistic unit as word, Ricoeur opts for that of discourse theory, which sees language as event and linguistic unit as sentence. As he reminds us, “the first and fundamental feature of discourse” is that “it is constituted by a series of sentences whereby someone says something to someone about something” (Ricoeur 1991: 82-83). This function is not radically altered when we turn from spoken communication to literary communication; but of course, the place and function of the text has to be addressed—and Ricoeur duly does so.

As we have seen, Romanticism gave us the idea of the writer as genius, with whom the reader seeks to empathise, hoping to experience the world in the same way, albeit at a lesser intensity. But New Criticism reminded us that it is only the author’s work, and not the author’s state of mind, that is available to us; and structuralism raised the question of whether language is a mode of individual expression at all. Thereafter post-structuralism gave full approval for the reader to respond to the text with complete disregard for any authority, authorial or otherwise. Ricoeur may be
seen as comprehending these issues by addressing “the very historicity of human experience,” which involves “communication in and through distance” (Ricoeur 1991: 76). Hence he articulates the dialectic between “participation” and “distanciation”, between “understanding” and “objectification”, between the response to the event of “saying” and the recognition of the fixity of the “said”—a fixity which in literature is known as the text (Ricoeur 1991: 78).

When discourse passes from speaking to writing, we find that meaning becomes much more problematical but also much more promising. As Ricoeur reminds us: “writing renders the text autonomous with regard to the intention of the author. What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant …” (Ricoeur 1991: 83). To recognise this, however, is not necessarily to abandon any notion of reference, to confine ourselves to an arid description of the language of the text, or to surrender to interpretative chaos. Ricoeur, drawing on his knowledge of hermeneutics, or theory of interpretation, asks us to take as our focus “the world of the text”. It is this notion that permits us to attribute referential meaning to literary works. For “there is no discourse so fictional that it does not connect up with reality” (Ricoeur 1991: 85). But such discourse refers not to the first-order reference that we get in spoken discourse, when the speaker is able to point to a reality which is common to both him and the listener. Rather, we are dealing with a second-order reference which offers a much richer sense of reality.

Essentially, what is at stake here is a new model of the reader: one which must be clearly distinguished from the freewheeling and high-handed figure celebrated by Barthes. Consider Ricoeur’s own, very careful formulation of what is involved in the act of ‘appropriation’ which the reader performs. Despite the connotations of this term, what Ricoeur envisages is as far from interpreting the text just as one pleases as it is from expending all one’s energies on locating the supposed meaning of the author. “Ultimately, what I [as reader] appropriate is a proposed world” (Ricoeur 1991: 87-88). This is “not behind the text, as a hidden intention would be, but in front of it, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Henceforth, to understand is to understand oneself in front of the text.” Though the reader is destabilised, the point is that it is the text which is doing the destabilising: “It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity for understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self, which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed” (Ricoeur 1991: 88). To apprehend such an existence demands a risk, or wager, of interpretation on the part of the reader: “just as the world of the text is real only insofar as it is imaginary, so too it must be said that the subjectivity of the reader comes to itself only as it is placed in suspense, unrealized, potentialized. In other words, if fiction is a fundamental dimension of the reference of the text, it is no less a fundamental dimension of the subjectivity of the reader. As a reader, I find myself only by losing myself” (Ricoeur 1991: 88).

Most people consulting the present volume will no doubt catch the allusion in that last statement to the Gospels. It is no coincidence. Ricoeur’s model of interpretation for secular texts works just as well for sacred texts. For in both cases, the goal of the reader is not to recover an authorial meaning that precedes the act of writing. Rather, it is to enter into the “world” of the text and to allow the realm of the “possible” to enter one’s life. In short, the end of the act of reading is revelation, which Ricoeur would have us conceive in the fullest sense, with all the Biblical connotations in play.

But even if one wishes to refuse the spiritual aspect of interpretation, one can still agree that Ricoeur offers a most satisfying account of the relationship between writing and reading, event and understanding, even taking into account the brief history of that relationship which we have here provided.


Environment

LAURENCE COUPE

The word ‘environment’ is here used to refer to both the human and non-human spheres, but with special emphasis on the dependence of the former on the latter. We explore the range of associations of the term in ecology, in the theory of evolution, in the ‘Gaia’ hypothesis, in religion, and in literary criticism. New advances in thinking are celebrated, but ancient wisdom is also invoked.

Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of ‘environment’ is that given in the Oxford Dictionary of Ecology: “The complete range of external conditions, physical and biological, in which an organism lives. Environment includes social, cultural and (for humans) economic and political considerations, as well as the more usually understood features such as soil, climate and food supply” (Allaby 1998: 143). Those human ‘considerations’ and those non-human ‘features,’ while they may be studied separately, are necessarily complementary. At first sight, it is the former that the English literary critics F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson seem to have in mind in their influential Culture and Environment (1933). After all, the avowed aim of the book is to offer a means of resisting the ‘standardization’ of life brought about by mass production and entertainment. But as their argument develops, we see that, in alerting their readers to the deterioration of their culture, they cannot help but talk about nature.

For, considering further that title of Leavis and Thompson’s volume, it is clear that by ‘environment’ they mean two different things. Firstly, they mean the social context of modern, urban England. This they see as having suppressed a living ‘culture’—the rural way of life which had been expressed most powerfully in the language of Shakespeare and whose demise is documented by writers such as George Sturt, author of The Wheelwright’s Shop and Change in the Village. This brings us to Leavis and Thompson’s second meaning. Because for them the world of Shakespeare and Sturt had ‘roots’ in a way of life which itself had ‘roots’ in the land, the critics see the ideal ‘culture’ as an embodiment of the ‘environment,’ in this sense: the rhythms of a natural order, manifest in a specific (i.e. English) locality.

The word that Leavis and Thompson use to make the link between social environment and natural environment is ‘organic,’ as in the phrase ‘organic community.’ The idea that there once was a human way of life that was in tune and in keeping with the order of nature, and that its memory should be kept alive, has over the decades since the book’s publication been dismissed as sentimentality. However, it might well seem all the more necessary today, as the very survival of life on Earth will depend on human beings acquiring sufficient respect for the natural environment to avoid doing further, irrevocable damage.

The challenge is to take responsibility for one’s locality without forgetting the larger, global context. We may say that ecology addresses the relationship between organism and environment; but the question arises as to how extensive that environment is. Most of the time, the individual will be thinking only of habitat, that is, the physical locality in which he or she lives, along with other organisms, whether plant or animal. But beyond that lies the whole landscape of the country of which he
or she is a citizen; and beyond that are the seas and lands of the rest of the globe, with all their varied inhabitants. The connections multiply. The Greek root of the word ‘ecology’ is oikos, ‘home’: to think ecologically is to understand that one’s home extends from locality to planet.

The term for the relationship between specific organisms and a specific environment is ‘ecosystem.’ But again, the extent of a given ecosystem depends on the decision of the person analysing it. The pond in one’s garden counts as an ecosystem; so too does a whole ocean. To have a coherent environmental worldview, one must be able to see that the relationships we discover in a chosen locality are indices of the larger relationships that keep the Earth functioning, which may be seen as an ecosystem on a grand scale.

Charles Darwin was someone who understood the larger picture, but his discoveries about nature came about through very particular observations. Consider the following descriptive passage from The Origin of Species (1859). “It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us” (Darwin 1985: 459). Darwin was particularly good at noting relationships which the casual observer would probably overlook. This skill, of course, helped him in his deductions about the way the natural world in its entirety had evolved.

Darwin’s followers tended to emphasise the idea of competition between organisms, as in the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ (often attributed to Darwin, though it actually was coined by the political theorist Herbert Spencer); but Darwin himself had much to say about cooperation. It is also worth pointing out that Alfred Russel Wallace, a scientist who has as much claim as Darwin to be the originator of the theory of evolution, made even more of cooperation, and demonstrated that the theory had implications for the way we view ourselves in relation to the planet. In short, Wallace’s notion of environment was holistic, and he was hopeful that human beings would come to see the importance of connecting culture with nature, and of connecting both with a larger, spiritual totality (see Flannery 2011: 27-32).

The “Gaia” Hypothesis

The idea that the total environment of the Earth might itself be sustained by a unifying force has in recent years been especially associated with the name of James Lovelock. His ‘Gaia’ hypothesis, while being thoroughly scientific, gains its imaginative appeal from its declared association with the eponymous goddess, the earth mother of ancient Greek religion. The theory itself sounds rather arid in summary formulation: “A view of the Earth that sees it as a self-regulating system made up from the totality of organisms, the surface rocks, the ocean and the atmosphere tightly coupled as an evolving system. The theory sees this system as having a goal—the regulation of surface conditions so as always to be as favourable as possible for contemporary life” (Lovelock 2007: 208).

Lovelock realised early on that his idea would never take hold of the popular imagination if he called it ‘Earth System’ theory. It was his friend, the novelist William Golding, who suggested the name ‘Gaia.’ Lovelock has since defended his decision to adopt his friend’s suggestion: “I know that to personalize the Earth System as Gaia, as I have often done and continue to do in this book, irritates the scientifically correct, but I am unrepentant because metaphors are more than ever needed for a widespread comprehension of the true nature of the Earth and an understanding of the lethal dangers that lie ahead” (Lovelock 1989: 188).
We are not here concerned with the legitimacy of using a figure from ancient Greek myth to represent a contemporary scientific theory. What matters is the significant impact that Lovelock’s thinking has had on our understanding of the environment. The ecological philosopher Colin Johnson explains: “The presence of sufficient living organisms on a planet is needed for the regulation of the environment. Where there is incomplete occupation, the ineluctable forces of physical and chemical evolution would soon render it uninhabitable.” Thus, “increased diversity among the species leads to better regulation” (Johnson 1991: 118). Moreover, if environment and evolution are inseparable, then Lovelock’s theory forces us to rethink the latter:

Our interpretation of Darwin’s great vision is altered. Gaia draws attention to the fallibility of the concept of adaptation. It is no longer sufficient to say that ‘organisms better adapted than others are more likely to leave offspring.’ It is necessary to add that the growth of an organism affects its physical and chemical environment; the evolution of the species and the evolution of the rocks, therefore, are tightly coupled as a single indivisible process (Johnson 1991: 118).

Nor is it enough to offer notional, abstract assent to Lovelock’s findings. For Johnson and other ‘green’ thinkers, real, concrete assent is required: “To create sustainable ways of living for the future, humanity has to accept the limits of those dynamics (as well as those imposed by finite resources) and devise ways of living and means of fulfilment within the Gaian whole, accepting our rights and responsibilities as part of a coherent web of life” (Johnson 1991: 118).

