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THE TWILIGHT ZONE OF MYTH-AND-LITERATURE
STUDIES: ANALOGY, ANOMALY, AND
INTERTEXTUALITY

Cadmus slays the Dragon and makes Thebes a prosperous city. Oedipus “kills” the Sphinx and the Thebans welcome him as their king. Perseus kills the Gorgon Medusa (as well as the sea-monster), acquires Andromeda and becomes king of Tiryns. Bellerophon kills the Chimaera, becomes a great hero and wins the daughter of Iobates. Heracles destroys several monsters, including the Hydra and the monstrous lion, and after accomplishing the twelve gigantic labors burns himself to death. St. George kills the Dragon and saves a city—and a maiden—in distress.

The analogies are irresistible. All these mythological culture heroes—as well as a profusion of protagonists in the folklore residues of almost every culture, including Hungarian folktales—evoke the monster-killing/heroic-rescue paradigm (with some of them also integrated into city-founding myths). Most of them embody the archetypal task motif: they are sent off on dangerous missions which are bound to finish them off. However, they prove their heroic potential and attain victories against all odds and are rewarded.

On first observation, therefore, subjecting these narrative segments to the same kind of paradigmatic—and archetypal—reading appears more than tempting. Indeed, some of these paradigms are implicated in a special kind of intertextual linkage within the mythological realm: the story of Perseus, for instance, may be read as a prevision of Saint George’s slaying of the dragon.

Yet the myths these similar segments are torn from have very different endings and they point to different interpretive options. Of the mythological heroes mentioned above, only two attain a blissful final end. Heracles is received into Olympus as the son of Zeus; Perseus and Andromeda, Ovid reports, live happily ever after. The other four are not so lucky. Unmerited suffering plagues the House of Cadmus, and Cadmus himself is trapped in a pattern that brings him an end which turns out to be far from heroic: he is changed into a snake before dying. Oedipus blinds himself and goes into exile. Bellerophon dies lame and cursed by the gods for his hubris and presumption. St. George's subsequent life brings him much suffering and he dies a martyr's death; the reward is spiritual.

Most of these mythological personages are by now safely embalmed in primordial configurations and they have served as original models for countless analogous incarnations in the subsequent evolution of culture, including the literary culture. The exemplary stories in which they figure have spawned a vast array of archetypal and paradigmatic alternatives, thus generating a whole spate of close cousins in the literatures of the past centuries. The archetypal career of the hero has thus become a formal pattern historically abstracted from the life cycles of mythological prototypes such as Perseus, Bellerophon, Heracles, Jason, Theseus, Meleager, Orpheus, Prometheus, Moses, etc. and has come to serve as a congenial nodal point and time-embalmed receptacle. As such, the paradigm of the hero has become ready to accommodate subsequent archetypal characters, also displaying in the process a gradual shift from the purely mythological to the literary, including, more recently, a new gallery of protagonists in popular culture. This metamorphic transition can be well traced even in a loose and skeletal sequence ranging from Achilles and Aeneas via Beowulf, Arthur and Roland to Hamlet and Ivanhoe down to the "superheroes" of contemporary, often escapist, mass culture. As regards this last, popular cultural, stage within the American frame of reference, it will be instructive to quote from the blurb of Jewett and Lawrence's monographic study on the American monomyth:

The American monomyth finds Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock of "Star Trek" saving various stellar communities from horrible dangers.

Superman is perpetually rescuing Metropolis, U.S.A. Buffalo Bill relieves the frontier territory of the Wild West of its threat from aggressive savages. Chief Brody in *Jaws* comes from obscurity to save Amity Island from the shark. Paul Kersey in *Death Wish* and Bufford Pusser in *Walking Tall* become archetypal superheroes singlehandedly purging evil in contemporary America.

In the foreword to the same volume, sci-fi author Isaac Asimov linked the American monomyth to a classical model, the Greek myth of Heracles, offering the following comment to justify the correlation:

Heracles just happened by, he came from nowhere. With no thought of personal gain, he made the cause of sympathy and justice his own, fought the villain, rescued the fair maid, and restored the happiness of the King. Then, scarcely pausing for thanks, he vanished into nowhere. (xiv)

This is a somewhat subjective explanation, and the points of similarity cited would more appropriately describe the Lone Ranger than Heracles. The nature of the justification is, however, symptomatic, and it also problematizes some of the potential advantages and inherent limitations of analogous transactions in intertextual relationships, the central theme of the present discussion.

