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The Role of Myth and Literature in the Construction of the American National Identity: From the Virgin Land to a Brazenly Expansionist Nation

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Abstract:

This paper offers a critical assessment of the psychology behind the birth of the American myth—the myth of the New World liberated from the dead past—with the help of allegories and illustrative imagery which, in turn, crystallized a whole cluster of ideas committed to ink and paper by visionary artists of the American Renaissance. Such conscious articulation by contemporary American writers and thinkers also gave birth to the authentic American man—an individual with enormous potential, who is innocent, balanced on the edge of a newly created history. Though the image created is illusory, it promised the settlers of the New World with limitless possibilities and a sense of adventure which was not offered any longer by the outmoded European world of inherited conventionality. The fact that this ideology was vulnerable and open to contestation appealed greatly to the minds of the new settlers and consequently a number of crucial questions regarding the nature of man and myth, in history and literature, were raised.

Keywords: myth, mythogenesis, New World, American Adam, national identity, nation building, frontier literature.

In light of Lawrence's remark—"That is the true myth of America. She starts old, old, wrinkled and writhing in an old skin. And there is a gradual sloughing off of the old skin, towards a new youth. It is the myth of America," to build a 'national identity' requires first the construct of the mythology of the nation, to impress upon the psychology of the people their cultural ancestry, so forcefully that it may have the power to change one's perceptions about its 'uniqueness'. It has been nonetheless a Homeric task, on the part of the American writers and poets, as it is "essentially artificial and typically American" (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 3). America has always displayed ambivalence regarding the concept of national mythology, though the 'Utopian ideals' and revolutionary zeal of the early settlers prove otherwise. Yet the mythology provided these colonists with a sense of coherence in history for those who chose to have faith in these constructed myths. The aim of this paper has not been to separate the emergence of the American myth and the discourse within which it was formed, from contemporary ideologies. The American myth, unlike the classical myth, was not self-fashioned by the mind and hand of one man. It is the collective effort of the men of letters of the day and is manifest in the various literary forms such as novels, poems, short stories, orations, essays, histories and sermons.

Myth is a heterogeneous compound of narratives that dramatizes a universal vision within the history of a civilization, in which years of human experience is reduced to a complex of moving images, thus transforming the vision into a paradigm; the process of cultural 'mythogenesis' is an uninterrupted course rather than "dramatic stops and starts" (Slotkin 4). The human mind has a natural tendency towards myth-making and views myth as a sacrament, thereby disregarding any rational foreknowledge of the same. Myths give us history encapsulated in an allegorical casing which transcends both time and history by legitimizing itself into culture and ideology. According to Roland Barthes, myth "can only

have a historical foundation” because it is a human creation: “It cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things,” unless we wish to personify Nature or return to a theistic world view (Slotkin, *Ideology* 80). Myths legitimize themselves through the manner of re-telling or narration, and in the course of development they legitimize the society in which they are told. The narrator of the myth does not require a separate discourse to prove its legitimized status. Merely in narrating the myth, the sense of history is dissolved and the human mind opens up to mythic time. The narrator is endowed with the authority to narrate the myth because he has heard it narrated himself. The myth, the narrator, the listener, all form a social bond that legitimates itself through the act of narrating the myth. The myth requires no legitimization other than itself within that culture and establishes the authority over concomitant micro-narratives.

The American myth can never be truly appropriated to sacred origins. They are constructed on a sub-literary level, as artists draw upon their historical experience which forms a part of their inner reality, subsequently projected on to the outer world. Roland Barthes associates myth with the dominant ideologies of a certain age instead of the usual classical fables of the exploits of both celestial and heroic figures. In his essay 'Myth Today', Barthes argues that the two orders involved in the process of signification—‘connotation’ or assigned meaning and ‘denotation’ or literal meaning—combine to create a dominant ‘ideology’ which he calls a “third order of signification”:

In myth (and this is the chief peculiarity of the latter), the signifier is already formed by the *signs* of the language... Myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us...(Barthes, *Mythologies* 115).

In 1973, Barthes concluded that 'denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature' the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature.' (Barthes, *S/Z* 9). According to him, connotation produces the illusion of denotation, through the powerful illusion of language, that denotation has no real or ‘natural’ meaning but gains its legitimized status through the process of naturalization, which is similar to that of the connotation. Such connotations which an individual allots the status of being ‘evident’ or ‘apparent’ attain the status of being as equally natural as any denotation. Barthes’ opinion conforms to an Althusserian perspective that puts forward the view that one is situated within an ideology by learning dominant connotations at the same time as one begins to learn denotations for the first time.