One problem in discussing the Gaia theory is the apparent contradiction between Lovelock’s idea of life on Earth as constituting a self-regulating system and the argument of the many green campaigners who draw on it in order to encourage people to take responsibility for its welfare. How can Gaia be both an order that continually repairs itself, and at the same time an invalid who relies on human care for her welfare? The contradiction is, as I say, only apparent, for Lovelock has increasingly insisted that if humanity does not act responsibly, it will itself become the invalid:

We have made this appalling mess of the planet and mostly with rampant liberal good intentions. Even now, when the bell has started tolling to mark our ending, we still talk of sustainable development and renewable energy as if these feeble offerings would be accepted by Gaia as an appropriate and affordable sacrifice. We are like a careless and thoughtless family member whose presence is destructive and who seems to think that an apology is enough. We are part of the Gaian family, and valued as such, but until we stop acting as if human welfare was all that mattered, and was the excuse for our bad behaviour, all talk of further development of any kind is unacceptable. (Lovelock 2006: 189)

So grim is the scenario which Lovelock depicts, that he proposes the idea that a group of concerned environmentalists should produce a Gaian ‘Bible’ to guide those who can see catastrophe ahead and the few who might survive it:

We need a new book like the Bible that would serve in the same way but acknowledge science. It would explain properties like temperature, the meaning of their scales of measurement and how to measure them. It would list the periodic table of the elements. It would give an account of the air, the rocks, and the oceans. It would give schoolchildren of today a proper understanding of our civilization and of the planet it occupies. It would inform them at an age when their minds were most receptive and give them facts they would remember for a lifetime. It would also be the survival manual for our successors. A book that was readily available should disaster happen. (Lovelock 2006: 203).
Mention of the need for a body of scripture may remind us that the idea of the natural environment as a total system to which humans must conform—a network of being which contains and sustains them, and which they challenge at their peril—might be difficult for many people of a religious persuasion to accept. The view of the natural environment associated with the Jewish and Christian Bible seems to be diametrically opposed to the Gaian. In the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis we read:

> And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (Genesis 1:26-28).

For those believers who want to read it literally, the Biblical story of origins is obviously incompatible with such a theory as Lovelock’s. The former has humanity at the centre of creation; the latter sees the natural environment as the totality which contains human and non-human life alike.

A transcendent, solitary God who creates the world through uttering his edicts from on high; human beings whom God creates ‘in his own image’ in order to rule over the rest of creation: these are not very promising elements in a story of origins, if the natural environment is your main concern. Monotheism and anthropocentrism are precisely the principles that have, according to ‘green’ thinking, caused most of the problems that now face us: the exhaustion of resources, the extinction of species, the intolerable increase in the human population, and global warming. The key word in the passage quoted is, of course, ‘dominion.’ However, as always, the Bible is here open to alternative interpretations: for instance, the fact that the creation narrative of Genesis 1 may be taken to mean that with dominion comes responsibility for a creation which God deems ‘good.’ Going further, a legitimate case for a ‘green’ spirituality could be made by pointing to Genesis 2, in which the role of Adam and Eve is presented more in terms of stewardship than dominion. Again, there are passages in Isaiah, in Job, and in the Psalms which present the natural environment as worthy of human respect. For example: “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy before the Lord” (Psalm 96:11-13). Of course, there is still the residual assumption evident here that nature is beautiful only because it reflects God’s glory, not because it is intrinsically good. For a fully ecological religious faith in the West, we have to wait until St Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), who regularly used familial terms ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ to address the non-human world: ‘Brother Sun,’ ‘Sister Moon,’ ‘Mother Earth,’ ‘Brother Donkey,’ etc. Even here, though, the objection might be made that, while Francis celebrated the natural environment, he still anthropomorphised it, that is, depicted it in human form. There again, the same charge could be levelled at Lovelock for his mythic personification of the ‘Earth System’ as ‘Gaia.’

**Eco-Spirituality and Eastern Religions**

Coming closer to our own time, it is worth noting that one of the main developments in theology in the past fifty years or so has been in what is sometimes called ‘eco-spirituality.’ One of the most important exponents of this in the United States was Thomas Berry, a Christian ecologist who described himself as a ‘geologian’ rather than a theologian. *The Dream of the Earth* (1988) is an extended invitation to begin
considering what it might be like to participate, physically and imaginatively, in the nature which is our true home. *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (1999) could be seen as a draft of the Gaian ‘Bible’ proposed by Lovelock. It is a guide for the coming ‘Ecozoic Era,’ during which we will take our modest and respectful place within the Earth community after centuries of destructive arrogance. Such a transformation will only come about through the rediscovery of both ancient and native wisdom, by way of a corrective to technocratic modernity. The hope is expressed that such wisdom might in due course be reconciled with a Biblical tradition which has been purged of its anthropocentrism.

There are, of course, environmentalists who see that tradition as part of the problem, and consider that Judaic and Christian thinking have had an irredeemably detrimental influence on the Western mind, yet who still seek a spiritual worldview. Many have turned to the ancient religions of the East. Taoism in particular has provided the necessary conjunction of holism and reverence required for a coherently ecological spirituality. Originating in the classic period of Chinese philosophy (roughly 550 to 250 B.C.E.), and associated with the names of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, Taoism was more of a path of wisdom than a fully-fledged religion. Indeed, when it did fledge, in the early years of the common era, the original impulse, that of aligning oneself with the ‘Tao,’ or ‘Way,’ of nature, became obscured by a superstitious obsession with immortality. That impulse was informed by the idea that everything is interconnected, and that humble acceptance of that interconnectedness is the key to spiritual revelation. The religious philosopher Alan Watts, in his *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, defines Taoism as “the way of man’s cooperation with the course or trend of the natural world” (Watts 1979: 42). In other words, and taking up that key term of Watts’ subtitle “Watercourse,” it is about ‘going with the flow’ of nature. In the *Tao Te Ching*, attributed to Lao Tzu, we read: “Humanity follows the earth. Earth follows Heaven. Heaven follows the Tao. The Tao follows what is natural” (Palmer 1991: 6).

Though other Eastern religions, notably Buddhism, stress the interconnectedness of all things, and though many Buddhists have gleaned an environmental message from the Buddha’s teachings, it is the early form of Taoism which most obviously endorses the belief that the natural environment itself offers all the spiritual meaning necessary. One does not need much imagination to see that the Tao is a force analogous to Lovelock’s Gaia: an integrated whole to which humanity will do well to subordinate its own whims and wants.

**Romanticism**

While the less environmentally-oriented model of Genesis 1 might seem to have held sway in the West, there was a significant rebellion against it in the later eighteenth century, when poets and painters repudiated the anthropocentrism of the received Biblical worldview. William Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ (1798) may be taken as representative:

… I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,

And rolls through all things. (Wordsworth 1994: 68)

Note how ‘the mind of man’ is included in the overall picture of the natural environment almost as an afterthought. More generally, note how the very sequence of phrases suggests the poet’s repeated attempts to define the force that underlies the natural environment which contains that mind; as elsewhere in Wordsworth’s writings, the word ‘something’ is made to do much of the work. Whatever he means, though, it has obvious affinities with both the Tao of Lao Tzu and the Gaia of James Lovelock.

Wordsworth in the above passage may subordinate the human to the non-human; but the burden of his work as a whole is the reciprocity of nature and culture. The English critic Jonathan Bate, in his study of the poet as representative of the English ‘environmental tradition,’ demonstrates that the poet’s sense of place was informed by an affection and respect for the rural communities of Cumberland, where he grew up, and that his ecological vision was also a social vision. Certainly, we may say that Wordsworth’s belief that to find how to relate to nature was also to find how to live in society influenced the Victorian sage John Ruskin, who opposed capitalist industrialism because it spoiled both the natural and the social environment. With his insistence that ‘There is no wealth but life,’ he advocated an art and a culture that honoured nature and allowed for what he saw as humanity’s natural need for beauty. It could also be argued that Wordsworth’s vision was the inspiration behind North American environmentalism. We might trace a line of influence running from the Lakeland poet through Henry David Thoreau to John Muir and beyond.

The ‘Green’ Movement and the Academy

That said, it does seem strange that the connection between English Romanticism and both English and American environmentalism took so long to be acknowledged and explored by literary critics. Bate’s book on Wordsworth appeared in 1993, effectively launching what he called ‘ecopoetics’ in the United Kingdom. Across the Atlantic, ‘ecocriticism’ had emerged slightly earlier, in the form of various scholarly articles, but may be said to have come of age in the mid-1990s, with the publication of Karl Kroeber’s Ecological Literary Criticism (1994), Lawrence Buell’s The Environmental Imagination (1995), and Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s anthology, The Ecocriticism Reader (1996). Both UK ecopoetics and US ecocriticism were finally brought together in Laurence Coupe’s Green Studies Reader (2000), which also included developments in cultural studies and philosophy. Thereafter, the phrase ‘green studies’ seemed to take precedence over ‘ecopoetics’. However, the definition of ‘ecocriticism’ offered by Buell conveys the spirit of the enterprise, whichever nomenclature is preferred: ‘a study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis’ (Buell 1995: 430).

Given how late the ‘green’ movement in literary theory was in making an appearance, one can understand the sense of urgency which its practitioners brought to bear in making their case. Cheryl Glotfelty’s pronouncement in her introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader is worth quoting: “If your knowledge of the
outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of
the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were
the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the
earth’s life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know that
there was an earth at all” (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xvi).

She then goes on to contrast the insulated nature of academic discourse, whether it
be postcolonial studies, Marxism, or feminism which is being professed, with the
alarming number of ecological disasters reported in the media—all of which never
seem to impinge on the academic mind. To paraphrase her general argument, and
to return to where we started, we may say that the ‘culture’ side of our definition of
‘environment’ had outweighed and obscured the ‘nature’ side. It is, then, an
encouraging sign of the times that the subject of the natural environment should
now be central not only to the sciences but also to the humanities; and not only to
critics but also to theologians, philosophers, and others.

Those engaged in this new advance in environmental thinking might do well to
register the importance of the following pronouncement by the ecological
campaigner Aldo Leopold, made in the middle of the last century: “A thing is right
when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic
community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold 1949: 224-5).
Environment is both culture and nature, for environment is ‘biotic community’; the
problems arise only when we forget this, and assert the values of culture at the
expense of nature.

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Green theory is a development within literary and cultural studies which is informed by the insights of ecology. We may define ‘ecology’ as a branch of science which deals with the relation between organisms and their environments, and with the total pattern of such relationships. The root of the term lies in two ancient Greek words: oikos (household) and logos (word): ecology is the study of the earth as our home. As a science, it began in the mid-nineteenth century; but its impact on critical theory as an academic discipline was not felt until the later twentieth century, when the relationship between human beings and their total environment had become manifestly unstable, and the damage being done to nature had become an unavoidable challenge.