Before passing to my main theme, however, it should be pointed out that capitalizing on the accumulated results of extensive studies in *Stoffgeschichte*, *littérature comparée*, *Gestalt*, folklore research, character typology, comparative anthropology, Joseph Campbell's global synthesis, or of a kind of vague and incidental critical fertility, myth-and-literature studies have churned out—and its representative texts are chock-full of—an awesome collection of archetypal characters. Just to cite some of the well-rehearsed configurations, besides the hero archetype we have by now separate niches for *antiheroes* (formerly the hero's hostile opponents; in more recent texts the bungler, the loser, for instance the schlemiel), the Jungian *wise fool* (the jester, Prince Myshkin), the *devil figure* (Satan, Faustus, Hawthorne's Rappaccini), the *outcast* (Cain, Ishmael, the Wandering Jew, the Flying Dutchman, Ethan Brand), the *double* (Poe's William Wilson, Jekyll and Hyde, the Karamazov brothers, Jókay's Baradlay brothers), the *scapegoat* (Adonis, Christ, Hester Prynne, Major

Molineux),¹ the *temptress* (Helen of Troy, Circe, Cleopatra, Delilah, Malamud's Memo in *The Natural*), the *trickster* (Odysseus, Til Eulenspiegel, Falstaff, Iago, Melville's confidence man, Flannery O'Connor's Bible salesman in "Good Country People"), etc.

In these formal abstractions the mythical prototype, whenever there is one, is most often regarded as the ur-character, and the same mechanism appears to apply to other well-rehearsed paradigms, such as the *fertility* myth (where the most commonly accepted fathering text is the Egyptian myth of Osiris, Set and Horus), the *creation* myth (as exemplified, for instance, in the ancient Babylonian myth involving Tiamat and Marduk), the myth of *deliverance* (e.g. the Biblical paradigm involving the ancient Hebrews, the saving acts of Yahweh, and Moses leading his people to freedom through the Red Sea), the *Sky Father↔Earth Mother* dichotomy (as in the first two chapters of Genesis, a larger number of other creation myths, Ovid's "The Four Ages," John Barth's "Night-Sea Journey"), *death and rebirth* (Ovid's story of Orpheus and Eurydice, the Biblical story of Lazarus in John's chapter 11, D. H. Lawrence's "Snake,"), *mating with a mortal* (Ovid's story of Europa in the second book of *Metamorphoses*, the legend of Leda and the Swan), the *search for the father* (from the story of Telemachus in Homer's *The Odyssey* through Sylvia Plath's "Daddy"), the *journey and the quest* (the Biblical story of the Exodus via Allen Tate's "The Mediterranean" through James Joyce's "An Encounter"), the *task* (the exploits of Jason, the Biblical story of Jacob serving Laban for Rachel and Leah, Arthur pulling out Excalibur embedded in stone, Malamud's "The First Seven Years"), the *contest* motif (David versus Goliath, Hector and Achilles, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, Bartleby and the lawyer), the *fall from innocence to experience* (the fall of Adam and Eve, Henry Fleming in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*), the *initiation* stage of *becoming* (the Biblical prodigal son, Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," Twain's Huckleberry Finn, Crane's Fleming, Hemingway's Nick Adams, Ellison's nameless-invisible protagonist). Depending on

¹ "To restore life to its first vigor," Vickery argues, "one must expel from the community all evils, afflictions, and sorrows together with those demons, ghosts, witches, and spirits of the dead which give rise to them. From individual attempts to remove personal woes there gradually developed communal endeavors to eradicate the afflictions of an entire people or nation" (*The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough* 60).

the ingenuity of the critic, comparative anthropologist, etc. the list can be continued indefinitely: the *triumph of the underdog*, the *opposable self*, the *glamorized misfit*, *one against the many*, the *pariah/savior*, the *rebel/victim*, etc.

Despite the profusion of these abstracted clichés, there is no definitive list of canonized archetypes, and neither is there a working agreement as to how a thematic cliché or other abstracted formula can make it onto the approved list. Some of the paradigmatic configurations are usually grouped, for convenience, in large thematic clusters such as the cycle of life sequence or designated simply as “archetypal situations.” George Polti, J. Matthews reports, classified all story patterns into thirty-six dramatic situations, which he viewed as archetypes (2). The number of discrete items in the Thompson-Aarne motif-index runs into the thousands. At the other end of the spectrum, through his universalizing monomythic construct, Joseph Campbell—organizing in terms of the entire earth—attempted to prove in effect that all the stories of the world are really one story.

