The Twilight of the Gods: 
The Poetics of a Post-Mythic Age

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Acknowledgements

Dedicated to Job

‘He was a friend of mine.’

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_A working-class hero is something to be._
The Twilight of the Gods: 
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Abstract

This thesis attempts to define a tradition of post-mythic literature. It therefore aims to demonstrate Nietzsche's claim that in a secular world God is dead, yet we continue to live under the shadow of myth. Each chapter is a detailed analysis of a key writer's ambivalent attitude towards the poetics and metaphysics of myth. Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus demonstrates how two methods of reading a violent Ovidian tale anticipate a progressive or regressive use of myth in the twentieth century. This can be seen in Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra which reveals a need to overcome myth as a dogmatic metaphor. On the other hand, T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' expresses the nihilistic despair of an age severed from the symbolic roots of traditional mythology. In the twentieth century the notion of myth is bound up with contrary forces, and Conrad's Heart of Darkness helped to establish a myth of the divided self to metaphorically displace the horror of human violence within a civilizing system. Against a context of systematic or over-transcribing rationality, Kafka's work returns to a mythic use of animals to preserve a sense of the sacred within the existential self. Wallace Stevens and Bob Dylan, demonstrate how a return to faith is linked to an aesthetic that is deeply embedded within the metaphysics of God.
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Bibliography
INTRODUCTION

‘Patterned by that the poet here describes’

New Struggles. – After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave – a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. – And we – we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.\(^1\)

When announcing to the world that God is dead, Nietzsche foresaw that in the new, liberated, and secular dawn men would struggle to free their spirits, and live easily with their independent status. Nietzsche declares the news in the form of a parable. A madman runs to the market place seeking God, and is disturbed by a series of unanswered questions:

“Whither are we moving? […] Are we not plunging continually? […] Is there still any up or down? […] Do we not feel the breath of empty space? […] Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? […] How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? […] What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? […] Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?”\(^2\)

Through the apocalyptic figure of a babbling madman who confronts a disbelieving, atheist crowd, Nietzsche mocks the presumptions of the modern enlightened thinker, and underlines the impression that what he has to say will not register with nineteenth-century readers. Nietzsche accepted that it would take some time before the full significance of this unique obituary could be fully understood. To some extent, the madman’s series of unending questions anticipates the entropy and existential paralysis of Vladimir and Estragon:

Vladimir: […] What do we do now?
Estragon: Wait.


\(^2\) Ibid., p. 181. ‘Have you not heard of that madman who […] ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: “I seek God! I seek God!”’.
Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting.
Estragon: What about hanging ourselves?
Vladimir: Hmm. It’d give us an erection!³

The old gods do not meet their end suddenly, they fade away in the twilight, and we in the twenty-first century continue to live in that twilight with the madman’s unnerving questions still ringing in our ears. As we ‘smell the divine decomposition’, have we buried alongside the old gods every grammatical trace of their living presence? Nietzsche acknowledged that one of the effects of a post-mythic age would be our ambivalent relationship to the language of myth that was coupled to an implicit evocation of an old metaphysical god – the two are coeval. How can we believe in the unbelievable, agree that we have buried God, but stay clothed in his language? Yet, because it suited a mode of expression befitting an age living in the twilight of the gods, Nietzsche too could not help but hold onto an atavistic mythopoeic style. This contradicts his attack, in Twilight of the Idols, on English moral philosophers for not having got rid of God as a foundation of morality:

They have got rid of the Christian God, and now feel obliged to cling all the more firmly to Christian morality […] When one gives up Christian belief one thereby deprives oneself of the right to Christian morality.⁴

In a post-Christian nation, we still stick to our Christian inheritance because a pervasive old belief that fundamentally defined a conception of human nature is difficult to overcome, especially when we cannot find a suitable alternative.⁵ One of Richard Garnett’s short tales, published in 1924, is titled ‘The Twilight of the Gods’, and dramatizes the fall of the gods to a temporal frame of existence that is beheld in the human mind:

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⁵ See Michael Tanner’s introduction to Twilight of the Idols, p. 13.
The idea that a Deity, other than some disgraced offender like Prometheus, could be the object of her compassion, would never have entered her mind. And now she pitied the whole Olympian cohort most sincerely, not so much for having fallen as for having deserved to fall. She could not conceal from herself how grievously they were one and all behind the age. It was impossible to make Zeus comprehend how an idea could be a match for a thunderbolt.6

Whilst suggesting that the power of ideas can be pitted against the sacred weapons of the old gods, Garnett's tale is couched in an extravagant language redolent of a bardic antiquity. For Nietzsche, to kill one god is to kill all the gods of Greek antiquity.7 In the eighteenth century, Friedrich Hölderlin saw in ancient Greece with its Olympian gods a holy shrine for humanity, and, like the neo-classicist Johann Winckelmann, found an aesthetic equivalent to the Christian concept of the soul.8 After The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche began to disparage the aesthetics of a metaphysical God emulated in this romantic sentimentality. For Michael Bell, at the turn of the twentieth century, '[t]he word 'myth' inhabits a twilight zone between literature, philosophy and anthropology.'9 More recently, Alister McGrath uses the word 'twilight' to describe the unexpected resurgence of religion in the United States during the 1970s, so proving that the last century was unable to overcome an embedded aesthetic of God within the concept of myth.10 There is a tradition of post-mythic literature which includes writers preoccupied with the death of God, who reveal an ambivalent attitude towards the dynamic between the poetics and metaphysics of myth. The legacy of the last century testifies to how, even though myth had become synonymous with the blind faith of a religious sensibility, the concept of myth was bound up with various contradictory forces. Because the

language of myth is deeply embedded in the grammar of human thought as well as the symbolic roots of a traditional past, a post-mythic age is defined by an obsession with what it had lost in the secularization of myth. Therefore, an irrepressible attraction remained towards a type of mythico-religious rhetoric that was caught between the dynamic of progression and return with regards to the past.

The European world wars of the last century are testimony to the extent to which it is difficult to be uncoupled from the language of myth when a nation's notion of myth continues to influence how we read our past. Adam Zamoyski argues that even though the Enlightenment had dislodged Christianity from its central position in the life of European societies, man's quest for ecstasy and transcendence that spawned the Romantic Movement gave rise to a widespread desire for ideal communities. Worship and dedication, originally channelled through the church, was refocused on the cause of the people and the nation. An ideal society is still bound up with an age-old idea of utopia. As Robert Coll's *Identity of England* demonstrates, a nation's identity is not solely constructed from past factual events:

[Too] simple a distinction between history and myth could not have explained how national identity draws on both as forms of truth.12

A nation suffering from an identity crisis tends to backtrack to find its mythic roots. And out of this there frequently emerges a folk revival that at first seems to be radically opposing the present day forces of homogenization, but often ends up so concerned with the issue of origins and authenticity that the mythology of a nation is recycled through a pattern of 'volk' stereotypes. Why does the past have to be such a crucial principle of definition when the nation panics about what it is becoming? Out of this was born the collective ideology of Fascism, Nazism, and Communism. The need for a fatherland or homeland reflects the ambivalence of a post-mythic age that cannot progress without the absolute of God. New false

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gods have replaced an age old god. The notion of myth was problematic in the modern era because it was equated with belief, or a closed set of inherited values. This is when myth becomes literalized, or a commonplace metaphor assimilated into habits of thought. Even the process of deconstructive thought that vandalizes the sacred can take on such predictable stages of metaphoric thinking:

Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial vessels dry; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance and it becomes a part of the ceremony.

Like Kafka's parable, myth can be used like the extended metaphor to frustrate the need to make its poetics translatable into concepts. In this context, even though we return again and again to the story to make sense of it, myth is not to be regarded as paradigm of reality. The myth does not have a message, it is the message. Like the transcendent dimension of a sacred god, it therefore keeps its meaning as a mystery. A progressive culture will therefore question the mindless imitation of past precedents inscribed in prescriptive myths. Exploited as a transfigurative tool, myth can instead preserve the sacred as well as radicalize the closed metaphors that allow myths to accrete as hardened or naturalized facts, or stereotypes of behaviour. For Nietzsche, the identity of the self can never become a dead metaphor.

When Ovid's *Metamorphoses* makes a physical appearance in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* it not only provides a hermeneutic key to solving the means of Lavinia's physical violation, it suggests also that there are two opposing methods of reading the mythic tales of the past:

How now, Lavinia? Marcus, what means this?
Some book there is that she desires to see.

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Ovid's book guides the action of the play by both dictating the cause of violence and revealing the damned contrivers of the deed:

This is the tragic tale of Philomel,
And treats of Tereus' reason and his rape [...]
Patterned by that the poet here describes,
By nature made for murders and for rapes. 17

The play suggests that the morality of Ovid's tale of rape and mutilation lies not in the sequence of violent acts of betrayal and revenge but in its figurative retelling, telling us that human values should be extrapolated above the level of the plot. Serving as a precedent of human behaviour, myths are meta-historical, for even when humanity tries to progress from the irreligious acts of human sacrifice it cannot escape from its symbolic signification. To exact vengeance against Titus, Tamora and her two contriving sons, Chiron and Demetrius, recycle Ovid's Philomel myth by multiplying the excess of physical violation. They bear an over-familiarity with Renaissance sources that causes Lavinia to suffer more than the tongueless Philomel. Yet, the copy-cat violators possess an awareness of the myth model that in literary terms can only be judged as criminally negligent - the proof of the pudding being in their inability to recall the full sequence of revenge. And whereas they viciously exploit the precedent of violent action, Lavinia exploits the power of the word to speak out against these physical and literary violators. So, in actually bringing on stage the play's paramount literary source, Shakespeare provides a salutary reminder to his audience that a myth can be re-used to strike back against its mindless imitators.

Recreation through art is vital to a humanist reading of myth because it allows for a re-assessment of the values inherited from our cultural past. Shakespeare uses a myth as an esoteric metaphor to offset the bigotry of a conventional interpretation of a familiar myth. Violence continues in each generation when the moral lesson implicit to the tale remains unlearnt – that the motive of intense passion is physically proportionate to the cycle of violence. In other words, the scale of the crime is equal to the intensity of passion. Shakespeare ends the play in a climax of human carnage, where nobody escapes via metamorphosis, to impart a stark message:

O, let me teach you how to knit again
This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf,
These broken limbs again into one body

Shakespeare is aware that underpinning the universal theme of human violence is the motive for revenge - 'meed for meed and death for a deadly deed' - which operates by replicating the deadly deeds of our barbaric past. The play, on the other hand, exploits inter-textually the theme of violence, with its heterogeneous mixing and conflating of sources (as the two myths of Tereus and Actaeon overlap) to reconstruct from pagan antiquity a cautionary plot: Tamora is first seen as the grieving Procne, and is then compared ironically to the pure and chaste Diana, and re-enacts, or betters, the Ovidian equivalent of Tereus. Ovid not only informs the

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18 'In [Metamorphoses], there are no sudden physical metamorphoses, but as men and women become animals in their lust for sex or blood, Ovid conveys what is happening on a psychological level through a series of chilling similes.' A.B. Taylor, 'Animals in “manly shape as too the outward showe”: moralizing and metamorphoses in Titus Andronicus', Shakespeare’s Ovid, The Metamorphoses in the Plays and Poems, ed. A.B. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 67. (Shakespeare has therefore introduced moralizing into a play which uses two Ovidian myths that deny the relevance of morality.), p. 71. Morality is not didactically placed within the original myth. Nevertheless, Shakespeare explicates a relation between physical transformation and the amplification of human passions to exploit a metaphoric transformation of the myth copy to convey a spectacle of violence that underlines the corrupt political body.