Ernst Cassirer’s approach to the relationship between Logos and Mythos; according to him, Mythos, or the mythical aspect, transcends linguistic terminology and in the human subconscious, and Logos or the linguistic function becomes archetypal and hence myth transforms into a highly complex structure with multiple connotations combining the external and internal world of the human psyche. To Cassirer, then, language, literature, myth, religion, science and art are symbolic forms by which man projects his reality and becomes aware of it. Jung’s idea of mythogenesis also takes into account the human psyche which is capable of containing recurrent images from which myths have originated. Since an external study of primitive society on a spacio-temporal level alone is inadequate, therefore, one must take into account the capacity of mythogenesis of the human psyche. Slotkin deems the American man ‘a myth-artist’ who uses a ‘myth-artifact’, an actual tale of a divine object connected to the mythic narrative, to transform knowledge into power in order to gain

control of the world; the artist does so “either deliberately, in an effort to make propaganda for his cause, or unconsciously, under the compelling association of perceived event and inherited mythology” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 8). Phillip Wheelwright refers to such adisposition as the “mythopoeic mode of consciousness,” which, according to him, exists in the mind of the both artist and the reader, and the thought-perception process transmutes into a single moving metaphor, charged with conflicting principles, into myth in the collective consciousness by way of ‘reasoning’. Thus, to evoke and preserve a mythic quality within the narrative requires several retelling of the same tale over successive generations or within the same generation.

Every culture is dominated by certain ideologies and during the process of obtaining an individual identity raises a philosophical discourse through peculiar and distinctive dialogue, instead of the hegemony of a dominant set of convictions, regarding the components of culture such as wealth, power, knowledge, sex, salvation, nature, scientific inventions and so on. The dominant ideology of an emerging nation, in this case America, is carried forward by the discourse of major binaries within these ideologies. Intellectuals since the 1820s in America engaged themselves in a creative ideological debate on the renaissance of a new culture in which the American Adam— a guiltless man, an ideal representation of his own destiny—was at the centre of a moral, intellectual and artistic society, thereby engaging in the act of forging a national identity. The settlers discarded both their European history and its Calvinist legacy in favour of the New World and the new American identity. They believed they had the power to reject the past and recover time lost in order to recreate it; they also took pride in their efforts to recreate the very essence of national identity. In 1839, *The Democratic Review* announced that "Our national birth was the beginning of a new history...which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only" (Lewis 5). Since the dissemination of the discourse took place across various platforms, it is difficult to analyse whether, for example, a historical perspective illuminated or contradicted the illustrations of contemporary novelists, in the process of retelling of the past; on the other hand, the novelists through their writing represented or contested the ideology asserted by the theologians, and so on. The emphasis of these instances remained the same, which being the atypical quality of the inhabitants of the New World; in the course of development, we see that intellectual history seizes upon the dialectical and dramatic qualities of its subjects and lending a ‘conversational’ flavour to the process.

Common imagery such as the past, the present, hope, memory, tradition, novelty, sin, evil, innocence and experience were the order of the day; the polarities involved in the terms were often emphasised, and each cluster projected in a different light found new appropriations. These cluster, emphasize the intellectual dialogues initiated by American representatives from 1820 onwards, in their contentious efforts to define the American character and the unending possibilities that the American dream. The responsibility of the writer goes beyond the discursive elements; the responsibility of singling out ‘images’ within the discourse or the “story”, which gives birth to the ideology for mythogenesis. Such images are essentially original and usually a powerful counterpart to the ideas themselves as they provide a more comprehensive view of life, an ideal extension of its present possibilities provided by the old European world of traditions and yet something ‘more than this’. Such utopian vision, voiced in the orderly language of rational thought, channels its way through the receptive minds of the newly formed identities where it posits itself within the emerging discourse. This recurring pattern of thought transcends its original status of a habitual tale, and is refashioned in a manner to be representative of the life in the frontier. The imagery in the narrative gave impetus and momentum to the intellectual discourse, sometimes surfacing, sometimes latent within the narrative, charging the rational terms with unfamiliar energy.

Such discursive techniques contribute to the shaping of history and in the process is itself transformed into a conscious and coherent narrative of the American myth.