As we have seen in our first example, the similarities and differences inherent in the various incarnations of the myth of the hero in mythological narratives in which the particular heroic careers are couched exemplify special issues and problems pertaining to analogy, the intertextual networking of apparently diverse or allegedly kindred plots, and the justification of a paradigmatic reading of texts, either myth(ological or literary). These uncertainties may become especially acute in myth critical transactions premised on the alleged intertextual validity of diverse prefigurative correlations, where the temptation to treat *loose analogy as identity* can be especially strong, not to mention conative impulses in assigning attributes and significances to things not otherwise significant.

In myth-and-literature transactions the triggering agent is *analogy*, which, by definition, is bound to operate within an intertextual networking of texts.² Intertextuality (and its satellites: interdependence, interlink, influence, the *ad infinitum* “play of texts,” source, residue, etc.) and analogy (together with its satellites: resemblance, sameness, difference, archetype, paradigm, anomaly, etc.) are interrelated within

² Indeed. I regard all myth(ological) correlations as manifestations of “mandatory” intertextuality.

the same cluster of networking. To see how these latent correspondences are triggered to generate linkage and added meaning, it is necessary to realize that these transactions operate within a structural scheme, which I will call *triangulation* and which will be used here to describe a special relationship between two given intertexts as fixed points connected to the cultural consumer (reader, critic, interpreter, etc.) who actually generates the interlink. Indeed, without the human subject as a perceiving and connecting agent, interlinks are merely latent and dormant possibilities. Which also means that in these transactions the “anxiety of influence” à la Harold Bloom is a perennial factor implicating both author and myth critic, also involving—less directly—the reader. In its larger ramifications of historicity, the very understanding of the myth-and-literature dynamic, which operates within a special process of give-and-take, that is, through the dialectic of continuities and disruptions, is inconceivable outside the intertextual dialogue of texts. Again, in a looser sense, the very idea of how tradition—including the legacy of myth—coalesces and is maintained is fundamentally intertextual.

The demonstration of how the lineage of a given corpus is established, how potential “fathering texts” can be located, and how, in establishing a context or frame of possible linkage, the binding element can be found in structural conventions, culturally related patterns of conduct, or some other constructs of cultural continuity would be the logical extension of the present inquiry. Owing to limitations of space, however, this demonstration will not be elaborated here. Suffice it to say that between two artifacts—thus between texts of ancient myth and subsequent literary works—almost anything can trigger intertextual linkage: a structural device, a plot segment, a literary figure, a character trait, a narrative element, a stylistic feature, a cliché. This last element, the *cliché*, is an especially potent generator of resemblances, particularly if the concept is meant in a structural or thematic sense. Cliché can thus be a synonym for a formal-thematic device of almost any order of magnitude, or it can simply stand for a platitude, a thematic concept, an instance of objectified ethos, a commonplace idea, a simple truth, a fact of life. Emily Dickinson, for instance, wrote 1775 poems, while *refreshing* a mere handful of conventional thematic clichés.

The problem of generating knowledge indirectly through analogy, together with the complex issues of reception and the recipient's freedom to be guided by his or her own preference models of interpretation is one of the twilight zones of literary aesthetic, riddled with parameters and paradoxes that are likely to be both subjectivized and epistemologically "soft." The complex of likeness, criteria of similarity, partial identity, and the nature of conditioning by the *historically changing* dynamic in the acceptance of paradigmatic readings was interestingly described in the preface of E. M. Moseley's study of the Christ archetype:

I was particularly interested in the Christ archetype in a series of novels quite dissimilar on the surface but basically alike in what they had to say. As I deliberately considered these similarities which I had more or less intuitively discovered, I came to realize that the important point was not so much how these works were alike as how they were different while being alike. My main interest became the variations on the same pattern, variations which I soon related to the changing climate of opinion almost from decade to decade. It is amazing that attitudes and emphases change so rapidly in our time!
(vii-viii)

One of the ramifications that is essential to perceive at this point is that in myth-and-literature transactions it is highly questionable to accept the dubious structuralist or poststructuralist premise that there is "nothing outside the text." The epistemological rationale for intertextual linkage is not an impersonal unfolding and recombination of *a priori* and dormant correspondences. Their appearance in the text is a concentrated manifestation of what they represent in the first place, thus it is impossible to abolish the reality behind the text. Doing so, to paraphrase Colin Falck's relevant statement, would be rather like talking about a ballgame without ever actually mentioning the ball.³ This is one