The name given to green theory when it was becoming established was ‘ecocriticism’, this term being used as an abbreviation of ‘ecological literary criticism’. Ecocriticism, essentially, is the study of the relation between literature and nature: in particular, the literary representation of nature and, just as importantly, the power of literature to inspire its readers to act in defence of nature. ‘Green studies’ takes its cue from ecocriticism but, rather than confine attention to literature, it expands the area of interest to include all manner of works, whether literary, artistic, cinematic, musical, political or philosophical. The two terms, ‘ecocriticism’ and ‘green studies’, are often used interchangeably, though the former seems to be more favoured in the USA and the latter in the UK. In this introductory essay, we are using the phrase ‘green theory’ to cover both ecocriticism and green studies, so nearly all of what is said about the former may be taken to apply to the latter.

NATURE AND CULTURE

Nature, then, is the focus, whichever name we give to the way we talk about it, and whether we are relating it to literature or to other forms of cultural production. But what is nature? The Concise Oxford Dictionary offers seven meanings, some of which divide into further sub-meanings. The first of the seven is ‘a thing or person’s innate or essential quality’: a usage that inevitably occurs in any kind of theory. But for green theory, these are the two semantic areas which are of special interest:

2 a (often Nature) the physical power causing all the phenomena of the material world (Nature is the best physician). b these phenomena, including plants, animals, landscape, etc.

6 a an uncultivated or wild area, condition, community, etc; b the countryside, esp. when picturesque.

Having provided these distinctions, it is necessary to gloss them if we are to be clear about the way green theory refers to ‘nature’. Thus, though it goes without saying that green theorists are interested in phenomena such as plants, animals and landscape (2b), it would be misleading to say that they are exclusively interested in the countryside, as they may be equally concerned with the ecology of the city (6b). Again, though they are interested in wilderness, they would usually try to avoid speaking of any community which lives in harmony with wilderness as itself either ‘wild’ or ‘uncultivated’ — or even worse, ‘savage’. For that would suggest a dubious
model of human evolution, and it would reinforce the language of colonialism (6a). Moreover, in considering the countryside, they would not want to endorse the commodification of landscape associated with the late-eighteenth-century cult of the ‘picturesque’, which selected and approved certain ‘views’ of rural landscapes (6b). But whatever their area of interest, green theorists will inevitably engage at some point with the idea of a fundamental force, capitalised as ‘Nature’: they will not necessarily resist the capitalisation, but they will by no means take for granted what the word represents (2a). Thus green theory ‘debates “Nature” in order to defend nature’ (Coupe 2000: 5).

Paradoxically, the picture becomes clearer when we bring in the complementary term ‘culture’, even though it is usually regarded as forbiddingly complex. For the point to emphasise about its etymology is that all three of its original meanings – ‘inhabitation’, ‘cultivation’ and ‘worship’ – suggest activity in relation to nature. People may inhabit, and so understand, a region of earth; they may cultivate the soil; they may worship an underlying ‘power’. Note too that ‘cultivation’ was early on used both for the soil and the soul, and we may say that a link between earthly matter and human spirit is implicit in the word ‘culture’. The further inference we might make is that human culture is only ever meaningful as a dimension of nature, which may perhaps be regarded as that larger culture which contains ours – whether we want to refer to it as ‘Nature’ or not.

GOING GREEN

We can begin to get some sense of the development of green theory by considering one particular literary convention: ‘pastoral’. This celebrates the idyllic rural life and loves of shepherds – the term ‘pastoral’ coming from Latin pastor, shepherd – with an emphasis on simple pleasure in a natural setting. In The Country and the City (1973), possibly the first example of ecocritical writing in the UK, the socialist theorist Raymond Williams demonstrates how writers have always looked backwards for their vision of rural contentment, and how such a vision has been used to mystify the actual relations of production in the countryside. While conceding this point, Jonathan Bate argues in Romantic Ecology (1991) that the poet William Wordsworth managed to forge a radical version of pastoral that entailed environmental and social responsibility.

Enquiring further into the dimensions of the genre, Terry Gifford in Pastoral (1999) differentiates between three modes of writing: (1) ‘pastoral’, the received literary form; (2) ‘anti-pastoral’, the critique of that form, particularly insofar as it distorts rural reality or justifies rural hierarchy; (3) ‘post-pastoral’, a newly inclusive mode which, while treating pastoral itself with suspicion, yet affirms the human need for a deep relationship with nature. This is a usefully flexible model which allows us to situate any depiction of the natural environment without pigeon-holing a particular writer. Gifford sees Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Ted Hughes, for instance, as encompassing all three modes.

In the United States, the question of how to avoid formulaic and idealised depictions of nature, in order to do justice to a new-found land that has not lost its wonder, is especially important. North American green theory is particularly interested in non-fictional nature writing, which seeks to convey a direct, authentic encounter with the landscape. Lawrence Buell in his The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture (1995) takes as his point of departure Henry David Thoreau’s famous work Walden (1854). In doing so, he explores the possibilities of an ‘aesthetics of relinquishment’, which involves a move from the ‘egotistical self’ to the ‘ecological self’ [my emphasis]. Buell is clearly aware of the deposing of the human subject that is characteristic of post-structuralism; but that
is done in the name of language and culture, with the ‘I’ discovering itself to be an effect of its own discourse. What he is talking about is the voluntary giving up of individual autonomy: that is, forgoing ‘the illusion of mental and even bodily apartness from one’s environment’ (Buell 1995: 143-5). Thus, Thoreau may seem at first to be brooding on his own experiences, but he in effect suspends his identity in the act of writing, presenting us with an image of what it might be like to feel at one with nature: he produces an ‘ecocentric’ text.

In concentrating on nature writing while demonstrating its impact on other genres, such as fiction and poetry, Buell shows us how one of the effects of green theory is to extend the scope of the literary canon. Complementing this effect are such works as Louise H. Westling’s *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction* (1996), which argues that the received, dominant tradition has enshrined a reductive view of both women’s experience and the natural world. With an ambitious sweep of exposition, Westling demonstrates how male heroism has been habitually defined by opposition to female nature. The settlement of North America, inspired by Biblical myth, saw a nomadic, pioneer spirit assuming total command over the ‘virgin’ territory it encountered, even while it retained a sentimental view of the female. Westling articulates this tension between force and feeling very clearly in her account of American fiction: she offers, for instance, a persuasive account of the defensively masculine stance that lies behind the modernist cult of primivism represented by Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. By way of counterpoint, she considers female authors such as Eudora Welty, whose fiction offers a revaluation of what precisely it means to identify the female character with a given landscape.

It will be seen that Westling’s argument is a confirmation rather than a contradiction of Buell’s. We might add, by way of postscript to this section, that he himself has gone on revising his initial thesis. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), he proposes that green theory needs to extend, not only its idea of what an environmental work is but also what ‘nature’ itself means; he also stresses the need to encompass perspectives such as social ecology and environmental justice. He even wants to query his own previous concern with locality and piety: that is, to open up environmental criticism to global issues and to face more explicitly the challenge of postmodern scepticism. Green theory, it seems, never stands still for long.

**GREEN THEORY IN PERSPECTIVE**

The term ‘ecocriticism’ was invented by the American critic William Rueckert, whose article ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism’ first appeared in 1978. In it Rueckert sets about trying to define the nature of literature, and does so by depicting literature as nature:

Poems are green plants among us … [which] arrest energy on its path to entropy and in so doing, not only raise matter from lower to higher order, but help to create a self-perpetuating and evolving system. That is, they help to create creativity and community, and when their energy is released and flows out into others, to again raise matter from lower to higher order (to use one of the most common descriptions of what culture is).

(Rueckert & Fromm 1996: 111).

Rueckert’s use of an organic metaphor to describe literary creation may seem fanciful, but this image of poem as ‘plant’, or ‘stored energy’, allows him to make a forceful case for the centrality of ecological thinking to literary studies. His aim is to
open up the question of the interrelationship between literature and the biosphere (the whole complex of life on our planet).

Rueckert’s inspiration in writing his article is the work of his mentor and friend, the poet-critic, Kenneth Burke (1897-1993). Firstly, the very fusion of ‘ecology’ and ‘criticism’ is indebted to Burke’s idea of ‘perspective by incongruity’, that is, the creation of new meanings by ‘extending the use of a term by taking it from the context in which it is habitually used and applying it to another’ (Burke 1984a: 89). ‘Perhaps’, Rueckert muses, ‘that old pair of antagonists, science and poetry, can be persuaded to lie down together and be generative after all’ (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: 107). Secondly: ‘Kenneth Burke was right – as usual – to argue that drama should be our model or paradigm for literature.’ It is not that he wanted to ‘treat novels and poems as plays’; rather, he wanted us to ‘become aware of what they were doing as creative verbal actions in the human community’ (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: 107). Thirdly, Rueckert is very much aware at the time of writing that Burke was insisting decades before that no academic discipline can afford to ignore the state of the natural environment:

We tend to over-refine our conceptual frameworks so that they can only be used by a corps of elitist experts and gradually lose their practical relevance as they increase their theoretical elegance. I am reminded here of the stridently practical questions Burke asked all through the thirties and early forties and of the scorn with which they were so often greeted by literary critics and historians of his time. But none of these questions is antithetical to literature and there is a certain splendid resonance which comes from thinking of poets and green plants being engaged in the same creative, life-sustaining activities, and of teachers and literary critics as creative mediators between literature and the biosphere whose tasks include the encouragement of, the discovery, training and development of creative biospheric apperceptions, attitudes, and actions.

(Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: 120-1)

Rueckert no doubt has in mind such statements as this, from *Attitudes Toward History* (1937):

> Among the sciences, there is one little fellow named Ecology, and in time we shall pay him more attention. He teaches us that the total economy of the planet cannot be guided by an efficient rationale of exploitation alone, but that the exploiting part must eventually suffer if it too greatly disturbs the balance of the whole.

(Burke 1984b: 150)

If Rueckert is right (and I believe that he is), we may regard Kenneth Burke as the father of green theory.

Though Burke never produced a final summation of his ideas, he did leave us a statement, simply entitled ‘Poem’, which he wrote for inclusion in a volume of essays celebrating his work towards the end of his life. It is based on an article he had written over thirty years before, but it is clearly intended to stand alone. Here are some lines from the first stanza, using uppercase as given:

BEING BODIES THAT LEARN LANGUAGE

THEREBY BECOMING WORDLINGS

HUMANS ARE THE
Given Rueckert's endorsement, we might do worse than think through some of these phrases within the green perspective that Burke himself helped to make possible. The aim is not to summarise Burke's philosophy (though we will need to refer to his other writings), but to draw inferences from his 'Poem' which connect up with green thinking generally.

‘THE SYMBOL-USING ANIMAL’

Burke's general mode of enquiry is what he calls ‘metabiology’. Where metaphysics is a philosophy of mind, insofar as it reflects on abstract concepts of being, metabiology is a philosophy of body-mind, of the mind as rooted in bodily processes, which in turn are rooted in nature. Biology assumes nature to be purposive; metabiology studies what happens when human language is added to biological purpose. So how should we view this particular system that one particular species manages to acquire, as indicated in ‘Poem’?