19 Shakespeare, Titus, V.3, lines 69-71, p. 163.

20 'Romans and “barbarians”, women and men alike are ruled by the mythological past. The characters are so caught within the confines of literary precedent [...] But Lavinia is the first character in this play who manages to break out of the precedent to which she has been forced to conform: she refuses to submit to her aggressor’s pre-text (the amended myth of Philomela) according to which she should remain silent and unnoticed. Instead, she pursues her nephew in search of that same patterning text in order to appropriate it, take control of it and turn it into her family’s pre-text for taking revenge.’ Pascale Aebischer, Shakespeare’s Violated Bodies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 53-4.
sequence of cruel action, but, like Philomel's woven tapestry that tells her sister, Procne, of her husband's familial betrayal, is pivotal to igniting the continuation of inter-familial revenge. The book's staging is only brief, but its theatrical entrance is a striking testimony to how classical sources, by inculcating atavistic human drives, can become complicit in the tragic recycling of human violence.\textsuperscript{21} A prescriptive adoption of a myth as a precedent generates acts of mindless repetition. For Shakespeare, revenge is often defined as history repeating itself because the persecutors of violence remain ignorant of the patterns of symbolic significance. The re-appropriation of Ovid into the very structural fabric of the play signifies the extent to which Shakespeare is identifying with the nature of mythic retelling in order to impart a humanist allegory upon the futility of anachronistic rituals of human sacrifice.\textsuperscript{22} By rejecting the classical source as a precedent for human violence to privilege instead its inter-textual reflexivity, Shakespeare's revision of an unnatural cycle of bearing and consuming children brings the art of classical imitation to a level of mimetic sophistication that anticipates a modernist response to myth. When Titus says, 'Patterned by that the poet here describes', the Ovidian influence is fore-grounded to underscore the idea that the myths repeat a similar pattern of destructive tendencies when little heed is paid to the implications of their similes, or psychological correspondences. In other words, Shakespeare dramatically transforms the original copy/precedent to re-evaluate its bearing on contemporary society. It is as if to imply that intrinsic to a myth's precedent exists the 'nuclear unit of the monomyth', which Joseph Campbell describes as:

> The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} '[The] literary aspect of Lavinia's violation, [is associated] with inter-textuality and rhetorical tropes' Ibid., p. 27.

\textsuperscript{22} Jonathan Bate, in \textit{Shakespeare and Ovid} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 103, sees Shakespeare's art as self-conscious Renaissance exercises in the imitation and amplification of Ovid. 'In what is perhaps the most self-consciously literary moment in all Shakespeare, the play's most significant source is actually brought on stage'. Paradigm in this literary context means authorial precedent, example, or original copy to be revised. For Bate, the rote learning of the classics is exposed as stupid with Chiron and Demetrius re-applying the criminal model. Shakespeare is destabilising the stature of canonical Greek texts, and its implied barbarism.

A mythic character is determined by a particular course of action, and for Vladimir Propp, this means the character is fixed within an unchanging role:

Both constants and variables are present [...] The names of the dramatis personae change (as well as the attributes of each), but neither their action nor functions change.24

The mindless imitations of a monomyth remain constant in their function despite the exigencies of a new set of circumstances or human values, for even though names of characters and their attributes change, their action or function remains constant.

Shakespeare's employment of myth as a metatrope anticipates one of the aims of Enlightenment thinking to liberate men from the fear alongside the irrational violence inculcated through past myths:

The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy [...] Ruthlessly, in spite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive25

Like Shakespeare, certain modern writers were keen to reject myth as a paradigmatic force yet remain keen to hold on to its transfigurative power, a power that was potentially superior to a kind of self-destructive knowledge substituting for mythic fancy. The purpose of this thesis is to assess how the poetics of a post-mythic age supports Nietzsche's observation that: 'God is dead, but he casts a long shadow.'26 The thesis is organised to correspond to the statements and questions of Nietzsche's madman.

Chapter 1, *The Death of Myth, The Birth of Modernism*, examines how the language of myth offered Nietzsche the opportunity for a unique style of metaphoric transformation that suited his transgressive Protestantism - anti-Socratic and anti-Platonic and falling between the opposing historical forces of post-romantic enlightenment:

There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us – for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.\(^{27}\)

A godless world put a heavy burden on the liberated individual that Nietzsche thought could be overcome by a higher language of poetic truth. Because the symbolism of myth was under scrutiny, its truth-values tested in terms of scientific utility, the reflexivity of Modernism was informed by a complicated awareness of the mediating framework of myths that prefigures the immediacy of poetic expression, or the articulation of metaphysical compensations. The textual exegesis involved in reading myths was important in enabling a ‘new’ thinking to override final or false causes of empirical historicism that threatened to replace the symbolic value of myth. This led to what Michael Bell calls a ‘double-consciousness’ of myth:

[The] increase in anthropological studies has meant that a modern writer now has quantitatively more myths to choose from and qualitatively a greater understanding of them, and can turn to more recondite mythologies, when Greek images have become clichés.\(^{28}\)


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displaying the implications of the deconstructionist logic characterised by Frazer’s ‘comparative method’ in *The Golden Bough*:

What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What after all are these churches now if they are not tombs and sepulchres of God?  

Eliot’s poem expresses the nihilistic despair of a modern European society cut asunder from its symbolic roots.

Chapter 3, *The Double-Life of Europe’s Savage Darkness*, examines how anthropology transformed the image of man bringing the steadily progressing Victorian nearer to his primal cousin. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* affected readings of the relation between the notion of civilization and the psychic double of the primal self, popularising a mythical concept of the retrogressive double that was bound to a pre-historical type:

Are we not plunging continually? How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?

The last words of Kurtz that express the undoing of a civilized mind are faintly redeemed by Marlow’s lie to his intended. But Conrad’s novella, whilst exposing the bigger lie of a civilizing rhetoric, is still based on another. Old myths are replaced with new false myths. The twentieth century was responsible for misreading into the basis of myth a foundation of racial superiority to create totalitarian utopia.

In chapter 4, *Kafka’s Sick Animals*, I examine how for Franz Kafka, the dogma of rational systems of thought posed a threat to the inner-sanctum of the self:

Do we not smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose.

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30 Ibid., p. 181.

31 Ibid.
Frequently, his short stories mimic an Ovidian type of metamorphosis, a violent transformation of man into an unearthly creature, to parody the delimiting intrusions of over-transcribing empirical foresight. For Kafka, the self still relied upon recourse to the hermetic character of mythic symbolism to protect a private image.

Chapter 5, *Re-inhabiting the Mythic Void through Poetry*, examines how even though the raw material of myths no longer proffered a straightforward blueprint for literary experiments, for Wallace Stevens the apperceptive mind - one that is conscious of how one assimilates ideas through the art of perception - could poeticise a barren landscape, to rekindle fresh fictions, imitating the mythopoeic imagination of the primitive savage:

> What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?\(^{32}\)

His brand of humanism, to a large extent, is a positive approach to the mythic vacuum that characterizes an often individually experienced form of religious conversion. The human mind cannot bear the full burden of a zero degree reality, so poetry is re-employed to replace the language of religion.

Chapter 6, *The Holy Blues of the Lone Pilgrim in Bob Dylan’s Lyrics* examines how Bob Dylan’s lyrical development from his first album *Bob Dylan* (1962) to *Slow Train Coming* (1979) maps out a personal conversion to evangelical Christianity that echoes the mythical resonances of the hard travelling hobo in American folk music. Deep beneath Dylan’s biblical references lies the model of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in which Christian abandons a sceptical dwelling place in an attempt to walk ‘a straight path’ to the Celestial City of God. A second-hand process that toys with the mythical undercurrents of traditional American folk music precedes Dylan’s eventual conversion. The spatial metaphor of self-journeying is developed through the trope of the gospel train and relates to a long

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\(^{32}\) Ibid.
tradition of folk songs where the journey towards self-discovery frequently mirrors a path towards God:

Has he got lost? Did he lose his way like a child? Has he gone on a voyage?33

In a way, the revival in spiritual sentiments during the folk-revival of the 1960s, and the Pentecostal movement of the 1970s, shows the extent to which the language of a mythic memory continues to influence our imagination. A secular imagination seems too barren and self-destructive.

Modernism is defined by a crippling sense of alienation, or a sense of loss, so artists sometimes affirm a need to return to the mythic past in order to recapture a sense of belonging. This therefore confirms Nietzsche's sense of a post-mythic age, because humanity has not yet come to terms with its proclaimed independence from God:

Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?34

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
The Death of Myth, and the Birth of Modernism

Because he paves the way for a 'hybridic' style of writing that is both anti-mythic in perspective yet rich in mythopoeic properties, Friedrich Nietzsche’s thinking is central to the modernist literary context. Myths themselves can only hold truth-values within a textual context, and so the concept of ‘myth’ for Nietzsche is variable to its shifting medium of expression. The works of Nietzsche reveal an inseparable relationship between his ‘new’ way of thinking and a style of expression that is multifarious, and highly rhetorical, creating a special discourse of form and content, from which the reader cannot separate the effectiveness of his thoughts from his metaphorical style. At the high point of his style, in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, mythic meaning is pre-determined, or pre-empted, by the knowledge that style, or the ‘appearance’ of style, makes meaning, and, therefore, can also unmake meaning.1 So, the effectiveness of any expressed meaning upon the self’s overcoming spirit, for Nietzsche, is dependent on the value of an indirect mythic and modern style. In Milton’s Paradise Lost, the poet is retelling the story of man’s fall bound to a scriptural knowledge of biblical events that are reworked into an epic grand style. The classical allusions reinforce the theological intentions of the poet, because the dramatization is based on what for the poet is a literal set of events:

[The] fact that Milton [...] grounded virtually every phase on the Scriptures would enable every seventeenth-century reader to respond [...] in accordance with the doctrinal interpretation he gave to the Biblical passages²

As Gordon Campbell points out, even though *Paradise Lost* encouraged in contemporary readers the Protestant virtue of individual interpretation, in the invocations to the poem Milton makes it clear that he thinks of his poem as divinely inspired. Milton’s epic dealing with the tragedy of the fall of man is a justification of God’s ways. In John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the allegorical journey of Christian’s spiritual quest towards the Celestial City bears a set of symbolic correspondences that are meant to be profitably registered within the Protestant reader. Nietzsche’s ‘transgressive’ Protestant rhetoric is highly wrought because he continually tries to address a posthumous ‘modern’ reader who does not intentionally underpin ideas through the use of symbolic convictions, or over-arching metaphors of knowledge.³ Nietzsche rejects an unyielding language expressing values of being via closed metaphors.