³ "The linguistic theories of Saussure and his successors are undeniably based on a correct recognition that 'correspondence,' or 'thing-and-name,' theories of linguistic meaning are philosophically indefensible. But these structuralist and post-structuralist theories seem themselves no less undeniably to be false in so far as they claim that linguistic meanings are a matter only of the relationships which hold between linguistic terms themselves, and that there is therefore, in some (admittedly rather special or arcane) philosophical sense, 'nothing outside the text.' The structuralist or post-structuralist tradition of linguistic—and therefore also literary—meaning in effect *abolishes reality*. To try to talk about literature in the language of structuralist or post-structuralist theory can seem rather

side of the coin. The other is the above-mentioned triangulation process of how intertextual linkage is generated: the oscillation between poles of similarity, partial identity, anomaly, etc. is grasped and sorted out by the externally situated, “extratextual” observer, i.e., the reader, the critic, the cultural consumer whose main epistemological tool in generating meaning is analogical reasoning, which in turn can be both “correct” and “incorrect,” likely to be tinged by conative impulses or the simple desire to find meaning that appears to be coherent or simply “satisfying.” Hence the enormous creative, but also abusive, potential of analogous combinatory operations.

Thus, analogy, because it is a form of generating indirect knowledge, has privileged epistemological potentials as a tool of choice between rival forms, and also as the structural means of setting up and operating paradigms. It is not by accident that the doctrine of analogy has been a privileged form of cognition and rhetoric in religious dogma for centuries. Neither should it be surprising—although this is almost always ignored—that the creative and enriching potentials of analogy and paradigmatic operations⁴ provide the rationale for most intertextual claims.

And hence the enormous responsibility of the “extratextual” perceiver who wields the instrument of analogy as a tool of choice between rival forms. Pinpointing the excesses of compulsive symbol seeking and deep reading has generated a minor industry in what J. C. Furnas has identified as “academic busywork” (520) and what I elsewhere called “interpretive overkill” (Virágos). It is partly understandable that the joy of discovery may prove difficult to contain when the myth critic is involved in practising a strategy of interpretation which is virtually foolproof. “This strategy,” Meyer H. Abrams has observed, “to be sure, has a single virtue: it cannot fail” (50). The temptation to offer pregnant surmises and to stimulate new growth of meaning through manipulating the pretentious metaphor, to isolate a pervasive archetype from unintentional myths at the expense of blurring

like trying to talk about a game of soccer or baseball without ever actually being allowed to mention the ball” (Falck xii).

⁴ It might also be useful to consider the theoretical ramifications of the following statement: “Paradoxical as it may seem, paradigms ... make all forms of creativity possible” (Curtis viii).

the actual nature of the text in question is often too strong to resist. It is especially so in the case of large, all-emcompassing paradigms and monomythic abstractions such as the quest-myth. More than three decades ago, G. Hough complained of the one-dimensional practice in myth criticism of seeing characters and events

as symbolizations of archaic, otherwise inarticulate responses to certain archetypal situations. [...] Characters in fictional works cease to be “just representations of nature” and become embodiments of a few mythical constants. Any young man who dies becomes a dying god, related to Attis, Adonis and Osiris. Any girl who is carried off and comes back again becomes Persephone; and any heroine who is badly treated by one character and rescued by another becomes Andromeda. Anybody who goes looking for anything becomes a participant in the “quest-myth.” (142–43)

In a review of John Vickery’s *Myth and Literature* T. H. Gaster talks about

the crucial error of assuming that there are certain basic situations which belong primarily to the realm of myth and ritual, so that when they appear in literature they must be thence derived. [...] Are we to say, for example, that a trip on the subway during the rush hour consciously imitates the archetypal myth of the journey to the netherworld or the perilous ordeal of the initiate? Or is a rape in Central Park an enactment of the Sacred Marriage? No; all that the mytho-critics are really saying, when you boil it down, is that myth, ritual, and literature deal with the same kinds of human situations. Which is scarcely worth saying. (28–29)

In other words, one should be aware of the fact that the system may “leak.” Very often, however, especially in myth critical studies, it is precisely the potential leakage that is creatively exploited. Because analogies are adaptable to diverse contexts and because arbitrary and determined features can be equally absorbed in these operations, normative applications can often create distortions, down to the point where analogy even becomes indistinguishable from *anomaly*, a case of obvious deviation from type. And it should be borne in mind that besides being external and elusive, analogies are suggestive and optive, rather than probative, and that paradigms do not create uniform, repeatable instances of *anything* (Curtis viii).