Human language is a specialised form of discourse, involving spoken and written words. Other species have their own forms of discourse, but ours is distinctive in its complexity and in the range of its influence. Nevertheless, we should not forget our bodily existence, and not start attributing to language an independent status beyond its actual function in helping us make sense of the world and of our place within it. Hence Burke translates ‘human being’ as ‘wordling’: a neat way of reminding us of our modest status. This view of language as arising from the body is most fully articulated by the famous exponent of phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who tells us that it is only by seeing ideas and utterances in the context of ‘the flesh of the world’ that they can make full sense. The individual's bodily life is inseparable from the ‘body’ of the earth from which it emerges and to which it inevitably returns (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 144).

Burke's term for the human capacity for language is ‘symbolicity’; he prefers the word 'symbol' to 'sign', because he wants to convey the tribal and ritual function of language in all its richness, which humanity has increasingly forgotten. As the ecologist David Abram has since argued, it was with the invention of phonetic writing – by which words were first removed from bodily and natural life, becoming counters in an abstract code – that humanity began attempting to break its bond with the ‘more-than-human world’. Abram reminds us, though, that what we call the self is still a bodily organism, not a transcendental ego; our only way of understanding the world is through situated participation not through abstract, objective knowledge – which is itself a false ideal. We are deeply implicated in the physical world: while it is true that we can shift our attention within the act of understanding, we can ‘never suspend the flux of participation’ (Abram 1996: 45-7). The code of language is only part of the larger web of being; words articulate an ‘interanimated world’ (Abram 1996: 85). With Merleau-Ponty in mind, he observes: 'The complex interchange that we call “language” is rooted in the non-verbal
exchange always already going on between our own flesh and the flesh of the world’ (Abram 1996: 90).

To return to Burke’s statement, it is important to recognize that there are not only huge advantages in symbol-using for human beings (for example, organizing the cultivation of crops, producing great poetry) but also huge dangers (for example, organizing large-scale deforestation, producing soulless shopping malls). Either way, the very possession of the capacity for language implies activity: human beings are always doing something with words in order to have some effect on the particular situation in which they find themselves. That is why Burke speaks of ‘symbolic action’ as central to human endeavour; and that is why he defines the human being as the ‘symbolic actor’. Words, as symbols, are names for situations; situations are always dramatic, involving conflict and engagement; and the drama extends to the farther reaches of the natural environment.

‘SEPARATED FROM OUR NATURAL CONDITION’

Burke’s phrase suggests that, due to their capacity for symbolic action, human beings are both a part of nature and apart from nature: the question is whether they can maintain an equilibrium. The problem of modernity is that the latter feeling predominates, leading to human alienation and natural degradation. For just as human discourse detaches itself from its biological environment, so technology – made possible by language and rationalized by language – assumes proportions and powers hostile to that environment. There is nothing wrong with symbol-making, nothing wrong with tool-making; but divorce these activities from the sense of ultimately being part of nature and you have the makings of ecological disaster.

To counter the escalating misuse of symbolicity and destruction of nature, Burke advocates a new kind of ‘humanism’: not one that glories in humanity’s advantages over nature, but an ‘anti-Technological humanism’: that is, opposed to the current faith in ‘Big Technology’ as the answer to all our problems. This would be ‘animalistic’ in the sense that ‘far from boasting of some privileged human status, it would never disregard our humble, and maybe even humiliating, place in the totality of the natural order’ (Burke 1972a: 53-4). While later green theorists have tended to reject humanism outright because of its suggestion of an inflated view of human achievement, Burke uses ‘perspective by incongruity’ to conflate humanity and animality, humanism and humility.

Always, though, we need to come back to the issue of language itself, which is so often taken to indicate human superiority over other species. Forgetting that human culture is an extension of the culture that we call nature, we forget also that once language was a means of having a dialogue with the earth (which was also assumed to be articulate), not of talking about it from a privileged distance – a distance which encourages exploitation. Burke observes that, if community depends on ‘identification’, then we need to recognise that we belong to the world, and not vice-versa:

> It would be much better for us, in the long run, if we ‘identified’ ourselves rather with the natural things that we are progressively destroying – our trees, our rivers, our land, even our air, all of which we are a lowly ecological part of. … But too often, in such matters, our attitudes are wholly segregational, as we rip up things that we are not – and thus can congratulate ourselves upon having evolved a way of life able to exhaust in decades a treasure of natural wealth that had been here for thousands of years.

(Burke 1970: 413-14)
The irony, of course, is that we treat nature as alien to ourselves, because of our supposed distinction as symbol-users, while remaining wholly dependent upon it.

Again, the problem comes down to the assumptions that we make because of our possession of symbolic discourse. This anthropocentric (human-centred) way of thinking is evident when we pronounce that the more-than-human world which we call ‘nature’ is nothing more than a cultural or linguistic ‘construction’. The philosopher Kate Soper begins her challenge to the increasing prevalence of ‘constructionism’ within the academy as follows:

…I recognize … that there is no reference to that which is independent of discourse except in discourse, but dissent from any position which appeals to this truth as a basis for denying the extra-discursive reality of nature. I seek to expose the incoherence of an argument that appears so ready to grant this reality to ‘culture’ and its effects while denying it to ‘nature’, and argue that, unless we acknowledge the nature which is not a cultural formation, we can offer no convincing grounds for challenging the pronouncements of culture on what is or is not ‘natural’.

(Soper 1995: 8)

Refuting those who would declare that ‘nature’ is just one more unit in a signifying system, she reminds us: ‘it is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer; and the real thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier’ (Soper 1995:151).

Someone who warned about the consequences of an anthropocentric view of nature was the scientist and anthropologist Gregory Bateson, whose Steps to an Ecology of Mind (1972) stands as a sustained challenge to what he called the ‘epistemological error’ of the Western worldview. This error is twofold. Firstly, there is the failure to see that ‘mind’ (the focus of the branch of philosophy known as epistemology) is not the exclusive possession of humanity. We need to learn from the wisdom of the ancient East: ‘mind’ is present in all of nature, as a wonderfully complex pattern of mutual arising, or co-dependent origination, with the human variant being only one minor aspect. Secondly, and following from that, is the wrong-headed belief that the individual organism may be understood in isolation from its environment, and that the human species may be understood in isolation from the total environment of all species. In short, the error in essence is ‘Man against nature.’ Bateson asks rhetorically what we end up with thereby. Referring to an environment he himself knows, he answers his own question:

When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise ‘What interests me is me, or my organization, or my species,’ you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is a part of your wider eco-mental system – and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience.

(Bateson 1972: 491-2)

Normally, one might take the picture painted by Bateson to exemplify ‘anthropomorphism’ (the attribution of human characteristics to nature); but in the context of his general argument, it would be more accurate to say that he is treating humanity and nature as two aspects of the total biological order. For the same rule applies throughout: ‘The creature that wins against its environment destroys itself’ (Bateson 1972: 501). It is a thought that occurs independently to Burke: having devoted a good deal of time to theorising about ‘victimage’ – the human urge to
create and punish a ‘scapegoat’, an ‘other’ to whom is attributed all the faults and failures of the community – he comes in his later years to see the same process at work on a larger scale, with disastrous consequences: ‘Men victimize nature, and in so doing they victimize themselves. This, I fear, is the ultimate impasse’ (Burke 1972b: 26).

‘GOADED BY THE SPIRIT OF HIERARCHY’

‘Hierarchy’ derives from two Greek words, meaning ‘sacred’ and ‘rule’, so it is worth reminding ourselves that the original idea behind the word is that of a divinely ordained pattern of existence. Anyone studying Shakespeare will sooner or later come across the idea of a ‘chain of being’, running from God at the top down through angels, human beings, animals, plants and so to stones. In studying one of the tragedies, for example Macbeth, we may read a commentary which explains that anyone who murders the king is breaking this ‘chain’: in other words, offending against a natural order which has its origin in the sacred Word of creation. As we read in the first verse of the first book of the Judaeo-Christian Bible: ‘In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth’ (Genesis 1:1).

In the context of our discussion, there are two possible viewpoints on such a model of society, both of which are allowed for by Burke. On the negative side, we might point out that human beings all too easily find in nature confirmation of their own system of government and economic organisation; in doing so they claim they are sanctioned by an appropriately capitalised ‘Nature’. The chain of being was, whatever truth it contained, a rationale for feudalism. Moreover, the consensus that it was a God-given structure only encouraged the rich and powerful to enforce rigid class divisions and wield power at the expense of the poor and vulnerable, who themselves were compelled to labour for paltry recompense. In this sense, we may speak of hierarchy as a ‘goad’: hence one of Burke’s many coined phrases, ‘hierarchical psychosis’, which refers to the state in which a legitimate concern for order becomes both obsessive and oppressive.

On the positive side, we might admit that some rudimentary acknowledgement of a chain of being had the advantage of reminding everybody that their ultimate allegiance was to something greater than themselves, and that the abuse of the system by the greedy was contrary to the whole idea of a divine harmony manifest in nature – as was frequently spelt out by holy men such as Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology. In that sense, we might relate it to the scientist James Lovelock’s ‘Gaia hypothesis’: named after the earth mother of ancient Greek mythology, it tells us that the biosphere is an organic harmony to which we must conform, or else suffer the consequences. The Gaian model is a ‘post-secular’ equivalent of the traditional model, emerging as it did at a time when it seemed that science had done away with the dimension of the sacred.

The question is, then, whether it is hierarchy itself that is the problem, or whether it is hierarchical psychosis. Burke would opt for the latter; proponents of ‘ecofeminism’ would opt for the former. For ecofeminists, the main point about hierarchy is that it goes hand in hand with patriarchy: get rid of the latter and you get rid of the former. Perhaps the classic case against both is given by the philosopher Val Plumwood in her influential work Feminism and the Mastery of Nature (1993). For her, the clue to the triumph and hitherto scarcely questioned survival of the patriarchal order is the view of the world that we call ‘dualism’, which works according to the law of divide-and-rule.