To transform the history of individual struggle into a politicised mythology is, for Nietzsche, to imaginatively succumb to the language of an accreting myth. In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche singles out contemporary Christians as particularly passive mythic readers, compounded by the two millennia history of a Christendom theology founded on St. Paul’s mythic misreading of Jesus’ symbolic use of language. In the beginning was the word misread:

> Our age is proud of its historical sense: how was it able to make itself believe in the nonsensical notion that the crude miracle-worker and redeemer fable comes at the commencement of Christianity – and that everything spiritual and symbolic is only a subsequent development. On the contrary: the history of Christianity – and that from


the very death on the Cross – is the history of progressively cruder misunderstanding of an original symbolism.4

Nietzsche views nations as tending to construct a traditional past out of a holy lie. The evangelical Paul is the Anti-Christ, misconstruing the original symbolism of Jesus’ parables or sayings to re-bolster the cause of a persecuted or weak nation of Jewish priests. The radical and natural narrative of a rebellious Jew was misappropriated, or denaturalised, to form a counter-persecution ideology. The originality of Nietzsche’s analysis lies within the harbouring of psychological and textual insights, cutting across historical documented evidence to countenance his argument. As he says, the evidence is contradictory because the biblical language is the symbolism of legends. The injustice done against Jesus is that the symbolic integrity of his provocative words is misapplied, transposed into symbolic truths, which subsequently accrete into a historical mythology. Jesus was the first and only Christian, and Paul was his first tendentious reader. Nietzsche is pointing out that at the heart of essential truths or the historical readings of myths lies an error – the misconstruing of the nature or the intentions of a symbolic language:

The word ‘Christianity’ is already a misunderstanding – in reality there has only been one Christian, and he died on the Cross. The ‘Evangel’ died on the Cross. What was called ‘Evangel’ from this moment onwards was already the opposite of what he had lived: ‘bad tidings, a dysangel. It is false to the point of absurdity to see in a ‘belief’, perchance the belief in redemption through Christ, the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian: only Christian practice, a life such as he who died on the Cross lived, is Christian5

Nietzsche is here reclaiming Jesus back from believing Christians, distinguishing Jesus from Christ and the mythic renderings of his life. But, and at the same time, he is also revealing a likening to the Christianised subject. The mythic appropriation of the death of the Evangel

5 Ibid., p. 163.
represents the barbarism of an aggressive language that induces unthinking collective action at the cost of individual practice.

As with the prophet Zarathustra, Nietzsche associates a transfigurative language with individual self-becoming. Nietzsche wishes for the integrity of the Evangel’s life to be read according to the value of his own words, beyond a mythological or metaphysical framework of understanding. Ultimately, Nietzsche is trying to re-establish the natural integrity in the meaning of his life and death:

The beginning of the Bible contains the *entire* psychology of the priest [...]. The concept of guilt and punishment [...] were invented to destroy the *causal sense* of man.6

Nietzsche honours the natural causal perceptions of Jesus above the tradition of a Christianity that was able to refashion Jesus into a familiar psychological type over which Paul could establish a priestly tyranny. To do this, the causal sense of Jesus’ symbolism that derived from a natural poetic sensibility was transformed into the extent to which one could believe in his ways:

The profound instinct for how one would have to *live* in order to feel oneself ‘in Heaven’, to feel oneself ‘eternal’, while in every condition one by *no* means feels oneself ‘in Heaven’: this alone is the psychological reality of ‘redemption’. – A new way of living, not a new belief7

Nietzsche re-evaluates Jesus in romantic terms, someone who does not fall easily into formulas, or patterns of self-satisfying creeds, or the ‘categorical imperative’ of the general will. Jesus is an outsider who illustrated a new way, a non-ressentiment way of dealing with evil, or the oppression of orthodoxy, without needing to counterattack its aggressive tactics in

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6 Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 177. His frustration comes out especially when he wishes that a writer, similar in psychological insight to Fyodor Dostoyevsky, had been there to witness and record the textual butchery of Jesus’ life and teachings.

7 Ibid., p. 158.
a similar vein. Nietzsche’s hostility towards Christianity is predicated on how a historical
movement distorted the original teachings of its central inspiration. So, ironically, the original
meaning of the mythic legend became lost as soon as it became a mythology:

If I understand anything of this great symbolist it is that he took for realities, for
‘truths’, only inner realities – that he understood the rest, everything pertaining to
nature, time, space, history, only as signs, as occasion for metaphor. The concept ‘the
Son of Man’ is not a concrete person belonging to history, anything at all individual or
unique, but an ‘eternal’ fact, a psychological symbol freed from the time concept. The
same applies supremely to the God of this typical symbolist [...] world-historical
cynicism in the mockery of symbolism [...] But it is patently obvious what is alluded
to in the symbols ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ – not patently obvious to everyone, I grant: in the
word ‘Son’ is expressed the entry into the collective feeling of the transfiguration of
all things (blessedness), in the word ‘Father’ this feeling itself, the feeling of
perfection and eternity.8

Nietzsche is identifying with Jesus as a poet philosopher, a sensitive thinker whose selfless
actions are a reflection of his self-fulfilling words. Paul takes Jesus’ mythic and poetic
symbolism as real or concrete signs of his actions and identity that allow for the religious
transfiguring of a whole life and being. For Nietzsche, Paul is able to justify his own inaction
to fulfil an individual integrity, by transforming Jesus’ words and life into the symbols of faith
and belief. The fulfilling of one’s life is measured by how much we invest our lives into the
belief that a particular person’s death will give us the promise of another destiny, in this case
supernatural eternity.

To counter Paul’s rhetorical logic, Nietzsche instead invests in Jesus the spirit of
Dionysus – amor fati, seeing Jesus dwelling on the eternally beautiful in nature, the ‘good
tidings’ that life can bring. As a deeply anti-political thinker, Nietzsche pictures Jesus as
being antithetical to Paul’s ulterior political motives. This theme runs throughout Nietzsche’s
writings, that political language serves only a collective will that inevitably vulgarises the
singularity of poetic symbolism. Under the hands of his sister, Elizabeth, after his death,
Nietzsche too became the victim of political propaganda, with his poetic writings becoming

8 Ibid., pp. 158-9.
stripped of their rhetorical intricacies. For Nietzsche, to be pronounced 'holy' after one's death was a crime against the achievements of self, as it meant that one had become in the end a historical lie, a collective myth that served others' base motives and fears of the temporal. This is not a redeeming fiction, but a self-serving grand fable that distorts the multifarious poetic colour of symbol for concrete truth. As Frank Kermode puts it:

Fiction can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive. In this sense anti-Semitism is a degenerate fiction, a myth; and [King] Lear is a fiction. Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agent of stability [concrete symbols], fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time, *illud tempus* as Eliade calls it; fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now, *hoc tempus*.

In a way, Nietzsche is accusing Christianity of turning the 'open endingness' of Jesus' teachings, the fictional possibilities of his poetic symbols, into the 'closed ending' of a mythological stable narrative. Generally, Nietzsche felt resentful towards the way in which nineteenth-century contemporaries, like the Utilitarians and Romantics, were either deriving their sense of morality from Christian allegories, or creating visions of human betterment couched in archaic Christian moral terms, so investing anew in an already clustered and closed dogmatic image. This is already an exhausted language yet still accreting new attributes of signification. The half-way house of this language adopts the language of God to use as a source for morality. George Eliot was famously singled out as Victorian progressive moralist still embedded in the language of Christendom. And the French philosopher, Rousseau, was seen in a similar light: to be, on the one hand, drawing upon romantic notions

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9 Politicians, or people of political persuasion, have throughout history debased the fineries of literary exploits. A 'dystopia' begins where language decays. See George Orwell’s *1984*. Language is not always so literal or didactic. Poets, as Plato knew too well, speak in ironic double tongues.

of humanity's newly gained liberty, whilst, on the other, envisaging man's natural
environment as a divinely interpolated world.

Fundamentally, Nietzsche attacks the psychology of Paul to defend the personal
integrity of Jesus' symbolism against the hermeneutics of ideological and historical
mythmaking: 'Christianity has from the outset transformed the symbolic into crudities.'\textsuperscript{11}
Beatrice Han views Nietzsche's philosophical intentions as integral to the poetics of the single
author:

Nietzsche's original intuition is that any true philosophical doctrine owes its
authenticity to the singularity of its author (the 'personality of the individual
philosopher') rather than to its objective content [...] the truth value of a discourse
will vary with the speaker's identity.\textsuperscript{12}

In other words, Paul denies the original meaning of Jesus by voicing his words in a discourse
that does not impart the singularity of the author's symbolism. This is when myth runs
counter to the personality of individual poetics. Again, Nietzsche is identifying with Jesus as a
philosopher in his own vein, where the organic link between the word and self has not been
shattered:

Yet the deepest meaning of this modern shattering of the self is not merely
psychological: its fundamental consequence is the impossibility for the Moderns to
ground in truth their own discourse [...] By contrast, the distinctive feature of the
'real philosophers' is that they achieve a perfect isomorphism between their word and
their nature, they are the incarnation of their thought and this thought, the necessary
expression of character.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Nietzsche, \textit{The Will to Power}, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R.J.Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York:

\textsuperscript{12} John Lippitt & Jim Urpeth eds., 'Nietzsche and the "Masters of Truth": the pre-Socratics and Christ',

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 119.
For Nietzsche, the mythic visions of Jesus’ parables reside within a single context – its textual symbolism, and not in an alien objective one which universalises its original meaning – a type of discourse that Gilles Deleuze calls the ‘dogmatic image of thought’.\textsuperscript{14} The mythic, in the context of Paul, is no longer poetic, whereas in the new image of thought (the poetic) the primary element of thought is sense and value [...]. The concept of truth can only be determined on the basis of a pluralist typology. And typology begins with topology. It is a matter of knowing what \textit{region} such errors and such truths belong to, what their \textit{type} is, \textit{which one} formulates and conceives them.\textsuperscript{15}

Deleuze agrees with Nietzsche that the active new imagery of Jesus was pacified into an inactive system of mythic historical thought:

Thinking is the n-th power of thought. It is still necessary for it to become “light”, “affirmative”, “dancing”. But it will never attain this power if forces do not do violence to it.\textsuperscript{16}

According to Nietzsche, the words of Jesus were the incarnate embodiment of himself and not God. Jesus spoke in supernatural terms not because his words could be consciously traced to such a directly influential force, but because he felt that his visions were greater than his mortal self to such an extent that they seemed to be of a greater outward source:

Among intelligent, strong, and vigorous races it is mainly the epileptic who inspires the convictions that a strange power is here at work; but every related condition of subjection, e.g., that of the inspired man, of the poet, of the great criminal, of passions such as love and revenge, also leads to the invention of extra-human powers. A condition is made concrete in a person, and when it overtakes us is thought to be effected by that person. In other words: In the psychological concept of God, a condition, in order to appear as effect, is personified as cause.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 104.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 108.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Nietzsche, \textit{The Will to Power}, pp. 85-6.
\end{thebibliography}
The mythic vision sees beyond the station of man and yet its cause is not rooted here in the supernatural for the condition of Jesus was superhuman.

Much of Nietzsche’s rhetoric is also imbued with mythic transfigurations of the self. In ‘Last Will’, human desire is expressed as overcoming the course of destiny:

So to die
as once I saw him die –
the friend who like a god
cast glances of lightning into my dark youth:
- wanton, profound,
- in the slaughter a dancer –

of fighters the cheerfullest,
of victors the sternest,
a destiny standing upon his destiny,
firm, reflecting, perfecting –:

trembling with joy of victory,
rejoicing that he died in victory:

by dying, commanding
- and he commanded destruction …
So to die
As once I saw him die:
Victorious, destroying

The imaginary person of ‘Last Will’ is victorious in commanding the timing of his own temporal demise. This brings a salutary lesson to the poet, reminding us all that we have the opportunity, despite being subject to the action of outward things, of attaining an unconquerable soul like the gods at the end of our lives. This poem has clear links to ‘Of Voluntary Death’ in Thus Spoke Zarathustra:

Many die too late and some die too early. Still the doctrine sounds strange: ‘Die at the right time’ […] Many too many live and they hang on their branches much too long. I wish a storm would come and shake all this rottenness and worm-eatenness from the tree!