In intertextual correlations, therefore, these linkages will almost always lead to only partial revelations,⁵ which in turn can be rhetorically manipulated and offered in critical strategies as fully substantiated. Which also means that an indeterminate number of analogies and paradigmatic claims is bound to possess the attributes of selective validity. To the question “is a lion like a snake?” one can legitimately respond both in the negative and in the affirmative. All depends on [1] whether the chosen criterion of comparison is relevant in the sense that it can be objectively corroborated in the given context; or, [2], on the subjective—and conative—level, whether the initiator of such a preference model can find “adherents” to the proposition, i.e., people sufficiently willing to accept the given criterion as relevant.

Moreover, the dilemma inherent in the acceptance or rejection of analogous propositions has been further compounded by how we interpret two of the prime tenets of postmodern criticism, namely that [1] no text has intrinsic value, and that [2] the cultural consumer, let us say the ideal or hypothetical—i.e., the mentally alert and culturally prepared—reader/interpreter, is far more important than the generator of primary texts. Should we also indiscriminately accept the corollary conclusion that “works of commentary” must now be valued as much, if not more, than “works of art” (qtd. in D’Souza 180) as a general blueprint, we may easily find ourselves in critical deep waters for the simple reason that it may become more than problematic to sort out valid and invalid propositions. We may thus ponder the usefulness of freewheeling associations where, for example, Rostand’s *Cyrano* and Rudolph the reindeer turn out to be, in the critic’s fertile moment of epiphany, the incarnations of one and the same archetype. Bert O. States of the University of California is invited to testify:

Some years ago I had a characteristic “mythic” experience. [...] I was rereading *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and it suddenly dawned on me that I knew this plot from another source. Here, it seemed to me, were the basic ingredients of the myth of Philoctetes, the Greek warrior who was exiled from the Troy-bound army because of an offensive wound. [...] Following the experience, I began seeing Philoctetes everywhere: in all those tales, for example, which center about ugly people, or ducklings, who are discovered to have

⁵ “As anyone knows who has worked with analogies, correspondences are elusive and often lead to only partial revelation” (Abrahams 154).

beautiful souls and in that broad class of fairy tales and novellas in which frogs are converted to princes and kitchen maids are discovered to be of royal birth or, by virtue of their undeserved hardships, to have attracted the patronage of fairy godmothers: moreover, are not many stories of overcompensation based on just this principle of the gifted pariah: And what of the genre of the moral tale? Consider the story of Rudolph, that lovable Horatio Alger of the reindeer world, whose grotesque electronic nose saves Christmas by piloting Santa's sleigh through the foggy night. (334)

The reader can draw their own conclusions. The fact remains that even conventional critical operations between selected intertexts are likely to produce a problematic residue of meanings and interpretive distortions: reductive categorization, redundant predictability, the misplacing of emphasis. And labeling: Captain Ahab is Satan; Updike's Peter is Prometheus; Steinbeck's Jim Casey is Jesus Christ. Gatsby is Attis; Gatsby is Phaethon. Or rather, he is Heathcliff. And so on and so forth. In these instances, like in hundreds of other demonstrated parallels, the few points of analogous traits are substantially outweighed by the undeniable differences. To use yet another intertextual example, in *The Executioner's Song*, as R. Schleifer has recently shown, Mailer rewrites a "fathering" text, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (227–41). The intertextual relation is sound in many respects, especially in terms of the two intertexts' thematic paradigm of crime and punishment in America but otherwise the essential difference between the works compared cannot be collapsed without violating the autonomy of the respective counterparts.

How this is gauged and measured remains problematic, primarily because none of the antidotes which one is likely to conjure up off-hand—common sense, sobriety, taste, credibility, etc.—is "objective." Analogical thinking raises apparently innocent questions that have been bothersome ever since the ancients. It is sobering to consider the fact, for instance, that there are no satisfying definitions and criteria of similarity or of partial identity that could be satisfactorily applied in criticism, not even foolproof ways of accounting for and recognizing the presence or absence of likeness. As D. Burrell stated in a study on the role of analogies in philosophical language, "there is no method for assuring proper analogous use" (242), and the claim is certainly descriptive of purposive critical strategies intent on generating

linkage. No amount of regulation could weed out the hazards that follow from the very nature and mechanics of these operations. The best a critic can hope for is being alert and aware of where leakage is likely to occur.

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