According to Plumwood, nature has, since at least the time of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, been systematically subordinated to ‘the master subject’, the
hero of ‘the master story’. This story identifies rationality with masculinity, and justifies the absolute rights of both. We will not be able to repudiate ‘the master subject’ until we have gone beyond dualism, which sets up a series of contrasts on the basis of higher and lower, according to its own remorseless logic. Thus, in the following list, the former are always believed to be opposed and superior to the latter:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>culture</th>
<th>nature</th>
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<tr>
<td>reason</td>
<td>nature</td>
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<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
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<tr>
<td>mind</td>
<td>body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rationality</td>
<td>animality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spirit</td>
<td>matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self</td>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(see Plumwood 1993: 41-4)

Plumwood traces the history of Western thought in terms of this dualism, demonstrating how a ‘female’ nature has been systematically degraded, dominated and exploited. The logical culmination, which now seems imminent, will be the destruction of the planet by ‘the master subject’ in the name of ‘rational economy’ and global profit, unless ‘reason’ can be remade. This cannot simply involve privileging ‘female’ nature instead of subordinating it, for that is simply to invert the logic of patriarchy. The answer is to develop ‘the rationality of the mutual self’, which would ensure ‘the incomparable riches of diversity in the world’s cultural and biological life’ and encourage participation in the whole ‘community of life’ (Plumwood 1993: 195-6). Despite any doubts he may have about the equation of hierarchy with patriarchy, Burke would certainly concur with that last sentiment, and indeed with Plumwood’s model of how dualism and hierarchy can work to reinforce each other.

‘ROTTEN WITH PERFECTION’

Burke sees the principle of perfection as implicit in human language: ‘The mere desire to name something by its “proper” name, or to speak a language in its distinctive ways is intrinsically “perfectionist”’. Here it helps to be aware of Aristotle’s concept of ‘entelechy’, which Burke defines as ‘the notion that each being aims at the perfection natural to its kind’. Thus the acorn will inevitably become an oak, the child an adult … all in due course. This process sounds innocent enough: after all, biology implies purpose. But Burke sees language as adding a potentially dangerous complication: ‘terminology’ involves ‘termination’: the words we use imply the ends we pursue. ‘At the very start, one’s terms jump to conclusions.’ (Burke 1966: 16-17)

Perfectionism, then, is a peculiarly human – peculiarly linguistic – urge which eats away at us, driving us on and on: hence the phrase ‘rotten with perfection’. True, the desire to fulfil the promises of our terminology is responsible for such undoubted achievements as *Paradise Lost* or *War and Peace*; but it is also responsible for the
nuclear bomb. We don’t have to take such an extreme example as the latter, though, to see how dangerous terminology is when it is complemented by technology. As our ability to transform our natural environment grows, so does our determination to do so. We complete projects simply because we have names for them, regardless of the consequences. In our own day, it is all too obvious how terms such as ‘management’, ‘development’, ‘enterprise’ ‘improvement’ and ‘progress’ are frequently deployed as though the pursuit of such ideals were unanswerable guarantors of benefit for the whole planet, and are relentlessly pursued despite the manifest falsity of that conviction.

Perhaps the most influential text to dramatise the human urge for completion is the last book of the Christian Bible, namely Revelation. Written towards the end of the first century AD, this is the book of the apocalypse – the word ‘apocalypse’ coming from the Greek for ‘revelation’. It reveals what will happen at the end of history: the Messiah will return to overthrow Satan and his followers, and to establish his heavenly kingdom on earth. One of the most vivid passages in Revelation depicts the destruction of the natural environment: ‘there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast up on the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up’ (Revelation 8:7). What replaces it, however, may not strike us as very much better. Jerusalem, the Messianic city, is described as having a street of ‘pure gold, as it were transparent glass’; moreover, ‘the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God did lighten it’ (Revelation 21:21-23). This celebration of divine artifice, with its implicit denial of nature, hardly makes for environmental responsibility. But it is precisely because it depicts both natural catastrophe and unnatural salvation that the Christian apocalypse has proved a powerful presence in green thinking.

Among Burke’s writings is a blueprint for a satire, to be entitled ‘Helhaven’, in which he rewrites Revelation so that the rich, or ‘saved’, live in a luxurious, synthetic ‘heaven’, well away from the very real ‘hell’ they have created through industrial pollution, which is populated by the poor, or ‘damned’. The natural environment having been degraded beyond recognition, he presents the rich as enjoying the display of artificial scenes of ‘natural’ beauty, in a demonic parody of the ‘picturesque’. In doing so, he wants to demonstrate that the comic mode of satire is the most appropriate literary response to ecological crisis, since by taking things imaginatively to their logical conclusion, it exposes and mocks the folly of those who would blunder on towards a very literal catastrophe in pursuit of technological perfection. His idea is that the satirical tendency to take things imaginatively to ‘the end of the line’ might help prevent the ultimate termination (see Coupe 2000: 96-103).

For a more obviously serious, sustained work of environmentalist thinking along apocalyptic lines, we might turn to Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962). This is her challenge to the damaging impact of agribusiness in the United States, with its widespread and destructive use of pesticides. It strikes its apocalyptic note immediately with a ‘Fable for Tomorrow’ concerning a town in which all non-human life is dead and human beings are dying (see Carson 2000: 21-2). Another is Bill McKibben’s The End of Nature (1990), which declares that, whereas once human interference in the natural order made only a local impact, which was not lasting, now ‘global warming’ has altered everything:

We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence is its meaning: without it there is nothing but us.

(McKibben 1990: 54)
Thus the urge to perfection has been fulfilled: nature has been subsumed within human culture, and is therefore at an end. McKibben leaves unstated here the obvious inference: that human culture cannot survive its futile triumph.

Both Carson’s and McKibben’s books are serious, significant works: important touchstones for anyone interested in the future of the planet; and their sombre warnings have only gained in credibility over the years. However, the task of green theory must be to continue engaging with the representation of nature and promoting its defence. In doing so, it must distrust finality. That is why it cannot afford to ignore the importance of what Burke in *Attitudes Toward History* (1937) calls the ‘comic frame’: a perspective which is dedicated to maintaining ‘ecological balance’, and which considers human life as ‘a project in “composition”’, never to be completed (Burke 1984b: 173). Thirty years later, he is more and more convinced that ‘mankind’s only hope is a cult of comedy’: ‘The cult of tragedy is too eager to help out with the holocaust. And in the last analysis, it is too pretentious to allow for the proper recognition of our animality’ (Burke 1966: 20). In our context, we might translate ‘help out with the holocaust’ (Burke’s allusion to the fascist ideology of tragic destiny) as ‘assume the worst about the state of the planet’. It is not at all that we should choose to laugh away the perils which now beset the earth; but a ‘cult of comedy’, founded on bodily participation in Merleau-Ponty’s ‘flesh of the world’, is far more likely to encourage generous activity in defence of nature than is a preoccupation with doom and futility. In Burke’s very first book, *Counter-Statement* (1931), he suggests that an important value of both literature and critical theory lies in ‘preventing a society from becoming too assertively, too hopelessly itself’ (Burke 1968: 105). Now that we have a flourishing green theory, let us hope it will play its part in the daunting task of preventing a whole species from ‘becoming too assertively, too hopelessly itself’. The stakes could not be higher.

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Please note:

1. In the section entitled ‘THE SYMBOL-USING ANIMAL’, the second sentence (‘Where metaphysics is…’) has had a clause restored which was omitted from the published version.

2. In the section entitled ‘SEPARATED FROM OUR NATURAL CONDITION’, the paragraph which begins with the words ‘Again, the problem…’ and ends with the words ‘insights at the level of the signifier’ was omitted from the published version of the chapter.

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ADDITIONS TO BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR 2nd EDITION OF ROUTLEDGE COMPANION


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**The Land of the Green Man**

4th September 2015  🌊 Uncategorised  🆔 Laurence Coupe

With the natural world under increasing threat from government policies and market forces, there would seem to be three related paths open to those of us who do not accept the imperative of industrial progress at whatever cost.

Firstly, there is resistance: direct action, petitions, lobbying, and general disruption. Secondly, there is the process which will necessarily inform the first: the recovery of roots, both natural and cultural, which remind us of our connection to the land and the manner in which our forebears have maintained that connection. Thirdly, there is the way of seeing that complements the first two paths: re-enchantment, or the imaginative reaffirmation of the wonder and mystery of the natural world.

If I say that Carolyne Larrington’s *The Land of the Green Man* seems to have little to say about resistance, that is not by way of complaint: her book is not meant to be an eco-activist’s manual. What she has provided is a source book for those who have realised the related need for recovery and re-enchantment. Her sphere is the British Isles, but I would hazard a guess that those who revere the green world, wherever they live, will find a model of how to read a landscape in terms of myth, legend and folk tale.

That term “folk” is not without controversy, of course. Larrington argues that the founding of the Folklore Society in 1878, which seemed to have the benefit of keeping alive the wealth of English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish stories derived from the oral tradition, actually had the effect of ossifying a body of narrative, rendering the characters and events merely quaint; worse still, they became accessible only in academically approved versions. A living tradition became a mere research programme. *The Land of the Green Man*, by contrast, is an entertaining and yet authoritative compendium of tales retold with both charm and vigour. As such, it reminds us how remarkable and how precious is the land from which these stories emerged.

As to the contents of this compendium, suffice it to say that we meet, amongst others: giants, ogres, dragons, wandering knights, elfin queens, enchanted lovers and (to me most intriguing of all), ancient sleepers under sacred hills. Weaving in and out of this wealth of narratives are the recurrent themes which Larrington reflects upon, and which tend to fall into pairs: life and death, beast and human, continuity and change.

Change is a key concept here. What I take from these reflections is that the endless reworking of narratives complements the metamorphosis that is gloriously evident in the natural world. So miraculous does that capacity for change seem that we find these tales continually blur the boundary between the “natural” and the “supernatural”, between the earthly and the eternal. Enchantment is at work. We might say that this capacity for amazement has been reaffirmed by the modern writers discussed by the author: J.R.R. Tolkien, Alan Garner, Ted Hughes, Susan Cooper, J. K. Rowling.

Larrington is rightly anxious to demonstrate that, however we come at the subject, we are not concerned with a sterile repetition of plot: stable characters in identical situations. As she says: “These are tales rooted in a particular earth, which have blossomed forth, over the years, in different forms.”
her final chapter. It is, of course, valid to point out that this fascinating figure reminds us of various others – Robin Hood, Jack-in-the Green and King of the May, for example – but Larrington refutes the thesis of certain folklorists that there is one basic pattern with one fixed meaning. She is surely right. Stories change: they stay alive through acquiring new significance.

Thus, the Green Man has come in recent years to be regarded as an emblem of the green movement, which obviously could not have been the case a century ago. Far from discrediting the ecological adaptation of the symbol, this realisation should remind us that the fate of nature may increasingly rely on human beings drawing on the power of the folk imagination. In this endeavour, Larrington’s book is going to prove indispensably inspiring.

Myth, Ideology and Identity

3rd September 2015  Uncategorised  Laurence Coupe

First published as ‘Foreword’, Amina Alyal & Paul Hardwick (eds), Classical and Contemporary Mythic Identities (Lampeter: Mellen Press, 2010), pp xi-xiii. Minor changes have been made to the wording.