Since the days of American Renaissance, mythologies have made a permanent place within the history of the self-baptized American population, aiding in the slow and subsequent erasure of every past history which existed before this self-fashioned notion of a New World. "Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates... All that is left... is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from. Or even better: it comes from eternity," says Barthes (152). The myth of the New World promoted a vision of life as shaped by novel, non-conventional ideals, outranking political and moral anxieties with the expansionist desire for exploration of uncharted ,which appealed to the sentiments of the colonists. But the ulterior motive of promoters was to create a demand for American real estate by mythologizing the landscape as the virgin land, in a state of Arcadian bliss, waiting to be tamed and settled upon.

It was during the early nineteenth century that the myth of the New World and the American Adam reached the zenith of literary expression and came to represent the American experience in the form of the elusive American dream. America, for the first settlers and their ambitious followers, had always been the land of unlimited opportunities, where we see a convergence of miscellaneous desires— for quick wealth, unending adventure, eternal youth, complete salvation and absolute liberty. The early settlers of America were ‘men of the world—explorers, traders, rogues—who, like hunters, tore violently through the opulent wilderness of the Virgin Land until they had mastered it, to lay the foundation stones of a great nation. Consequently, they turned a blind eye to the adverse effects of the industrial and urban revolutions, and the dire need of social reform in a newly formed nation. Their desire for financial and spiritual regeneration had made them blindly accept violence as a means of achieving their dreams. It is their hopes fears and the justifications of their actions that the writers have attempted to pen down as the basis of the American myth-epic. Myth attempts to create a whole human experience, purposeful yet digs deep into the human soul. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the history of previously failed attempts at hegemony and anarchy. The early settlers on American soil solely aimed to defend their own ventures in order to acquire the treasures of the new lands for the monarchs who commissioned their voyages and to make way, both geographically and financially, for those who chose to follow their footsteps. The future appeared immensely promising to them and they braved all the hardships to grab the “lands rich in natural resources and peopled by strange and primitive tribes” (Spiller 14). The Indians of the ancient forests who greeted the colonists were unprepared for the gluttony and violence that they brought along, a direct result of ‘colonizing intent’ rather than the ‘customary balm’ which could have relieved social anxieties. Their retreat is not evidence of their weakness but of surprise as the invaders came armed, already considering the natives an impediment on their way to acquiring aboriginal gold and as well as land.

Ronald Reagan’s millennial vision, delivered in the September 1980 presidential election campaign, reasserted the myth of Manifest Destiny, the sacrament attributed to the Puritan dream of the arrival of God’s kingdom and carving of the political destiny of the American nation:

I have always believed that this land was placed here between the two great oceans by some divine plan...to be found by a special kind of people... who had the courage to uproot themselves and leave hearth and homeland and come to what in the beginning was the most undeveloped wilderness possible.....a new breed of human called an American...a proud, an

independent and a most compassionate individual for the most part...together we can begin the world over again. We can meet our destiny and...build a land here that will be for all mankind a shining city on a hill.

The colonists migrated to America from innumerable nations with expansionist aims; this 'diversity within unity' gave an opportunity to the immigrants to craft a new past for them which would reflect divine goodness and yet aim at becoming the sole great nation of futurity, with the abundance of material resources to fulfill every desire. The American myth saw the life and history begin on a clean slate which was newly created, a divinely consented, much desired second chance for a fresh start, separation from Europe, its history and habits. The individuals who chose to leave the old world made impure by timeworn conventions, set aside new moral and political ideals introduced the figure of the American man, an individual emancipated from history, and the heroic incarnation with idealistic human virtues. The new World was therefore was not the end product of a long historical process, contrary to the semiological theory of mythogenesis; instead it recorded the dawn of an entirely new kind of history which dissociates us from the past in order to unite us with a promising future—"An individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources" (Lewis 5). This yearning for a rather primitive, pre-lapsarian perfection instead of the notion of progressing towards perfection, can be attributed to the fact that the Bible-ready generation was imbibed with the desire for a renewal of life.