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Jesus' death can be read as a profound death because he chose to die at the right time so that his death would be 'a spur and a promise to the living'. This is not to be confused with the mythic and redemptive death of the resurrection. Nietzsche pours scorn upon the idea to such an extent he wishes that Jesus had stayed around a bit longer than he had done to witness the effect that his early death had upon others:

As yet he knew only tears and the melancholy of the Hebrews, together with the hatred of the good and just – the Hebrew Jesus: then he was seized by the longing for death. Had he only remained in the desert and far from the good and just! Perhaps he would have learned to live and learned to love the earth – and laughter as well!\(^{20}\)

Georg Hegel spoke of a similar notion of the symbolic or figurative use of language as spiritual revelation in expressing the psychological conviction of God's 'immediacy' and the 'intuitive' character of man's sense of the divine. The vital essence and function of religion is a conscious unity, 'versohnung', between man becoming self-conscious and becoming conscious of God as truth:

We define religion as being in the stricter sense the self-consciousness of God [...] Religion is something revealed, it is manifested [...] as the consciousness of the absolute Essence [...] It is Christian religion which is the perfect religion, the religion which represents the Being of Spirit in a realized form\(^{21}\)

Whilst Nietzsche questions the political adoption of the romantic indivisible unity of form and content in the symbolic construct, he nonetheless privileges a more 'natural' revelation or personal apprehension of God's presence in the soul of man. Walter Benjamin also supports

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 98.

the claim that a misplaced traditional notion of the poetic symbol evoked misinterpretations of
the divine interpolation within 'spiritual' revelations:

The unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox
of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and
essence. The introduction of this distorted conception of the symbol into aesthetics
was a romantic and destructive extravagance which preceded the desolation of modern
art criticism. As a symbolic construct, the beautiful is supposed to merge with the
divine in an unbroken whole. The idea of the unlimited immanence of the moral world
in the world of beauty is derived from the theosophical aesthetics of the romantics.22

Nietzsche's poetic mythic renderings can only suggest the inspiration of the theological divine
if his metaphors are read as unbroken symbolic wholes. In 'Last Will' what is being expressed
is the desired triumph of one's last will, the feeling of conquering fate - the outward
determinism in the contingency of life. In the ending of a certain life, where one has achieved
the limits of one's potential, there resonates an afterlife - a meaningful reverberating echo. Its
virtue lies not in its mythologized posterity, but rather in the fact of what is achieved before
death puts a final signature on it. This is when death is free because it is justly willed:

In your death, your spirit and your virtue should still glow like a sunset glow around
the earth: otherwise yours is a bad death.23

A virtuous life is achieved if the spirit is right. This is only achieved when the self has
reached its natural potential within the natural causality of a temporal life. One's death then
becomes a sacrificial gift to the living:

Such men must seize death at the right moment, the singular moment in which their
historic contribution to the historic good reaches completion, in which their gift has

23 Ibid., p. 99.
been given and heirs created. This is a fitting teaching for one who understands mankind to be bridge or rope reaching toward a future that alone justifies it.\textsuperscript{24}

By overturning the traditional teachings of the apostles in which it is said that life is lived in the service of death, Nietzsche demythologizes the supernatural causes of Jesus’ death. Nietzsche regards Jesus’ teachings as symbolic to the singular moment of his sacrificial life — where one finds self-redemption by overcoming oneself. This defines his notion of the over-man. Zarathustra also preaches this type of individual integrity:

I am a law only for my own, I am not a law for all. But he who belongs to me must be strong-limbed and nimble-footed, merry in war and feasting, no mournful man, no dreamy fellow, ready for what is hardest as for a feast, healthy and whole.\textsuperscript{25}

Zarathustra overturns the ascetic ideals that unfortunately were attributed to the teachings of Jesus, since his sacrificial life entered into a posthumous mythic posterity within the estate of St. Paul.

Nietzsche deconstructs the mythological but in dealing with a rich and complex web of symbolism and biblical allusions, Nietzsche’s style becomes mythic by upholding the ideals of a poetic singularity to inspire ambitions of the self. This style can alienate the reader who is looking for a passive construct, or an overarching ontological metaphor. Instead, the effort to overcome meaning is desirable to the author’s intention, and this co-relates with a reader who is willing to finally overcome the author’s intentions. In \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra}, Nietzsche’s imaginary prophet is both the mythic personification of Jesus as well as Nietzsche, the poet philosopher who is reclaiming the original meaning of ‘The New Testament’ prophet. At the end of every chapter, Nietzsche repeats the refrain ‘Thus spoke Zarathustra’. This is to reinforce the singularity of the prophet’s teachings, even though their

\textsuperscript{24} Laurence Lampert, \textit{An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 72.

\textsuperscript{25} Nietzsche, \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra}, p. 296.
meaning is dependent on the ironic relationship they have to Christ's own. This is done in an effort to reinstate the initial symbolic intentions that have become distorted under the dogmatic image of the resurrection, turning the superhuman into a spiritual everyman.

In 'The Last Supper', with clear allusions to the Holy Communion and Christ's last meal with his followers, Nietzsche's secular parodies of the mythic contents of the Bible are deliberately farcical. Noting the lack of bread, Zarathustra quotes the words of Jesus 'that man does not live by bread alone'. He replaces Jesus' next words, 'but every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God,' with his own words, 'but also by the flesh of good lambs, of which I have two'.\(^{26}\) The two lambs are slaughtered and spiced. Zarathustra does not take up any dietary laws. Instead, he is willing to immerse himself into the conviviality of the gathering:

> And neither is there any lack of roots and fruits, fine enough even for gourmets and epicures; nor of nuts and other riddles that need cracking. Thus we shall very shortly partake of an excellent meal.\(^{27}\)

Nietzsche inverts the life-denying ethos of Christians to emphasise the epicurean pleasures of the prophet. The voluntary beggar denies himself the joys of eating flesh, wine and spices and accuses Zarathustra of being a 'glutton': '[Does] one take to caves and high mountains in order to partake of such meals?'\(^{28}\) Those who misinterpret the prophet's teachings, as if he praises the virtue of a moderate poverty, burden Zarathustra with ascetic expectations. Nietzsche consciously puts a beggar in the position of voicing such reactionary comments, because he is dependent on the alms of others. His humility breeds lowly expectations, and so mistakenly believes that the prophet has qualified the extremism of his plight to an acceptable and comfortable status – one that is 'moderate'. Rather, with the years of isolation in the


\(^{27}\) Ibid., p. 295.

\(^{28}\) Ibid.
wilderness of caves and high mountains, Zarathustra has learnt to appreciate the joys of socialising:

When I went to men for the first time, I committed the folly of hermits, the great folly: I set myself in the market place. And when I spoke to everyone, I spoke to no one. In the evening, however, tight-rope walkers and corpses were my companions; and I myself became a corpse.  

Zarathustra's isolation from man's company does not serve as a model ideal. The beggar believes this state of existence appeals to his impoverished status as a form of self-imposed humility, so implying an instructive method. Nietzsche disapproves of extrapolating from someone's noble life a systemization of values:

To become a self is to be socialised: each of us is constituted as a self only to the extent that we are implicated in webs of particular desires, expectations, and relations. But to become a self is also to become self-conscious, with at least some ability to reflect on and direct the forces at play in the constitution of self and community.  

What Zarathustra gains in experience from society does not affect the virtues of his teachings. His teachings do not derive from abstract correspondences within a systematic ideology. The consensus of society, its 'herd' mentality, lures the self into the conformity of accepted values. Zarathustra follows neither mode of conformity, be it societal or individual. He therefore acknowledges that his practice should not include further exclusion from the fruits of the earth. When the reader first encounters Zarathustra he appears as a wandering hermit, imitating the desert ascetics who moved to the wastelands of Egypt. And like Saint Anthony, Zarathustra struggles with temptations and demons that take on the grotesque forms of dwarfs, dogs, and snakes:

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29 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 296.

When Zarathustra was thirty years old, he left his home and the lake of his home and went into the mountains. Here he had the enjoyment of his spirit and his solitude and he did not weary of it for ten years. But at last his heart turned — and one morning he rose with the dawn, stepped before the sun, and spoke to it thus:

Zarathustra's metaphorical teachings derive from experiential ideas — the complex interweaving of passions and extraneous forces. They are told anecdotally and aphoristically. Like the mythic symbolism of Jesus' parables, their meaning is resolved within their intrinsic context of sense and value. The beggar transforms his metaphorical message into political dogmatism by separating the virtue of his words from the context of his being. He is then, according to his own internal logic, shocked by Zarathustra's contradictory and inconsistent behaviour. However, Nietzsche is demonstrating here, through the use of pictorial anecdotes, or parables, the ease with which symbolism is divested of its original intent. Furthermore, he demonstrates the appropriate behaviour that Jesus advocated by not reacting with equal force to misjudgements cast down by the 'asses' of the world:

'Be of good cheer,' Zarathustra replied to him, 'as I am. Stick to your usual custom, admirable man: grind your corn, drink your water, praise your own cooking: if only it makes you happy!'

Zarathustra realises his teachings are beyond the learning of this man. His words do not speak to him. Not everything is identical in perception. But he does not discriminate against the man and his way of living with political fervour. Zarathustra is a spiritual rebel and a prophet, not a politician of pogroms, policies or doctrines.

Nietzsche has set Zarathustra in a time apposite to the archaic style of his discourses, but the tenor of which is not alien to a modernised cultural context. The imagery at first seems elemental in referring to the surrounding agrarian environment and the associated produce of its working culture: caves, mountains, fields, seeds, fruit, nuts, flesh, lamb, corn, water

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32 Ibid., p. 296.
etcetera. To a large degree, this imitates the parables of Jesus in the *New Testament* who spoke of salt, light, farmers, land, servants, sea and water:

‘You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.’

There is an affinity between Zarathustra’s method of discourse and Jesus’ use of metaphor and parable. Nietzsche is embracing a natural philosophy married to the culture of the causal perception. To teach the virtues of life, Jesus immediately derives his imagery from the material objects that the earth yields. In fact, Jesus’ imagery is symbolically transformed by symbiotically relating the essence of being ‘earthy’ to the material composition of the earth. The immediate sense of Jesus’ sayings relies upon the material and natural context to which he relates. The correspondences of meaning are not abstractly constructed from a systematic use of language. They are anecdotal in form allowing for the analogous unfolding of meaning, rather than formulating reason and value through a system of logic:

Thus it is characteristic of both Jesus and his archenemy Nietzsche-Zarathustra that they do not know what the most important values are but what they are like.

Symbols and metaphoric analogies work in tandem in both discourses to form pictorial syllogisms:

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

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33 Matthew 5:13.


35 Matthew 5:14-16.
Here the symbolism and experiential imagery work logically in more of an interlocking way. Jesus builds his metaphor, ‘light of the world’, from a common perception of how, in the everyday, people function and behave. Again, a natural causality is emphasised to reinforce the possible practicality achievable within the virtue of good deeds. The integrity of his words is not at odds with the performance of daily temporal practices. For Nietzsche, concluding ‘Father in heaven’ does not express a supernatural wish-fulfilment, a future reward for earthly deeds committed. Instead, it underlies the singularity of the poetic speech by rounding off the parable with a sense of universal revelation. Nietzsche is denying intimations towards the supernatural by stating that the symbolic use of ‘Father’ here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, is universally felt as a temporal correspondence. In symbolically relating to a ‘god’, Jesus does not necessarily betray his earthy integrity by intimating towards the eternal presence of the ‘divine’ that can be achieved through human actions. Rather, Nietzsche is saying that Jesus was a poetic philosopher who inspired virtue through the use of both a mythic and elemental hybrid language.