Myth, Ideology and Identity: A Note

Laurence Coupe

About twenty years ago I launched an undergraduate course, ‘Myths Ancient and Modern’, only to be told by a colleague that he objected to the name. At first I thought that what bothered him was the rather weak pun on the title of the Church of England hymn book. But no, it was rather that I had chosen to use the word ‘myth’ instead of ‘ideology’. I suppose that he envisaged students sitting around and swapping their favourite fables, instead of engaging with the rigours of class struggle. Rather than enter into an etymological debate, I merely suggested that ‘Ideologies Ancient and Modern’ did not have quite the same rhetorical flourish as my chosen wording. We politely agreed to differ.

The point of this anecdote is that ‘myth’ has been, and remains, a contentious term. As Amina Alyal and Paul Hardwick’s volume of essays shows us, it is best deployed when our awareness of its more negative connotations does not blind us to its own special demands, as an elemental expression of the narrative imagination. Thus, the notion of ideology may figure here, either explicitly or implicitly, but it is never applied in a crude, reductive manner. The myths examined are given, as it were, room to breathe. Indeed, each contributor seems to have spent a good deal of time, not only pondering the nature of myth but also asking themselves just where they stand in relation to the myths that interest them. In keeping with the phrase ‘contemporary myth’ (rather more demanding than my own ‘modern’), we could not ask for a more vital or wide-ranging demonstration of the continuing relevance of mythic themes, patterns and symbols.

From the Book of Genesis to present-day conspiracy theories, from Pandora’s box to Pan’s Labyrinth, from the adventures of the Irish warrior Cuchulain to the wanderings of Dylan’s hobo, from satyrs to cyborgs, we discover what is possible if one is prepared to read myth with creative ambivalence: not only as a misleading
explanation of the world where necessary, but also as a mind-expanding exploration where possible. Or, to put this another way: we see that recognising the ideology that shadows mythology should not prevent one from taking the latter seriously in its own right. Whether myths assume a local colour, as with the ‘wild spirit’ Tregeagle of Cornish folklore, whether they are filtered through the celebrity which attends the production of popular fiction, as with Ian Fleming’s novels, or whether they are reworked in keeping with changing ideals of femininity, as in Hollywood films and cult TV series, there can be no doubt that they are indispensable for understanding where we are – and, more importantly, who we are.

In this connection, Alyal and Hardwick refer to ‘the construction of identity’, a phrase that we might pause to situate briefly. We all know that there has been a longstanding trend in critical theory to see both non-human and human nature as linguistic constructs, to an extent – the various theorists differing as to just how extensive they want to be. With regard to non-human nature, it is surely time to draw the line. I know that I am not the only one to protest that to say that our understanding of reality is always partial and perspectival is not necessarily to imply that there is ‘no such thing as nature’ (see Coupe 2009: 95-101). However, if it is humanity which is the focus, and if the crucial construction at issue here is that of identity, then it is surely undeniable that our very selves, apparently so substantial, are constantly being shaped and reshaped by the power of myth. By the same token, our collective identity – that is, culture itself – may pretend to be based on logos, or rational truth, but is really formed through mythos, or narrative imagination.

Allowing for the constructed aspect of the human character, we yet need to recognise, in this age of imminent ecocatastrophe, that the most important identity which myth makes possible is that between humanity and nature. James Lovelock realised this when he decided to use the name of the Greek mother goddess, Gaia, for his vision of the planet as a living organism. He knew that people are much less likely to care for an abstract ‘earth system’ than for a sacred personage who appeals to our imagination and love of story-telling (Lovelock 1989: 209). But how may this insight into the human response to nature be reconciled with the notion of human nature as constructed? I would suggest that waking up to the provisional and contingent nature of our collective identity is precisely what is required if we are to rid ourselves of the assumption that we have, as the ‘superior’ species, an absolute right to exploit, pollute and destroy the natural world.

Kenneth Burke once remarked that human beings ‘build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss’ (Burke 1984: 72). Thus our most recurrent narratives may function to bolster a fragile sense of collective identity. But he also believed that one of the main values of imagination was that of ‘preventing a society from becoming too assertively, too hopelessly itself’ (Burke 1968: 105). The contributors to this volume exhibit a flair for demonstrating how our most recurrent narratives, while frequently being used to vindicate a given sense of collective identity, cannot help but provide a glimpse of another way of inhabiting the earth.

With my initial anecdote in mind, I would suggest that it is entirely appropriate that the key word of Alyal and Hardwick’s title is ‘mythic’ and not ‘ideological’. I am sure that their collection of essays will inspire other scholars to explore the rich field of mythology with the same spirit of informed enquiry.

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SELECTED SAYINGS OF KENNETH BURKE

My Favourite ‘Flowerishes’

Here are some of the many aphorisms — what Burke calls ‘Flowerishes’ — which are scattered throughout his *Collected Poems* (a volume which unfortunately has been out of print for many years). I have here chosen the ones that I find myself quoting most often. Please note that Burke’s ‘Flowerishes’ are not offered as solemn philosophical statements: rather they show him thinking aloud, trying out ideas, in the spirit of what he calls ‘the comic frame of acceptance’. This does not, of course, preclude rebellion: hence Burke’s resistance to the powerful forces responsible for the pollution of the natural environment. (Laurence Coupe)

Even humility can go to one’s head.

At the very start, one’s terms jump to conclusions.

When he didn’t fight other people, he fought himself — and boy, could he fight dirty!

We always avoid being stupid like other people by being stupid in ways of our own.

Must it always be wishful thinking? Can’t it sometimes be thoughtful wishing?
If you can learn to benefit from adverse criticism, your enemies will work for you without pay.

When people started agreeing with him he lost all his convictions.

This job is so top secret I don’t know what I’m doing.

Though he despised mankind, he dearly loved an audience.

He resolved always to wait two weeks before committing suicide.

In a world full of problems, he sat doing puzzles.

They say alcohol reveals our true selves – but which of our selves is that?

He felt it was alright to do like the others, if only he did it with a bad conscience.

As outmoded as last year’s model of the universe – a dreary old place, full of old newthings.

Poets with little to say learn to write as though guarding a secret.

Freud’s theory of the father-kill may not be true at all, but it does seem true of Freudeans.

Afraid of losing his faith in scepticism....

Of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: ‘I knew him when...’

The cure for digging in the dirt is an idea; the cure for any idea is more ideas; and the cure for all ideas is digging in the dirt.

The less life, the more biography.

Art turns liabilities to assets, guilt into solace, weakness into strength; it transforms the onus of owing into the honour of ownership.

By saying no to himself, he gave form to his life.

They canonize their saints and sanctify their cannon.

To cover their delay they tell you to hurry.

Rusty with irony...

ALSO...
Introduction

The word ‘hermeneutics’ may be defined as ‘theory of interpretation’; it is usually complemented by the word ‘exegesis’, which denotes the application of that theory. Hermeneutics is at least as old as scriptural scholarship: the post-exilic rabbis and the early church fathers sought to systematize their reading of the Torah and the Judaeo-Christian Bible respectively. But it was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that ‘hermeneutic’ signified a problematic. At that stage the other etymological elements in the term came to the fore: for the ancient Greek word from which it derived (the texts of Homer themselves had merited a systematic reading) had not one but three orientations of meaning. Apart from ‘interpretation’, hermeneuein carried the suggestions of ‘expression’ and ‘translation’; and it was the questions raised by these — on the one hand authorial intentionality and on the other the later reader’s cultural distance from that moment — which came to embarrass the interpretative procedure.

The hermeneutical tension has been summarized by E.D. Hirsch as that between ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’. He formulates his distinction as follows:

Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent.

Significance, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything else imaginable.(1)
For Hirsch a proper hermeneutics is that which does not confuse the one with the other. True interpretation always returns to the possible intention of the author, within which resides the meaning; mere evaluation tends to subsume the intended sign sequence under the critic’s own preoccupations, responses and conjectures. In what follows I shall have occasion to draw on Hirsch’s distinction as a useful framework for outlining the development of modern hermeneutics. However, his own interest — in prioritizing ‘meaning’ over ‘significance’ — will itself be thrown into question as we come to consider the contribution of Freud to that history.

**Hermeneutics before Freud**

Before coming to Freud, we need a short overview of the theory of interpretation, as understood before his intervention.(2)

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), as a professional apologist for Christianity, was prompted to make, in response to the Enlightenment’s spirit of critique, a crucial distinction. He acknowledged that science was indeed a legitimate attempt to describe the external world; but he argued that it was a mistake for science to encroach upon the area of human feeling, that inner realm from which religious faith proceeded. In other words, objectivity could only take one so far; it could not account for the subjective state of, first, self-consciousness and second, following from that, dependence on God.

However, Schleiermacher’s was no simple rearguard action. He was quite prepared to open up the Bible to analysis of a scientific disposition: indeed, he was himself a major exponent of historical and critical scholarship within theology. Only, he wished to guide analysis by synthetic intuition, or what he called ‘divination’. ‘Grammatical’ interpretation — philology, textual study, comparative method — was a necessary rehearsal for faith; but faith itself was ultimately a matter of ‘psychological’ interpretation.

It is necessary to understand that Schleiermacher’s distinction is essentially continuous with that made by the early church fathers. They had assumed that the ‘literal’ meaning of the Judaeo-Christian Bible was transparent in the same way as the ‘law’ had appeared to the scribes of Jesus’ day: the word of God had found perfect expression in the words of men. Where difficulties arose, and a particular text seemed inaccessible, it was to be recuperated by way of a ‘figurative’ reading. For example, the curious episode in the Book of Genesis, in which Jacob wrestles until daybreak with an unidentified opponent, was interpreted allegorically by Origen and St Jerome as an image of the need for the Christian to persevere in prayer.(3)

Within medieval Catholicism this distinction held good, now elaborated (in the light of the fathers’ hints) into a systematic exegesis authorized by ecclesiastical doctrine. Thus, though the scriptures were proclaimed to be thoroughly accessible, all interpretation was subject to the supervision of an increasingly authoritarian church. It was precisely such dogmatism that the reformers Luther and Calvin sought to resist, by returning abruptly to the ‘literal’ meaning of the sacred texts: far from needing definition by the episcopal hierarchy, the Bible interpreted itself freely to all those who had the faith.