The image of a group of Dutch sailors are conjured by Nick Caraway at the end of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, who imagine their collective awe as they stood "face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to [Gatsby's] capacity for wonder" (Fitzgerald 154), instantly calls to mind "an image pregnant with the doomed dreams of Renaissance sailors who, blocked in their quest for the vast commercial riches of the East by the stubborn solidity of the Americas, for a brief moment transformed the continent into an older and indeed profoundly spiritual object of dreams: *Novus Mundi*, the Earthly Paradise" (Wharton 38). Instances of imageries from European mythology and the Golden Age of the classical poets, though highly artificial and mainly literary, are found in the journal entries of early explorer-conquerors, which provided the basic sources of later literary compositions including sermons, narratives of Indian warfare, colonization and anti-colonization tracts. Howard Mumford Jones makes a note of the traditional imagery of the *Novus mundi* found in Columbus' first description of the New World:

The islands and all others are fertile to a limitless degree...All are most beautiful, of a thousand shapes, and all are accessible...And the nightingale was singing...The people of the island...go naked...they never refuse anything which they possess, if it be asked of them; on the contrary they invite anyone to share it, and display so much love as they would give their hearts...And they do not know any creed, and are not idolaters; only they believe that power and good are in the heaven... (Slotkin 16).

Here, Jones's description sounds generalized, and vague, and the reference of the nightingale purely fictional or hallucinatory, a myth driven by conventional European imagery as the New World is devoid of such creatures. The only truth lay in the description about the natives who had welcomed the pioneers with kindness which was reciprocated with violence.

The American settlers displayed an urgency to deny history, to invest in Fitzgerald's idea of the 'orgiastic future', which "is traceable to the Renaissance belief in *novus mundi*, the earthly paradise, land of the Golden Age, the fountain of youth" (Wharton 52). Immigrants during the colonial period considered the journey across the sea was the

beginning of a new life. It remained a metaphor for ‘*manifest destiny*’ of a nation in the collective national consciousness and served, according to Mircea Eliade, as “the rite of passage for Crèvecoeur’s American, the *new man*...redeemed from time,” the sea representing the crucible in which reason, virtues and morals would be tested. The American concept of Manifest Destiny within history grew out of “Puritan efforts to fructify existence in a wilderness city on a hill ignored by a Europe “dead in sin”” (Wharton 47), but in reality, they had run out of frontier territory. Through several retellings of these tales, the frontier allowed the inception of manifest destiny, with strong political support for westward migration.

Modern writers during the later periods turned to the ‘natural man’ to create a mythology of the “real and imagined experiences based on the Indians,” which according to Kenneth Rexroth was “the actual, savage environment that reason and order and humane relationships can penetrate but cannot control” (Slotkin 17). In short, the trajectory of the American mythological evolution has been, extremely slow in the case of the natives in the American world—an artificial process, in an almost revolutionary strain, of the reconciliation of the conventional European myths to American aboriginal experience. Again, the binary of the unacquainted wilderness and tremendous potential of the frontier land along with the ubiquitous presence of the Indians added to the colonial anxiety. A sense of exile heightened by the lack of communication with the colonists’ homeland pressurized them to explore new lands, fight Indians, enslave them or be enslaved in return, in order to justify the idea of usurping frontierland, which rightfully belonged to the natives. It was easier to define the colonists’ own cultural identity by condemning the natives as “the Other,” thus coloring the indigenous characters in these narratives as “the Indian of the white man’s imagination rather than the Indian of historical fact” (Spiller 14). It is an “incongruous mixture of naïve idealism and crude materialism that produced in later years a literature of beauty, irony, affirmation, and despair” (Spiller 16). Yet the congenital differences in the ideals and the literature carried over from the colonizers’ original country remained the central debate of emerging American ideology.

The Puritan settlers carried with them the mythology developed from their own cultural history, to which they were adapted, before they first arrived in America. But in the new environment the colonists were forced to look at this with a new and unfamiliar perspective which non-colonists back in their homeland would find odd. To assure that they had not substituted Europeans civilization for savagery, the colonists had to conform to certain religious and political demands. This constant drive to define themselves with a new, yet, prestigious identity, gave rise to “a highly self-conscious literature with a tendency toward polemic and apology, in which the colonist simultaneously argued the firmness and stability of his European character and (paradoxically) the superiority of his new American land and mode of life to all things European” (Slotkin 15). Since the majority of the American population was of European descent, questions about ‘American-ness’ of their origin and the viability of such myth is generally raised, given the dilemma that the land prior to the settlement belonged to the Indians.