Similarly, Zarathustra in his discourses metaphorically transfigures a sense of the eternal spirit of man through references to observed nature. In ‘Of the Three Metamorphoses’, the camel, the lion, and the child represent three transforming stages of the spirit’s growth. The labouring experiences of the camel speak to the heavily burdened spirit, whilst the lion wants to capture freedom in the desert, saying ‘I will’ instead of ‘Thou shalt’. The child is the spirit of a new beginning. For Zarathustra, the spirit must go through each stage of transformation as a different creature. Nietzsche here is appealing again to an archaic rhetoric with each metamorphosis appearing like a Greek mythic persona, or the animals of Aesop’s fables. And yet, Zarathustra’s discourses are bewilderingly indirect. The anthropomorphic characters do not allow for a literal translation from metaphor to a concrete, stable sense. Aesop’s animals clearly represent finite types in their manner of behaviour, from the heroic to

36 Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, pp. 54-56.
the foolish. But the three metamorphoses described by Zarathustra are polymorphic types through which the spirit must continually become. Nietzsche is emphasising the process of transformation rather than the final state of being. Zarathustra does not describe the transformation to the camel, and it is not clear how the final transformation of the child can embody the two previous transformations to make up a finite creation. Zarathustra's rhetoric does not seem to be logical, let alone possible. A dragon interjects to say: 'All values have already been created, and all created values – are in me. Truly, there shall be no more "I will"!'\(^{37}\) It is only when we become aware that the three metaphorical transformations represent for Nietzsche the process of resisting the reactionary forces of dogmatic imagery that an understanding can be gained. His liberal use of a mythical archaic language is informed by the desire to break the Old Tablets of values, and not to re-propose definitively a new ontological way. This is why the child suggests a new beginning rather than an achievable goal. And furthermore, this speech on the transformation of the spirit is not Zarathustra's final word on the subject.

Each creation represents a process of becoming anew, to 'create itself freedom for new creation', for the spirit to will 'its own will'.\(^{38}\) Each stage does not lead to a fulfilled entity, but marks a process of change. Nietzsche is only interested here in how the transfiguring language of myths can be adapted to transfigure the self in the process of becoming. Nietzsche is not parodying the symbolism of the *New Testament* per se; moreover, he is mocking the mythological translations of Jesus' parables when reduced to a finite act that the last will of human life should attain. This is why Zarathustra avoids direct instructions that could so easily be mistaken for political statements on the final justification of the spirit's will. Unlike Paul's theological ownership on Jesus' parables and life, Nietzsche refutes the

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 55.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
notion of redemption through divine agency, to undercut the tradition of onto-theology with its promises of supernatural compensation:

While Zarathustra’s teaching aims to produce qualities it deems worthy, it depends initially on a quality that is simply given, a gift of the spirit that Zarathustra cannot give. 39

This is why there exists a central paradox to the whole of Zarathustra’s teachings: the qualities he teaches he does not bestow upon anyone or give a clear method as to how certain goals can be attained. He demands an audience, and, at the same time, he rejects them:

I now go away alone, my disciples! You too now go away and be alone! So I will have it. Truly, I advise you: go away from me and guard yourselves against Zarathustra! And better still: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he has deceived you [...] You had not yet sought yourselves when you found me. Thus do all believers; therefore all belief is of so little account. 40

Zarathustra does not present a whole truth, because Zarathustra is not literal. He embodies a necessary metamorphosis. Zarathustra is only a transitory transfiguration in the growth of the overman. He is not specific about where the journey will take his disciples. 41 Zarathustra’s teachings are like the esoteric insights of the Gnostics. The same question he asks of the lion, ‘My brothers, why is the lion needed in the spirit?’, equally applies to the prophet. Zarathustra is a metaphorical transformation that can inspire the imagination of others to be just as adventurous. 42 He does not represent an ontological model to be copied over and over again for successful self-transformation. One must literally take control of one’s own agency to

39 Lampert, An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra, p. 33.

40 Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, p. 103.

41 ‘But I need living companions who follow me because they want to follow themselves – and who want to go where I want to go.’ Ibid., p. 51.

42 Ibid., p. 55.
overcome a mythological legacy. This is when Nietzsche defines negatively myth as a systematization of metaphors that Zarathustra avoids becoming. David B. Allison argues:

What must be transformed, for Nietzsche, is our fearful and enervating dependency on that past, on what he calls the "it was." The past itself stands to thwart the individual's future, since the past and its continuous reverberations operate as the origin of our own weakness, our own distorted and inverted wills.43

By regarding the fact that our nature is still beholden towards certain mythic 'truths', which operate as continuous reverberations of our origins, Nietzsche anticipates Freud's notion of our childish dependency on a cultural memory that checks our recovery and progress to a new state of affairs. The cultural landscape of the past casts an overshadowing rhetoric:

But when I looked into the mirror [of the cave] I cried out and my heart was shaken: for I did not see myself, I saw the sneer and grimace of a devil. Truly, I understand the dream's omen and warning all too well: my doctrine is in danger, weeds want to be called wheat!44

Whilst ironically echoing a parable of Jesus, Zarathustra recognises that, despite his best efforts to nurture among his followers the integrity of his ways, one metaphoric meaning can be easily confused with another. By perverting the esoteric meaning of his teachings, Zarathustra fears that his followers will actually believe that they have become more than their life actually justifies.

The cultural landscape of Thus Spoke Zarathustra befits that of biblical times, the symbolism cultivated from similar material resources. However, the motives, fears, and desires appeal both to its archaic references and the modern decadence of the nineteenth century. The text's set of allusions is contemporary, ancient, and personal, and its style is epic


44 Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, p. 107.
in mythological and rhetorical proportion. The irony lies in double inversions, and the parody is achieved by inverting the ontological logic of theological discourses. Zarathustra’s wanderings may be seen as romantic quests into the unknown, the bard in communion with the elements of nature; but unlike Shelley’s unbound Prometheus, his ultimate goal is not to liberate humanity through a universalising abstraction of equality for all. For such an aim is ultimately political, serving the general will, and equated with the democratic logic of the common denominator. The beggar is a trans-historical social type, but for Nietzsche he is a psychological type that Christianity elevates to an enlightened and redeemed status. The beggar does not resist social conformity if he begs with humility for the scraps of charity. Christianity has universalised the poverty-stricken beggar into a sacrificial figure upon which all our higher hopes are pinned. Zarathustra speaks of and to the ‘Higher Man’, deriving meaning from what is immediate, complete, and found in his natural surroundings – the stone, the tree, the plant, the mountain, or the cave. Even though Zarathustra lives in the immediate condition of his being, his imagination reaches beyond it; because instead of producing negation within a temporal scope of being, Zarathustra dwells on the eternal integrity of things-in-themselves.\footnote{And during that meal nothing was spoken of but the Higher Man.' \textit{Ibid.}, p. 296.} For Zarathustra, life is not so crap if you live life as an activity of self-production. Definite religion is also conscious of the universal spirit, producing a different psychological type – isolated and persecuted, and yet bound to the general will of a mythological contract. Zarathustra strives not for the absolute as a future projection amidst the nihilism of the present. For his mythic investments compound the ‘blessedness’ of the present.\footnote{‘Religion, insofar as it is definite, and has not as yet completed the circle of determinateness.’ Hegel, ‘On Religion’, \textit{Introductory Lectures}, p. 198.} He thinks for himself, but wonders how what he has learnt about himself in the throes of isolation can best serve humanity. But his cause is not to serve a consensual humanity. It is higher man he serves - the man that can eventually overcome all reference to
Zarathustra as a base beginning to the becoming self. Nietzsche’s works are suffused with asides on the cultural threat of appealing to the democracy of the ‘mediocre’. The virtue of high culture cannot be gained through a historical process that is sustained and justified by rewarding base motives:

Let us be clear how dearly a virtue is bought; and that virtue is not something of average desirability, but a noble madness, a beautiful exception, with the privilege of strong feelings.\(^{47}\)

The art of becoming begins to fail as soon as one begins to lean on another’s teachings as though an index to the masses.

Ultimately, Nietzsche attacks Christianity because it is a democratising mythology, serving souls conquered by the dogmatic image of redemption. This historical myth is allied to the nineteenth-century notion of democratic ‘progress’: Nietzsche frequently criticises the quasi socio-biological language of Darwinian evolutionary theories, and Hegelian historical notions of progress, in dismissing the sense and value gained through art. Frequently, Nietzsche also wages war against the historical approach to the Bible. He attacked anthropological or ‘mythic’ studies for denying a psychological understanding of virtue and poetic expression. David Friedrich Strauss sought to separate what he saw as only mythic forms, or crudities, in the Bible from what was quintessentially religious – its transcendental subject.\(^{48}\) He demeans and rejects the literalism of the Bible, but invests in its symbolism a historical morality. Nietzsche attacked his form of scientific materialism in *Untimely Meditations* for being too narrow, sober, and dried-up in fulfilling scholarly requirements. He also accuses Strauss of deputizing the ‘old faith’ of Christianity for a ‘new faith’ in natural science:

\(^{47}\) Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 463.

\(^{48}\) David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74) was a theologian who, under the influence of the philosophy of Hegel, propounded in his *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (1835-6) the thesis that the events narrated in the Gospels are not historical but mythical.
At the bottom, then, the new religion is not a new faith but precisely on a par with modern science and this not religion at all.49

Darwin is the new messiah, and science the new cosmos. Nevertheless, Nietzsche sees Strauss as confused in his artificial style because of his inability to distinguish between faith and knowledge. Nietzsche instead tries to preserve, from the hands of objective historians, the mythopoeic symbolism of the Scriptures as an intrinsic form of philosophy. Nietzsche, like Strauss, divests the New Testament of the Gospel narratives that clustered around Jesus: the evangelical myths of his disciples; myths embodied in Hebrew traditions; and historical myths where the events of Jesus' life become mythic.