However, once that step had been taken, and the divine word made entirely manifest once more, the scriptures became extremely vulnerable. As the historical and critical methods of the later seventeenth century were consolidated by the rational scepticism of the Enlightenment, theologians such as Schleiermacher had to defend Christianity itself from the apparently reductive drive of objective scholarship. In doing so, he could not fall back upon the kind of figurative recuperation sanctioned by the church fathers; but he effectively produced an
enlightened variant upon it. Thus we may see his ‘grammatical’ as a logical extension of the earlier ‘literal’ interpretation: indeed, both usages were known to Origen; Schleiermacher simply extended the definition of ‘grammar’. More importantly, ‘psychological’, with its Kantian acknowledgement of the role of the perceiver in constructing the world, revised ‘figurative’ interpretation. Nor should we ignore how this latter move simultaneously complied with Romantic interest in the mysteries of genius and in organic form. Thus the end of interpretation was the ‘divination’ of the author’s world, thought to inform the text at every point. Such an emphasis was certainly new in theology: previously the evangelists had been considered important chiefly in so far as their texts bore witness to the truth of the Messiah. It was not that biographical conjecture was being commended: rather, the specific gospel yielded hint after hint as to the authorial ‘psychology’, or spirit. The interpreter’s task was to perform a full ‘grammatical’ analysis and, as he proceeded, to infer from the parts examined — the words, the sentences, the chapters — the totality of the evangelist’s inspiration. Schleiermacher recognized the dialectical nature of this process, but went little further than to name it: ‘the hermeneutic circle’.

It was left to Wilhelm Dilthey (1883-1911) to explore this whole problematic in philosophical — more specifically, epistemological — terms. For him hermeneutics was a ‘philosophy of life’ and the interpretation of texts a model of human understanding as such. Thus in the Diltheyan perspective Schleiermacher’s ‘circle’ applied not only to the scriptures but to all cultural expressions of the past: indeed these might not be texts at all (though literature, including the Bible was expression par excellence), but might take the form of rituals, institutions, laws.

Hence in response to claims that the ‘natural sciences’ were sufficient basis for describing the world, he posited the need for ‘human sciences’ which might do justice to the subtleties of mental experience. Inert ‘explanation’ was not enough: active ‘understanding’ was called for. His ‘hermeneutic circle’ was a matter of tracing connections, subtly and progressively. This, he felt, was possible because the ‘psychological’ was not merely (as with his mentor) an individual category, but collective, cultural and historical.

Dilthey deemed humanity to be characterized by its capacity to express, and so to understand, experience. Human beings inevitably sought connections, within the world and with other human beings, in the present and with the past. In this last instance, involvement in the hermeneutic circle arose as the process of empathy, or understanding, began. For in pondering any cultural object of the past — notably, a literary text — one was seeking to bridge a huge gap of cultural difference. The author may have had an individual experience which he wished to express in the objective form of the text; but informing the author’s experience was a whole culture, which also sanctioned the textual form. Thus the interpreter was seeking to infer, not only an individual author’s ‘world’, but a whole ‘life unity’. The hermeneutic circle was not a textual dialectic, or even a text-author dialectic, but an
emergent recognition of the ‘commonality’ of life unities within and beyond the cultural and temporal discrepancies. For what linked all cultural objects was the very fact of expressivity: that human need which, having found form, demanded the human response of interpretation.

We may judge Dilthey’s importance in extending Schleiermacher’s insights by juxtaposing their respective summations of the hermeneutic enterprise. For the earlier thinker, ‘Strict interpretation begins with misunderstanding and searches out a precise meaning.’ It was left to Dilthey to demonstrate systematically the impossibility of final understanding, and to make of cultural relativism a complete epistemology:

Our understanding of life is only a constant approximation; that life reveals quite different sides to us according to the point of view from which we consider its course in time is due to the nature of both understanding and life.(5)

Thus, where Schleiermacher worked on the premise that the individual author’s intention might ultimately be inferred and ‘meaning’ (in Hirsch’s usage) known, hermeneutics was now an account of historical humanity as constantly engaged in the creative tension between ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’.

It may still be possible, however, to deny Dilthey the role of guiding spirit within twentieth-century interpretation. Two reservations are worth mentioning here.

One concerns his assumption of identity. Though Dilthey emphasized the temporal point of view, he did not go so far as to advocate an affective critical position: relativism did not permit a hermeneutics of pure response. The interpreter was, he argued, constrained by the original historical moment of the author’s experience as objectified in cultural expression. ‘Significance’ was not possible without ‘meaning’, and ‘meaning’ was inseparable from expressivity; the author’s cultural identity was at one with his textual identity.

The second reservation, which follows from the first, is that Dilthey’s extension of Schleiermacher’s ‘psychological’ interest, though it evaded the problematic of direct encounter (one to one, between writer and reader), was yet informed by an assumption of integrity. In the act of textual expression, the person of the author was conceived of as a psychic unity. Just as author coincided with his text, so he coincided, as it were, with himself. No contradictions were involved.

In both these related areas — identity and integrity — Freud’s unwitting contribution to modern hermeneutics was to prove decisive.

**Freud’s hermeneutics**

In traditional hermeneutics, as we have seen, the fundamental distinction was between the ‘literal’ and the ‘figurative’. Schleiermacher, extending the former concern by use of historical and critical scholarship, revised the latter as ‘divination’. Though this intuitive interest was parallel to the Romantic emphasis on imaginative individuality, he himself did not go so far as to explore the mysterious activities of genius. Nor indeed did his successor Dilthey, whose distinction between ‘explanation’ and ‘understanding’, though derived from that of Schleiermacher between the ‘grammatical’ and the ‘psychological’ dimensions, was meant to justify an emphasis on cultural experience and expression rather than on Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s individual ‘shaping spirit of imagination’. His ‘human sciences’ privileged communication above psychic exploration; for him artefacts were signs
Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) published *Die Traumdeutung*, subsequently translated as *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in 1899 (though it was actually dated 1900). By then he had already begun to demonstrate the inadequacy of a communication model of epistemology. With his colleague Breuer he had outlined four years earlier a sketch of the human ‘unconscious’, difficult of access due to the necessary mechanism of ‘repression’. The symptoms of hysterical patients, it seemed, resulted from the overzealous repression of a ‘traumatic’ memory. Such a symptom would involve the patient in a long, tortuous process of therapy before the moment of ‘abreaction’, when the repressed memory would be released and a cure would be possible. This was because it was in the nature of hysterical symptoms to be ‘over-determined’, to arise from more than one event (the memory being in fact many memories).(6)

Granted that the hysteric was an extreme representative of dissociation, the very psychic model Freud had employed — memory, repression, unconscious — was enough to throw into question the expressive, integrated subject which Dilthey’s hermeneutics had assumed. Freud was discovering a humanity at odds with itself, a victim of the contradictory structure of its own psyche.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud turned from symptoms to symbols, from hysterical deviation to the universal activity of sleep narrative, thus compounding the earlier challenge to assumptions of identity and integrity. Early on in the work, he explicitly rejects any kind of analysis which takes symbols to be signs, which expects a unitary meaning to be deciphered by reference to a handbook of unvarying symbolic properties. Freud seeks, as a psychoanalyst, to go beyond mere transcoding to a delicate articulation of the psychic production of images discernible in the patient’s ‘free association’ in therapy. Thus Dilthey’s cultural relativism becomes oneiric pluralism, that is, the acknowledgement of varying dream motives: ‘I … am prepared to find that the same piece of content may conceal a different meaning when it occurs in various people or in various contexts’.(7) Though in any culture there will be a body of fixed symbols — in his own Freud discovers parents frequently represented by kings and queens, the penis by a tower or umbrella, the womb by a box or ship — what is important is the use to which these are put, the way they are structured in dream form by the particular patient. Interpretation, he claims, is not an empty repetition of the universal insight that the dream represents a ‘wish-fulfilment’. Rather, it has to negotiate the implications of the complete formula — ‘a (disguised) fulfilment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish’ — in case after case which resists the analytical aspiration to typicality.(8) Moreover, even when the dream has been revealed as embodying a repressed wish, one is still left with the distance between the fulfilling dream and the unfulfilled dreamer.

In the context of hermeneutics *The Interpretation of Dreams* might be regarded as the systematic acknowledgement of a split within interpretation. On the one hand, there persists the socially-oriented aim of mediating understanding, of clarifying that which has been obscure, and giving it discursive form. Indeed, Freud himself has to assume a unity of some kind in order to articulate the mystery: thus he refers to the process of ‘secondary revision’ by which most dreams attain their narrative shape, making them in effect dreams which have been ‘already interpreted once, before being submitted to waking interpretation’. On the other hand, the ‘dream-thoughts’ which he is seeking to elucidate do themselves bear witness to an anti-social, non-discursive realm of desire, conflict and angry frustration. The epigraph for the book from Virgil is thus well-chosen: ‘If I cannot move heaven, I will stir up the underworld.’ The repressed dream-wish ‘stirs up’ the ‘underworld’ of the unconscious and casts a shadow over the rational order of ‘heaven’. (9)
already depicted the world as ruled by a blind, insurgent ‘will’, and had advocated
(with a new desperation) the traditional ideal of salvation through contemplation
and art.(10) Nietzsche, resisting the hope of transcendence, had insisted that the
‘Dionysian’ remains a constant in our thinking even, or especially, when we presume
to attain ‘Apollonian’ clarity and order.(11) However, Freud in the *Interpretation*
goes further than either of these in setting out to demonstrate the workings of
psychic contradiction or non-coincidence within a series of specific textual studies,
and to use a specialised vocabulary to describe the textual organization.

The texts (which include not only patients’ dreams but also Freud’s own, together
with works of literature), I shall consider briefly in the next section. Here it will be
appropriate to explain some of the vocabulary. Most important to grasp is the
distinction between the ‘manifest’ and ‘latent’ contents of the dream. The wish-
fulfilment, emerging or ascending into dream consciousness when the activity of
sleep has weakened the forces of repression, is in the process given the surface
interest of imagery, or plastic representation. The two main imaginative devices are
‘condensation’ and ‘displacement’.

In the first instance, elements normally kept apart in waking life are fused in the
dream: Freud cites the example of the ‘botanical monograph’ which in one of his
own dreams represented many ideas, experiences and obsessions in one ‘manifest’
image. Like the symptom of the hysterical, condensation is made possible by the
psychic arrangement of ‘over-determination’: the dream thereby fulfils several
wishes, not just one. ‘If a dream is written out it may perhaps fill half a page. The
analysis setting out the dream-thoughts underlying it may occupy six, eight or a
dozen times as much space.’(12)

‘Displacement’ too is illustrative of over-determination: one dream phenomenon
may appear central to the narrative, to the manifest content, but on closer
inspection turns out to represent a transference from the complex of dream-
thoughts onto an incidental detail. Freud cites his own dream of his uncle’s ‘fair
beard’, which distracts attention from the underlying passion for promotion and
status.(13) (See below.)

The account of such devices as condensation and displacement, with recurrent
reference to specific dream narratives, fulfils and systematizes the interpretative
promise of a Schopenhauer and a Nietzsche; it is the first attempt to spell out the
consequences of the discovery of what we might call the contrary self. With Freud,
notions such as identity and integrity appear to lose their force; and with them the
Diltheyan sequence of expression, objective form and empathy. If the self is
permanently divided between the claims of the manifest and latent contents, then
hermeneutics cannot rest content with a model of communication and
comprehension, but has to engage with the inaccessibly regressive drive of
humanity to blind will, to the relentless energy of primitive desire. Freud’s
demonstration through dream analysis that narratives do not simply say what the
narrator means, but emerge from a conflict of forces, signifies a major shift in
exegetical procedure.