Mythic literature always depends on the demand of the literary market. Author and publisher, to push sales, may purposefully shape their narrative according to current fashion which “may have little to do with American colonists’ attempt to understand the situation in their own terms” (Slotkin 20). The superiority of their Englishness was continually stressed in writings where white heroes were seen pitted against native barbarism to accomplish baptism by combat or sermons. The later myths portrayed them growing closer to the natives as their love for the land grew— such as the mythic figure of Daniel Boone— the solitary hunter-

hero of the Frontier Myth, representing progressive and disciplinary ideals, along with an escapist attitude away from the bourgeoisie, which is allegorically predicated on to the Indians, who remained true to their traditions. John L. O'Sullivan in his *The Great Nation of Futurity*, in 1839, described the Puritan zeal to conquer unchartered territories:

We are entering on its untrodden space with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can. We point to the everlasting truth on the first page of our national declaration, and we proclaim to the millions of other lands that "the gates of hell"—the powers of aristocracy and monarchy—"shall not prevail against it."

When seeds of the Enlightenment gained the soil of the frontier land, the rationalists took politics and economics to be phenomena controllable by man for securing his own destiny; labour, not property, was considered as markers of worth, and the prosperity of the individual, not society was of sole importance. According to settlers, this would only have been achieved by living in a society offering "freedom of thought, speech and worship" which are the necessary conditions of human happiness. These commodities, combined with the rights of 'life, liberty and property,' changed by Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence* to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," tantamount to the Enlightenment as the natural rights of man. It was not regarded as "gifts of an indulgent government, but irrevocable grants made by a divine Providence to all men regardless of wealth or social status"(Horton 72). This resulted in an ambivalent view of traditionalism in the field of fiction, affecting both form and content; an intermingling of past and present experience in the New World came to predominate the field of narrative, most notably in the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain and James Fenimore Cooper.

The premeditated upshot of such political mythology was to eliminate both notions of privilege and servitude, and theoretically, establish a classless society. Merle Curti in *Growth of American Thought* and Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, talk about a significant legacy of the Enlightenment—the idea of 'Progress'—that man is 'perfectible' and has an inexorable tendency towards development of both himself and society. For 'an Enlightened man', moral and material struggle would initiate overall improvement of the world itself, and an extension of this struggle over a considerable period of time, he felt, would result in the establishment of 'a Kingdom of Heaven on Earth,' which connects the Puritan idea of a 'blessed mission' in the wilderness with the Hebrew Exodus, as equated by Perry Miller. Richard Hofstadter summarizes the thesis of George Bancroft's *History of the United States (1834-76)* to emphasize a similar idea:

The unifying principle...was *progress* ordained and planned by God—the advance of liberty, justice, and humanity, all of which were particularly exemplified in American history, where providential guidance had brought together a singularly fit people and fit institutions.

Most Enlightened thinkers, themselves belonging to the newly arrived bourgeoisie, were acutely sensitive to the impoverished lot and strove to raise their general standard of living; believing the attaining of individual happiness on Earth to be the supreme attainment in the worship of God, and be sympathetic towards the materially and socially unfortunate.

In opposition to this stood the Environmentalist view, like those of Crèvecoeur, which stressed heterogeneity on the basis of wealth and not class. Benjamin Franklin, an Environmentalist himself, strongly argued for the progress of society by allowing equal opportunity to everyone. Yet the Enlightenment theorist believed in man's will power,

combined with the benevolence of God who created natural law for the prosperity of man, would pave the path for progress; and that man being *tabula rasa* would write his own affluent destiny. While “the Calvinist fixed his gaze upon heaven and his fears upon Hell; the man of the Enlightenment concentrated upon society, confident in the belief that the improvement of terrestrial existence would insure a man’s future salvation” (Horton 77).

Universality of the myth is important because its viability depends on its ability to unlock particular questions about human life. There is always the chance of a myth being interpreted in particular terms instead of the universal, and it is here that the role of the writer-manipulator, who develops and controls the mythic narrative, becomes crucial. It would be unwise on the part of the readers to ignore the mythological heritage since the mythological past tends to reach out to cripple the present; one may remain unaware of the psychological and ethical changes in the world in which one continues to live. “The ghosts of outmoded idealisms...are not easily laid. As they lose their pertinence to a changed social setting, they often become bad influences lending themselves to the uses of men who wish merely to confuse issues” (Smith 31). Yet we cannot help but acknowledge that through the inception of a mythic history, America has left every nation behind in the race which allows only the fittest from the race of survival.

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