However, Gustav Jung regarded Nietzsche's denial of the supernatural myth as being equally ambivalent. Nietzsche's continual deployment of mythic qualities in his writings demonstrates an unwillingness to be unyoked from the religiosity of his past Protestant forefathers:

Nietzsche was quite conscious and quite responsible in breaking the old tablets and yet he felt the peculiar need to back himself up by a revivified Zarathustra as a kind of secondary personality, a sort of alter ego, with whom he identifies himself in his great tragedy Thus Spake Zarathustra. Nietzsche was no atheist, but his God was dead. The result was that Nietzsche himself was split and he felt himself forced to call the other self “Zarathustra” or, at other times, “Dionysus”. In his fatal illness he signed his letters “Zagreus,” the dismembered Dionysos of the Thracians. The tragedy of Zarathustra is that, because his God died, Nietzsche himself became a god; and this happened because he was no atheist. He was too positive a nature to content himself with a negative creed.50

Jung disputes Nietzsche's own 'inflated' claims to be the harbinger of God's death. He is rather the deluded victim of a dualistic disruption:


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The disruption can produce a dual or multiple personality. It is as if one single person could carry the total amount of energy, so that parts of the personality which were hitherto functional units instantly break asunder and assume the dignity and importance of autonomous personalities.51

This is brought on by a development similar to the theoretical ‘halfway house’ that Nietzsche attributed to the current decline of Protestantism. Certainly, Nietzsche’s personal state was very much implicated in his grand and tragic pronouncements with his inability to detach from his writing the ‘singular’ integrity of his spirit. Within the figure of Zarathustra as the overcoming-man, Nietzsche was rejuvenating a dead God into a new god into which he could invest the romance of his own identity:

Since the throne of god could not be discovered among the galactic systems, the inference was that god had never existed. The second inevitable mistake is psychologism: if god is anything, he must be an illusion derived from certain motives, from fear, for instance, from will to power, or from repressed sexuality. These arguments are not new. Similar things have already been said by the Christians missionaries who overthrew idols of the pagan gods. But whereas the early missionaries were conscious of serving a new God by combating the old ones, modern iconoclasts are unconscious of the one in whose name they are destroying old values.52

Jung is charging the modern iconoclast for repeating the same offence he accused his contemporaries of committing – poisoning a dead mythic language with unconscious forms of theistic religiosity. Jung saw Nietzsche as not so much appealing to creations of art, but to the living deities, or the eternal forms of a great world-reality that the religious-minded man of the Greek world would have believed in.53

From the outset Nietzsche’s style of writing was imbued with the mythic, in part as a consequence of Wagner’s direct influence. One of Wagner’s ideas that ignited Nietzsche’s

51 Ibid., p. 104.
52 Ibid., p. 103.
enthusiasm was that in its deepest essence drama is music made visible.\textsuperscript{54} The idea that tragedy is born from the soul of music was turned into an historical account. \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} reveals the philosopher's life-long enthusiasm for Greek literature, especially tragedy, and the central notion that remained throughout his life that only as an aesthetic phenomenon are existence and the world justified. Nietzsche was willing from a very young age to want to perceive directly the experiences of the aesthetic:

\begin{quote}
We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics when we have succeeded in perceiving directly, and not through logical reasoning, that art derives its continuous development from the duality of the Apolline and Dionysiac; just as the reproduction of species depends on the duality of the sexes, with its constant conflicts and only periodically intervening reconciliations.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

Nietzsche borrows terms from the Greeks to reach a psychological understanding of art's forms of intoxication. His style generally imitates the baroque mythic dream states of Wagner's operas, revealing the author's own enrapt receptive nature. \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} created a furore on its first publication in 1872, ostracising the philologist from his fellow scholars at the time, because Nietzsche seemed, in his style of analysis, fanatically unwilling to maintain the proper detached objective persona. Nietzsche reveals himself to be a mythic aesthete like the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin:

\begin{quote}
O Mother Asia, and your heroes / Without fear for the signs of the world, / Heaven and fate upon their shoulders, / Rooted on mountaintops days on end, / Were the first to understand / Speaking to God / Alone. These now rest. But since, / And mention must be made of this, / O ancients, since you would not say where / we draw your name, we are divinely compelled / To name your Nature, and every god-born thing / Emerges from you, fresh, newly bathed.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}


Hölderlin went beyond his predecessors and contemporaries in hoping to revitalize 'ancient' myth by daring to believe that the Greek Gods are still somehow alive and accessible. In his poem 'The Only One', Apollo, Zeus, Hercules, Christ and the Christian Father are bought together on the same hopeful level. For Hölderlin, the aesthetics of the Greek pantheon is a metaphysical assertion. As a frustrated musical poet, Nietzsche was also enraptured by the mythological spheres of the Greek’s pagan and godly culture:

The striving for infinity, the wingbeat of longing, that accompanies the supreme delight of clearly perceived reality, reminds us that both states are aspects of a Dionysiac phenomenon: over and over again it shows us the spirit that playfully builds and destroys the world of individuals as the product of a primal pleasure: similarly, dark Heraclitus compares the force that builds worlds to a child placing stones here and there, and building sandcastles and knocking them down again.

Immediately, the strident tones, the emphatic rhythmical cadences, the phrasal flourishes, and rolling clauses of Nietzsche’s sentences evoke the sensual within his metaphorical analogous profusions. This is a writer full of impetuous energy. Nietzsche described Wagner’s ‘disintegration of style’ in dramatic music in similar terms:

[He] emphasises poses [...] he appealed to “beautiful things” and “heaving bosoms” [...] *ancilla dramaturgica* [...] The picturesque pomp and power of tones, the symbolism of sound, rhythm, colours of harmony and disharmony [...] the whole sensuality of music which Wagner has brought into dominance

Nietzsche’s style was from the start metaphoric, and full of passionate Wagnerian flourishes. Sometimes his style reads like a parody of Wagner. The Greek term Dionysus, used throughout Nietzsche’s writings, never remains merely a scholarly reference - it evolves as a

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60 Magee, *Wagner*, p. 298.
psychological type, a metaphor of multifarious meanings, a transfiguring symbol, and a universal icon that becomes a metamorphic signature at the end of his private letters. Nietzsche's relationship with Greek myths is always personal and philosophical, inseparable from the hybridic style of his thinking, the incarnate embodiment of a trapped, and crippled, aesthete.

M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern agree that Nietzsche's treatment of Greek material is far from being a scholarly re-examination:

"In its use of Greek material in particular, it recalls an artist’s use of public property—say, Shakespeare's use of Plutarch [...] BT is to be judged as much by quasi-artistic criteria as by those appropriate to classical scholarship and 'science'."

The work is of a mixed mode between literature and science, and art and thought, representing a radical departure from the historical method of the German philologist, J.J. Winckelmann, who generally perceived of the 'Golden Age' of Greece in classical terms of refined shape and proportioned orientation. Silk and Stern view Nietzsche revealing himself unmistakably a Hellenist in nature, without the appearance of a scholarly defined sense of logic. They regard his style as affected, enhanced by a cumulative force of rhetorical gestures, indirect, complicated, unfamiliar in its deployment of images, and full of romantic aesthetic posturing. However, even though the text seems immature in its lack of unity of content and form, Nietzsche's identification with mythic deities should not be defined as an affected. It is one that matures to intense levels.

Throughout his writings, Nietzsche tries to become the thing that he in life cannot be. Plagued by physical and mental ailments, his cerebral outbursts belie the torments of his destructive isolation. Wandering up the mountains of southern Italy spurred the 'wingbeat' of his romantic longings. Nietzsche seemed to have a clear perception of what the cruel realities

of life could bring to the individual. His enthusiasm and taste for high art were equally fuelled by a desire to escape into the intoxications of aesthetic pleasures. Zarathustra's ascetic wanderings into the mountains and caves of social isolation are personal allusions to Nietzsche's social and spiritual solitude. He acts out through the mythic landscape the primal and instinctive desires of his own life. Jung is right in commenting that Nietzsche is personified as mythic characters, Dionysius, as well as Zarathustra, in a process of artistic sublimation. But, these transfigurations are not poisoned with dogmatic religious terms:

[My] instinct [around 1876] went into the opposite direction from Schopenhauer's: toward a justification of life, even at its most terrible, ambiguous, and mendacious; for this I had the formula "Dionysian". Against the theory that an "in-itself of things" must necessarily be good, blessed, true, and one, Schopenhauer's interpretation of the "in-itself" as will was an essential step; but he did not understand how to deify this will: he remained entangled in the moral-Christian ideal. Schopenhauer was still so much subject to the dominion of Christian values that, as soon as the thing-in-itself was no longer "God" for him, he had to see it as bad, stupid, and absolutely reprehensible. He failed to grasp that there can be an infinite variety of ways of being different, even of being god.62

Within a mythopoeic language, Nietzsche perceives of a transfigurative philosophy that allows for an infinite variety of becoming. He does not identify here with the mythic because he longs to endow himself with the old associated qualities of a mythic language that intimates to the omnipresence of God:

And, like a human being, a people has value only in so far as it can give its experience that stamp of eternity, for in this way it becomes desecularized, and reveals its unconscious inner conviction of the relativity of time and the true, metaphysical meaning of life.63

Despite the fact the Greek term is couched in the rhetoric of an old mythology, as mythic metaphor, the Dionysian appeals instead to the natural nature of Jesus, a becoming self, or

63 Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, p. 111.
transfiguring poet-philosopher, overcoming the general will of an old, tired, and angry world. This is a new psychological non-type to be continually revitalised.

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Language cannot be shorn of its past roots, but mythic language is metaphoric in sense, and so is conducive as a source, allowing the poet to revitalise the old symbols of being, to overthrow the old values that betray the becoming self. Nietzsche is salvaging from the mythic past lost names and types that can be disentangled from the historical web of false values. Nietzsche's perspective on myth is intensely personal, allowing for a more open, metaphoric expression of the self. This conflict between the individual and the collective anticipates the need for metaphoric meaning that is defined within the extremes of mythic use within the next century.
In bearing a set of contrary relationships between its texture, text, and context, T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ is uniquely suspended within the contrary forces of a post-mythic age. The word ‘text’, deriving from its Latin etymology - ‘texere’ or ‘textum’, meaning to weave - implies a piece of woven fabric, or type of cloth, that consists of criss-crossing, interweaving threads to form a patterned whole. Through its fractured texture of juxtaposing fragmentary or disjunctive lines, Eliot’s epic poem gives a surface impression that unhinges a reading process that looks for an unfolding tapestry, or an intricate and complex embroidered canvas tightly woven to form a whole pattern. For W.K. Wimsatt, this was the ‘well-wrought urn’ of poetic design giving itself a self-contained uniform, or coherent, form. Eliot’s technical design though is oddly ‘patterned’ by a diffusive distillation of interweaving, or loose, threads of cultural and literary allusions that the reader is encouraged to trace, when reading beyond its surface disunity to reform a pattern of textual design.

T.S. Eliot in the 1920s, along with I.A. Richards and William Empson, as forebears to New Criticism, made a plea for the ‘ontological critic’. They advocated ‘close reading’ and detailed textual analysis of poetry, rather than an interest in the mind and personality of the poet, sources, the history of ideas and political and social implications. Nonetheless, ‘The Waste Land’ is fundamentally implicated in a complex history of ideas, as any detailed textual analysis will direct the reader outside of the ontological status of the text to an epistemologically loaded context. For central to the ambivalence to the poem’s technical
design, and the modernist response to the collapse of Christianity and the mythic vacuum it left behind at the turn of the twentieth century, are T.S. Eliot's endnotes:

Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge). Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston's book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do; and I recommend it (apart from the interest of the book itself) to any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble. To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly, I mean *The Golden Bough*; I have used especially the volumes of *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*. Anyone who is acquainted with these works will immediately recognize in the poem certain references to vegetation ceremonies.1

The first issue of the quarterly periodical, *The Criterion* (London) in October 1922, Eliot's own magazine, published 'The Waste Land', and the poem had its first American publication in *The Dial* (New York) in November. When the poem appeared in book form, published by Boni & Liveright of New York, on 15 December 1922, Eliot's 52 endnotes were added and they have generally appeared in subsequent editions. What is implied with the inclusion of the endnotes is that an essential relationship exists between the reading of the poem and of anthropological accounts of myth, and the suggestion that the concept of myth was mediated through a 'double-consciousness'.2 Eliot directs the inquisitive reader towards two significant anthropological works on myth.3 Thereafter, it naturally follows that an ideal reading of the poem's fragmented imagery will imply a correlation between its condensed, disjointed,


2 'The double consciousness of living a world view as a world view is importantly encapsulated in modern literary mythopoeia as it unfolds over the course of the century.' Michael Bell, *Literature Modernism and Myth, Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 1. Also see John J. White, *Mythology in the Modern Novel, A Study of Prefigurative Techniques* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 7-8. 'The] increase in anthropological studies has meant that a modern writer now has quantitatively more myths to choose from and qualitatively a greater understanding of them, and can turn to more recondite mythologies, when Greek images have become clichés.'