Paul Ricoeur has summarized the transition as that from ‘interpretation as
recollection of meaning’ to ‘interpretation as exercise of suspicion’.(14) In terms of
the tradition, it is as if the ‘literal’ or ‘grammatical’ level of meaning has been
reduced to the matter of biological drives; and the ‘figurative’ has been released
from the restraints of orthodox recuperation. In the terms of post-Enlightenment
hermeneutics, it is as if individual ‘divination’ or the inference of ‘life unities’ is
exposed as an empty rationalization of the nostalgia for integrity and identity. In
Hirsch’s terms, ‘meaning’ can no longer be explained as intention; nor need
‘significance’ be constrained by the ideal of ‘what the author meant’.
Freud’s exegesis

Freud tells us in the Interpretation that his patients often resisted the idea that dreams could ultimately be seen as wish-fulfilments, but that he usually managed to persuade them that there were no simple dreams. He gives the example of the young aunt of two small boys, the elder of whom had died at the time when she was being courted by a young academic whom she very much desired to marry. Subsequently the man had broken off relations with her, however. In her dream she saw the younger boy too now lying in a coffin, his hands folded: the atmosphere and images of the dream narrative were reminiscent of the actual death of the elder brother. Freud was able to interpret the apparently straightforward anxiety dream as a disguised wish-fulfilment, in which the death of the younger boy was associated with the return of the suitor. He had been there at the time of the previous death (actually coming to pay his condolences) and so might well be there should another occur. The desire for the lover had been repressed, but the dream gave vent to the underlying wish in disguised form. (15)

Freud also recounts many of his own dreams, and interprets them similarly as resulting from the mechanism of repression. Prior to one such, he had been pleased to learn that he had been nominated for the position of assistant professor at his university. However, one evening soon after a friend had called to say that, though he too had aspirations to that rank, he had been unofficially advised that anti-semitism would ensure he, being a Jew, would not gain promotion. Freud, also a Jew, had therefore resigned himself to the failure of his own ambition. However, that night he had the following dream, in the form of a thought followed by an image:

1. My friend R. was my uncle – I had a great feeling of affection for him.

2. I saw before me his face, somewhat changed. It was as though it had been drawn out lengthways. A yellow beard that surrounded it, stood out especially clearly. (16)

Freud’s only uncle had in fact been a petty criminal at one time. If the friend was associated with the figure of the uncle by way of displacement (‘R.’ had a greying black beard, not a yellow one) then Freud is able to interpret the dream as a vindication of his own wish to be the legitimate candidate for assistant professorship: crime, not race, is now the issue. Moreover, the ‘affection’ he felt in the dream is seen to contribute to the psychic distortion: belonging to the surface narrative but not to the underlying dream-thoughts, it is designed to conceal the reality which interpretation will have to seek in retrospect. It is, in short, a means of disguise: the dream substitutes affection for contempt and so deceives the dreamer. Again, the mechanism of repression has to be uncovered, and the discrepancy between manifest and latent demonstrated. (17)

There are perhaps two ways of describing Freud’s exegesis in the above instances. On the one hand, we might say that it illustrates perfectly the hermeneutical transition which I have sketched in the last section: whatever the dream appears to be saying, analysis reveals distortion and censorship — the consequence of repression — to be at work. Division of the self is assumed, and the text of the dream is read accordingly. Freud thereby releases hermeneutics from the traditional constraints of transparency and recuperation, and in so doing renders exegesis dizzyingly open to infinite textual possibility. He himself spells out the implications for literature:
Just as all neurotic symptoms, and, for that matter, dreams, are capable of being over-interpreted and indeed need to be, if they are to be fully understood, so all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single impulse in the poet’s mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation. (18)

On the other hand, in his very expectation of full understanding, he is perfectly capable of making claims for his analysis which simply reproduce the excessive arrogance of positivism: ‘The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind’. (19) Thus the Interpretation might itself be seen as a divided text: on the one hand, immanent exegesis; on the other, despite the protestations in the earlier part of the book, the transcendent perspective of a master-code.

In order to test this tension further, we must examine — in the light of the above pronouncement on ‘creative writings’ — Freud’s account of a specific literary text: namely, Hamlet. Having found in Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex evidence that the majority of male children feel desire for the mother and antagonism towards the father, he argues that Shakespeare’s treatment of the Oedipal theme is less direct:

In the Oedipus the child’s wishful phantasy that underlies it is brought into the open and realized as it would be in a dream. In Hamlet it remains repressed; and just as in the case of a neurosis – we only learn of its existence from its inhibiting consequences. (20)

The reason for this indirectness is given as ‘the secular advance of repression in the emotional life of mankind’. (21) Thus Hamlet, unlike Sophocles’ tragedy, is a play about hesitation, about the arrest of vital impulses through extreme repression of terrifying truths:

Hamlet is able to do anything — except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father’s place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish. (22)

The inner workings of the narrative are now revealed: the play is structured on the premise of an unrecognized Oedipal impulse or wish. The manifest content of the text may concern the morality of the revenge imperative, but the latent is quite other.

However, Freud does not rest content with the function of the protagonist within the plot, but moves further back to the authorial presence behind the textual form:

…it can of course only be the poet’s mind which confronts us in Hamlet. I observe in a book on Shakespeare by Georg Brandes (1896) a statement that Hamlet was written immediately after the death of Shakespeare’s father (in 1601), that is, under the immediate impact of his bereavement and, as we may well assume, while his childhood feelings about his father had been freshly revived. (23)

It may be that we are once again confronting a division within Freud’s hermeneutical practice. It is one thing to open up a text to new possibilities of significance; it is another to fit the text, in Procrustean manner, into the confines of theory.

The new possibilities discovered by Freud have been challenged by E.D. Hirsch Jr. According to him, the meaning of Hamlet remains what it always was, that is, what the author intended by the sign sequence produced. What is demanded is not
biographical conjecture: Hirsch would not, for example, accept the use of dubious information from ‘a book on Shakespeare by Georg Brandes’. Rather, we are to engage with the ‘intrinsic genre’ which defined and facilitated the authorial intention. Thus if *Hamlet* belongs to the category of Renaissance revenge tragedy, then its meaning is inextricably bound up with generic expectations arising from Shakespeare’s decision to produce that kind of text. It is not valid, Hirsch asserts, to read the plot as if it were about an Oedipus complex, since Oedipal implications do not belong to ‘the type of meaning Shakespeare willed’. ‘He may have willed very broad implications,’ Hirsch concedes — a revenge tragedy will be about more things than revenge — ‘but he did not necessarily will all possible ones’; and we cannot interpret the text indefinitely. To do so is to subordinate ‘meaning’ to ‘significance’.

The confines of Freudian theory have also been challenged, more recently, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. According to them, the very systematic nature of the ‘complex’ reading (consolidated five years after the *Interpretation in Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*), inevitably reduces the rich variety of not only the literary text but also the psychic life of the putative patient. Freud’s reading of Hamlet would then be as tyrannous as his analysis of dreams: in both cases, the infinite potential of narrative is translated into an entirely repressive master-code.(25) In Hirsch’s terms, if not in his strict usage, the ‘meaning’ of the Oedipus complex, deemed by Freud to be universal, gathers whatever varieties of ‘significance’ the text possesses into its omnivorous maw.

In the instance of the Oedipal reading, then, Freudian hermeneutics would take us little further than nineteenth-century biographical criticism. ‘It is known, too, that Shakespeare’s own son who died at an early age bore the name of “Hamnet”, which is identical with “Hamlet”,’ Freud asserts. ‘Just as *Hamlet* deals with the relation of a son to his parents, so *Macbeth* [written at approximately the same period] is concerned with the subject of childlessness.’(27)

However, it is in the very next sentence that we are advised of the necessity to ‘over-interpret’ literary texts, since they are ‘the product of more than a single motive and more than a single impulse in the poet’s mind’. Having reduced *Hamlet* to autobiography, and ratified such a reduction by his own master-code, Freud once more insists on the infinite potential of ‘meaning’, to be complemented on the interpreter’s part by an infinite potential for ‘significance’. Moreover, here in one sentence the author of the *Interpretation* acknowledges the divided interest of his own text. On the one hand we have the ideal of full understanding, the attempt to discover ‘the poet’s mind’ — what Ricoeur calls the hermeneutics of ‘recollection’; on the other we have the capacity of texts to be ‘over-interpreted’, to attract ‘more than a single interpretation’ — what Ricoeur calls the hermeneutics of ‘suspicion’.
We will look in vain through Freud’s book for a thorough dialectic of ‘recollection’ and ‘suspicion’, or of ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’. This is because Freud cannot at this stage articulate the full hermeneutical implications of his discoveries, being himself locked into the ‘problematic of the individual subject’. (28) But his symptomatic reading of *Hamlet* remains crucial for literary criticism in the twentieth century, not because of what it surmises about Shakespeare but because of its readiness to disrupt the text’s reception. ‘Here I have translated into conscious terms what was bound to remain unconscious in Hamlet’s mind; and if anyone is inclined to call him a hysteric, I can only accept the fact as one that is implied by my interpretation.’ (29) Crudely mimetic in itself, this revision of critical opinion yet opens up infinite possibilities, not necessarily to be confined by the individual problematic. Six years after the *Interpretation*, it is Freud himself who gestures towards a truly radical exegesis: in *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage* he includes *Hamlet* in that group of plays which rely for their effect on the neurotic in the spectator. (30) The play can then be seen as inducing in the audience the neurosis watched on stage and so, according to a recent account of Freud’s reading, ‘crossing over the boundaries between onstage and offstage and breaking down the habitual barriers of the mind. A particular type of drama, this form is none the less effective only through its capacity to implicate us all …’(31) In his essay Freud quotes Lessing: ‘A person who does not lose his reason under certain conditions can have no reason to lose’. (32) The literary text thus ceases to be an individual case-study and becomes a trans-individual, a cultural, challenge; it does not simply reveal its author but interrogates its readership.

It may be, paradoxically, that a thoroughly Freudian hermeneutics would be one that regained the Diltheyan sense of collective experience, expression and empathy: conscious, of course, that a ‘life unity’ is never stable; nor is it ever what it seems.

**Notes**


8. SE IV, p. 160.

9. SE V, p. 490. (*The Interpretation of Dreams* takes up one and a half volumes in the


12. SE, IV, p. 279.

13. SE, IV, p. 305.


15. SE IV, pp. 152-4.

16. SE IV, p. 137.

17. SE IV, pp. 191-3.


27. SE IV, pp. 265-6.


29. SE IV, p. 265.

30. SE VI, pp. 303-10.


32. SE VII, p. 309.