3 Eliot later remarked, 'I have sometimes thought of getting rid of these notes; but now they can never be unstuck. They have had almost greater popularity than the poem itself.' The author himself acknowledges the problems caused to readers when meaning seems to be at first absent from the poem: 'The] difficulty caused by the author's having left out something which the reader is used to finding; so that the reader, bewildered, gropes about for what is absent, and puzzles his head for a kind of 'meaning' which is not there, and not meant to be there.' Quoted from *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, ed. Richard Ellmann & Robert O'Clair (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973), p. 458.
diffusive, and inverted symbolism, and a type of discourse that, serving as reference points, extraneously frames the textual allusions. The supplied context implies a convenient reading method that is supposed to restore a balance of ordered meaning to the poem’s fractured state.

By 1922, especially with the third edition compressing the twelve volumes into a 756 paged abridged edition, *The Golden Bough* was an all too familiar book, representing a continuation of the tradition of eighteenth-century ‘Enlightenment’:

Many historians and philosophers would say that religion was like magic, a thing of the past. In their view it still survives only among those who belong to a more primitive stage of development. Such indeed appears to be the opinion of Sir James Frazer, the author of *The Golden Bough*, and of Mr. Bertrand Russell [...] It is as impossible for a civilized man to be religious as the orthodox would say it is for a religious man to be a scientist. Religion is then identified with all those theological beliefs and rituals which preceded the conclusions and methods of science

Eliot was well aware that Frazer was expounding a form of anthropological science that was impacting on the feelings, state of minds, and philosophical outlook of individuals within his contemporary culture; and that as organizing principles history, reason, and logic seemed to be failing in the modern world. The exact nature of Frazer’s scientific claims evaded some of Eliot’s contemporaries, but at least Ezra Pound recognized that an understanding of *The Golden Bough* was essential to reading the poem:

As Voltaire was a needed light in the eighteenth century, so in our time Frazer and Fabre have been essential in the mental furnishings of any mind qualified to write of ethics, philosophy or that mixed molasses, religion.

Frazer himself was unable to understand his book’s general effect on modern culture, and to perceive how his comparative method had become integrated into Eliot’s technical design:

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When Denis Saurat, Director of the French Institute, told him about ‘The Waste Land’, in which T.S. Eliot acknowledges his debt to *The Golden Bough*, I started to read the poem to Frazer, but we soon gave up in bewilderment.⁶

Crucially, Eliot saw through Frazer’s scientific objectives and their failings, and saw a link between the crisis of faith and the ‘language-game’ of mythography – a form of anthropological science that demystifies the traditional symbolism of cross-cultural religions, by locating a real social basis of pre-historic ritual behind the actual myths. In doing so, the poem thus signals an advanced awareness in the development of mythic reading, one that reacts to the ‘myth’ of a science that has devalued the sacred element of religious mythology.

Whilst ‘The Waste Land’ reflected the author’s personal despair at a spiritual downfall in a post-mythic age, its technical method simulated the scientific methods of a discourse that was significantly instrumental in the collapse of a traditional symbolic order predicated on a mythic past. This created an ambivalent relationship between the author’s personal intent and the effects of an adapted technical method:

Eliot’s formulation contains a significant ambiguity. Is myth merely a technical method enabling the artist to express the futility and anarchy, or is it a principle of meaning that actually opposes it?⁷

Even if ‘The Waste Land’ parodies the effects of a scientific analysis of myths, the poem is nonetheless implicated in certain effects of a mythographical methodology. By mixing an array of dramatic idioms, Eliot expresses the kind of nihilistic chaos found in the Theatre of the Absurd or Dadaism. Occasionally, Eliot’s own voice appears to penetrate like a Greek chorus through the dramatic movement and dialogue of clashing voices to express our modern hubris. Speaking through the dramatis personae of the blind prophet, Tiresias – bereft of sight by Jove, who throbs between two lives, who perceived the scene, and foresuffered all - Eliot

⁶ Ibid., p. 61. Downie also places the language and imagery of *The Golden Bough* as significant in the influencing of so many poets and writers. For Robert Ackerman, in *J.G. Frazer, His Life and Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), this indicates the ‘literariness’ of Frazer’s work.

⁷ Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth*, p. 122.
seems to be saying: ‘I say you are the murderer you hunt’. After all, it is we who killed the old gods to replace them with new false gods, and now have to breathe this empty space. But, whilst Eliot is looking towards the symbolic past to support a notion of tradition and order, the reader is encouraged to partake in the contrary complications of a contemporary context.

The poem’s ambivalent nature is founded on Eliot’s divided attitude towards James Frazer and Jessie Weston. James Feibleman, writing in 1947 for a journal Eliot himself often contributed to, states why the ‘spectacle’ of mythology (mythological studies) during the modern age had the reverse effect of enlightenment scepticism:

The master-myth is no recent fabrication; indeed, it is no fabrication at all. It is an abstraction from the myths of many times, places, and peoples, made possible by the studies of comparative mythology. The work of Sir James George Frazer, particularly in the twelve volumes of *The Golden Bough*, supplemented by the labours of many other investigators, has made the master-myth clear for us [...] To say that we know mythology in the abstract in the form of the master-myth is not to say that we do not have hold of something concrete. The abstract in this sense is no mere creature of the imagination but the result of the empirical study of many concretions. It represents not a departure from the true nature of actuality but rather the very essence of actuality [...] The master-myth is no mere substitute for particular mythology; it is a guiding force in terms of which the greatest artist could be discovered.

Inspired by the master-myth of *The Golden Bough*, Eliot was attracted to both the qualities of its twentieth-century mythopoeia, as well as its eighteenth-century empirical science. Knowing he was living in an age that was no longer galvanized by myth narratives, it seems peculiar that T.S. Eliot, a developing Christian thinker, should want to be seen allied to the ‘anti-telos’ of modernists. Modernism is generally described as a cultural reaction to a sense of loss when authority has been undermined in religion and morals, and the old accepted standards cannot satisfy a changing age because the fixed canons of taste have lost their validity. Through a deconstructive obsession which devalued the sacred element within the

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mythic, the modernists were distinguished from other periods in their seeking to return to
the past as a way of relocating the present. The deconstructive cult of mythography, by
reconstructing the religious myths as historical sites, posed a serious challenge to the authority
of Christian belief.

Eliot was received into the Church of England in 1927, five years after the first
publication of ‘The Waste Land’ with notes, and for some time before 1922 was sensitive to
how mythography was relativizing the cultural inheritance of Christian symbols. Reviewing
R.G. Collingwood’s Religion and Philosophy in 1917 for the International Journal of Ethics,
Eliot writes:

Religion, on the other hand, or at least the Christian religion, depends upon one
important fact. Philosophy may show, if it can, the meaning of the statement that Jesus
was the son of God. But Christianity – orthodox Christianity – must base itself upon a
unique fact: that Jesus was born of a virgin: a proposition which is either true or false,
its terms have a fixed meaning. It seems therefore insufficient to claim, what seems to
be the extent of Mr. Collingwood’s historical demands, that Jesus was an historical
person.

In questioning the contemporary trends in the philosophy of religion, it is evident Eliot held
an advanced theological understanding that the Bible was not to be solely judged according to
its mythical symbolism, and that the object of faith was not in accordance with historical
reconstructions. The spread of scientific knowledge and of naturalistic philosophy, which
questioned the evidence for the miraculous disappearance of Jesus’ body and the basis of
belief in Christ’s resurrection and immortality, caused a prevalent state of disbelief and
uncertainty. This subsequently created an age manifestly divided against itself in its

10 See Jeffrey M. Perl, The Tradition of Return, The Implicit History of Modern Literature (Princeton, New
no. 4 (1917), p. 543.
estimation of religion. The resultant crisis of faith caused some theologians to feel that it left the 'liberal Christian' with only two theological options:

The Christian theologian stands, at the end of the nineteenth-century, at the parting of ways. Only two paths are open for him. He must either turn his back on the so called higher criticism which Germany has brought upon us, reassert the supernatural, the miraculous, origin of Christianity, the continuity and completeness of Christian tradition, the self-intelligibility of Christian teaching, with all that this involves, and in this way try to establish the finality of Christian ideals; or else he must become a complete rationalist, must prove that his ideals are valid because they satisfy the rigorous claims of reason.

In 1949, in his preface to Simone Weil's *The Need for Roots, Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, Eliot was to assert a similar line of argument:

For people who are really uprooted there remain only two possible sorts of behaviour: either to fall into a spiritual lethargy resembling death, like the majority of the slaves in the days of the Roman Empire, or to hurl themselves into some form of activity necessarily designed to uproot, often by the most violent methods, those who are not uprooted, or only partly so.

Eliot's theological development up to the publication of 'The Waste Land' demonstrates an attitude towards religious belief that is mindful of the reductionist effects of anthropological studies on ritual, myth and religion. However, with the endnotes encouraging similar deconstructive tendencies, Eliot's disapproval of mythography's cultural after-effects runs counter to the poem's textual design. A poem caught between two contrary informing forces thus created a suspended text that was theologically reflective of the dismantling of Christian myth, and expressive of a personal need to be reconnected to the outward signs of a traditional order of religious symbolism, whilst at the same time reproducing the effects of the enlightenment ideals of German higher criticism, of which *The Golden Bough* was an

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empirical development. In other words, Eliot’s technical method places ‘The Waste Land’ into the language-game of *The Golden Bough*. To gauge the ambivalent nature of the poem’s textual status, it is necessary to assess the epistemological implications of Frazer’s ‘comparative method’ and to take into account Eliot’s position vis-à-vis mythography as a site of scientific falsehood.

Frazer’s journey of anthropological study takes the reader back to a place called Nemi, near Rome, where there was a shrine down to imperial times, and Diana, goddess of woodlands and animals and giver of offspring, was worshipped with a male consort, Virbius. The rule of the shrine was that any man could be its priest and take the title King of the Wood, provided he first plucked a branch – the golden bough – from a certain sacred tree in the temple grove and then killed the priest;

In the sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day, and probably far into the night, a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer, and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. Such was the rule of the sanctuary. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he himself was slain by a stronger or a craftier.16

This is how Frazer famously begins to describe the regular mode of succession to the priesthood of Diana at Nemi. The singular aim of *The Golden Bough* is to try to answer the question: why did the priest have to kill his predecessor? *The Golden Bough* begins by recalling the tragic memories from the lake of Nemi: ‘the dark crimes which under the mask of religion were often perpetrated there.’17 This is the place where once a candidate for priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest. Explaining the rule of succession involves a comparative method linking the tragic crime at Nemi to other customs


throughout human history:

The strange rule of this priesthood has no parallel in classical antiquity, and cannot be explained from it. To find an explanation we must go farther afield. No one will probably deny that such a custom savours of a barbarous age, and, surviving into imperial times, stands out in striking isolation from the polished Italian society of the day, like a praeval rock rising from a smooth-shaven lawn."\(^{18}\)

The motive inferred from the killing of the priest is shown to have operated widely, producing in varied circumstances a variety of institutions. The successive volumes adduce more and more evidence of a worldwide evolution towards a heightened cosmic level of worship away from the brutalities of earlier totemic worshipping. The sacrificial doctrines of Christianity, together with the doctrines of the Incarnation, and of the Virgin Birth and Resurrection, are causally related in the development from magic to religion:

In his character of the founder of the sacred grove and first king to Nemi, Virbius is clearly the mythical predecessor or archetype of the line of priests who served Diana under the title of Kings of the Wood, and who came [...] to a violent end."\(^{19}\)

In ‘The King of the Wood’, Frazer sets out the rule of the Priesthood of Nemi in similar terms of ritualistic sacrifice: ‘In antiquity this sylvan landscape was the scene of a strange and recurring tragedy."\(^{20}\) In ‘The Dying God’, the link between the king and nature is made stronger via the identification with a god. A feeble old king will not be able to perform his proper functions of safeguarding the course of nature, because, on the principle of contagion, his feebleness will threaten nature’s fertility. Therefore, he must give way to a successor who, by killing him, demonstrates his own better ability to perform the duties of kingship: ‘Le roi est mort, vive le roi’. Frazer collects, and compares, various cross-cultural analogies to the custom of Nemi; the story of Christ’s death and resurrection is paralleled with this pattern of

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 12.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., pp. 14-15.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 9.
sacrifice and renewal, with the mockery of Christ compared to the mockery of the king of Sacaea, and the Jewish practice of putting to death annually a man in the character of Haman. To explain Christ's subsequent deification and worship, Frazer sees God's exalted son as representative of a god whose counterparts were well known all over Western Asia.21

Influential to Frazer, in his writing of *The Golden Bough*, was William Robertson Smith's idea of a dying god. In *The Religion of the Semites* (1888), Smith gives an examination of an ancient religion that concentrates on ritual, and which was largely totemic and sacrificial in character. Frazer was fascinated by the idea of an animal or man being regarded as divine to the worshippers, and of whose flesh and blood they sometimes partook as a solemn form of communion with the deity:

Smith, then, placed the study of primitive religious ritual in the forefront of scholarly consciousness by asserting that the rite in antiquity took the place of creed [...] The myths only offered explanations of what the worshiping community was doing in its rituals but were not binding in a doctrinal sense on the worshiper, and therefore he was not disturbed by varying interpretations of the same rite (although he was intensely disturbed by the varying performances of it).22

In the most notable form of Semitic sacrifice, the tribe consumed the sacrificial animal-victim, which was ordinarily their taboo divine totem-brother. In 1888, when Frazer wrote the articles on Totemism for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Smith encouraged him to analyze the origins of ritual institutions by consulting analogies in the usages of early people. The ninth edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* was the high-water mark of Victorian rationalism:

They [Victorian rationalists] assume the assent of all educated persons to a single substantive conception of rationality [...] They understood the outcome of allegiance to the standards and methods of such a rationality to be the elaboration of a comprehensive, rationally incontestable scientific understanding of the whole, in which the architectonic of the sciences matched the cosmos [...] They saw their whole mode of life, including their conceptions of rationality and of science, as part of a history of inevitable progress, judged by a standard of progress which had emerged from that history. The progress of science and reason had on their view been uneven,

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21 See 'The Crucifixion of Christ' chapter, pp. 666-676.

22 Robert Ackerman, 'Frazer on Myth and Ritual', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 36, p. 120.
interrupted by external factors; but rupture and discontinuity were always the result of temporary alien intrusion into that history.  

Frazer turned his attention to the Graeco-Latin tradition, rather than the Judaic. His earliest attempt at anthropology was to demonstrate totemism's ubiquity throughout the primitive world, and how it was possible to discern traces in the religious observances of ancient Israel, Greece, and Rome. Smith wanted to prove that Judaism had evolved from magic to the worship of one God, that bloody sacrifice gave way to the repentance of a humble heart, and that the slain animal representing the community god gave way to a spiritual worship. This thematic pattern of slain god, mimed death, and revival, within initiation ceremonies, totemic rites, and sacrifices, was to be repeated in Frazer's work, where religions are viewed as based on symbolic customs which established a close communion between worshippers and their priest god. Frazer saw the study of ancient rituals as shedding light on classical literature, and then under the influence of Smith he attempted to read backward, through myths as classical symbolic tales, to reconstruct the actual reality of the antecedent ritual.

Frazer adopted the main tenet of the Cambridge School of anthropologists that rite in antiquity took the place of creed. In other words, myths had grown up as elaborations upon rituals:

'Ritualism' is the theory that derives myth, and in consequence literature and folklore influenced by myth, from antecedent ritual performances, usually from the agricultural magical sort.

This anthropological approach saw myths derive from a prior human stage in cultural evolution - the ritual, which was fixed as an obligatory rite, whereas myths - as variable accounts or fables - consist of explanations, or unconscious interpretations, of these preceding rituals. Frazer is referred to as a 'euhemerist' - a mythographer who views myths as not the

24 Ackerman, ‘Frazer on Myth and Ritual’, p. 115.
stuff of mystical fancy, but rooted in a real social milieu. Mythic tales are not seen as fictional but organically evolved human stories relating indirectly to a primal deed:

Such fables contain a deeper philosophy of the relation of the life of man to the life of nature - a sad philosophy which gave birth to a tragic practice.\(^\text{25}\)

For Frazer, the many fables of classical antiquity are the retelling of the same practice, sustaining the story of the primal motive in the killing of the priest. Frazer is a rationalist reformulating 'myth', with the reliance on fertility magic in myth, as a kind of rudimentary error: killing the god was thought to affect a renewal of the crops. And Frazer is a euhemerist too in viewing the god as originally a king or magician, or a sacred personage crucial to the well being of the tribe. The god then became a primal father deified, and the hidden meaning of myth lies in the cycle of vegetation, where the community depends on the sacred personage for its own survival:

Wherever, as in Japan and West Africa, it is supposed that the order of nature, and even the existence of the world, is bound up with the life of the king or priest, it is clear that he must be regarded by his subjects as a source both of infinite blessing and of infinite danger. On the one hand, the people have to thank him for the rain and sunshine which foster the fruits of the earth, for the wind which brings ships to their coasts, and even for the solid ground beneath their feet. But what he gives he can refuse; and so close is the dependence of nature on his person, so delicate the balance of the system of forces whereof he is center, that the least irregularity on his part may set up a tremor which shall shake the earth to its foundations.\(^\text{26}\)

The antecedent ritual performance within an agricultural magical community was the site of the original deed from which derived the historical continuity of further symbolic practices. The original sense of these rituals was then to be forgotten or misunderstood through myth:

\text{It needs no elaborate demonstration to convince us that the stories told to account for Diana's worship at Nemi are unhistorical. Clearly they belong to that large class of}


\(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 138.
myths which are made up to explain the origin of a religious ritual and have no other foundation than the resemblance, real or imaginary, which may be traced between it and some foreign ritual. The incongruity of these Nemi myths is indeed transparent, since the foundation of the worship is traced now to Orestes and now to Hippolytus, according as this or that feature of the ritual has to be accounted for. The real value of such tales is that they serve to illustrate the nature of worship by providing a standard with which to compare it; and further, that they bear witness indirectly to its venerable age by shewing that the true origin was lost in the mists of a fabulous antiquity.27

Later mythic examples of ritualistic sacred killings are viewed as connected to the motives inferred from the crime at Nemi. Therefore the genesis and perpetuation of religion is seen to be based on the ritual events of primitives. So, it is here that the origins of gods are also to be found:

Men mistook the order of their ideas for the order of nature, and hence imagined that the control which they have, or seemed to have, over their thoughts, permitted them to exercise a corresponding control over things. The men who for one reason or another, because of the strength or the weakness of their natural parts, were supposed to possess these magical powers in the highest degree, were gradually marked off from their fellows and became a separate class, who were destined to exercise a most far-reaching influence on the political, religious, and intellectual evolution of mankind. Social progress, as we know, consists mainly in a successive differentiation of functions, or, in simple language, a division of labour.28

The anthropological study of customs, derived from field research into contemporary atavistic societies, provided the empirical evidence for understanding the origins of ritualistic customs. Regarded as survival forms, they were representative of the beginnings of an intellectual evolution.

In shifting his attention to finding the origin and meaning of myth in its relation to ritual, Frazer thinks that the killing of the priest formed an obligatory rite in the social organization of totemistic cultures. Diana was not a mere goddess of trees, but a personification of the teeming life of nature, both animal and vegetable, a deity of the woods, a patron of the beasts of the wood, both game and cattle. For Frazer, these customs originated

27 Ibid., p. 15.
28 Ibid., p. 75.
in a philosophy of magic, where the savage explains the process of inanimate nature by supposing that they are produced by living beings working in/behind the phenomena. Frazer takes this as meaning that in its origin the belief was the indirect consequence of utilitarian functions – 'for the sake of some ulterior yet perfectly definite and concrete object [or] for the sake of food.'29 The savage projected unconsciously onto the universe his own implicit consciousness of reality, regarding all natural objects as animated and intelligent beings, and was readily persuaded that men may be metamorphosed into plants, beasts, or stars. In his society, the savage based his laws on the well-defined lines of totemism - deriving sacredness from a close relation to natural objects and the sanction of marriage prohibitions and blood feuds. The irrational element of superstition later extended into the mythical adventures of the gods of the Greeks, Romans, Aryans of India, and the Egyptians of the Ptolemaic age, where they were seen as metamorphoses of men into animals, trees, and stars. For Frazer then: ritual begets myth.

The fertility god or goddess is embodied in the example of the Phoenician/Greek story of Adonis - which Frazer takes to be analogous to the story of Osiris. Adonis is mortally wounded by a wild bear, and is subsequently revived as god by Aphrodite, who wishes to ensure that each year he will be reborn in the spring to be with her. Frazer associates the cult of Adonis, a god of the ancient Mediterranean, with the death of nature in autumn and its revival in spring. His dying preserves the reproductive power of nature, with the ceremony of his death and resurrection dramatically representing the decay and revival of plant life.30 Frazer demonstrates how the old magical theory of the seasons was displaced, or supplemented, by a religious theory. Under the names of different gods, in different cultures of Egypt and Western Asia, the yearly decay and revival of vegetable life was personified as a god, who annually died and rose again from the dead. ‘In name and detail the rites varied

29 Ibid., p. 105.
30 Ibid., p. 333.
from place to place: in substance they were the same. Frazer also goes on to conclude that effigies of the dead Christ emulate Pagan ritual customs of the past, honouring the cyclical continuation of vegetable life:

When we reflect how often the Church has skilfully contrived to plant the seeds of the new faith on the old stock of paganism, we may surmise that the Easter celebration of the dead and risen Christ was grafted upon a similar celebration of the dead and risen Adonis.

For Frazer, Attis, as a god of vegetation, transformed into a tree-spirit, or other human representations, in Oriental religions of the East, inspired other spurious Christian imitations. ‘Taken altogether, the coincidences of the Christian with the heathen festivals are too close and too numerous to be accidental.’ And the most popular of all Egyptian deities, Osiris, the Corn-god of fertility, who is said to die and come to life again every year, was an emblem and an instrument of resurrection:

In the resurrection of Osiris the Egyptians saw the pledge of a life everlasting for themselves beyond the grave. They believed that every man would live eternally in the other world if only his surviving friends did for his body what the gods had done for the body of Osiris.

The meaning of such a ritual is fertility, and this is linked with the rule of Nemi.

Therefore, magic is principal to the concept of the dying god, and is the origin of all myth making and all religion, with nature conceived as an impersonal force, to be manipulated. By ‘sympathetic’ magic, the death and revival of the god parallels, or causes, the renewal of the land. For example, to induce rain, water is poured onto the ground. By ‘contagious’ magic, the god becomes a ‘scapegoat’ figure, who carries away the sterility,

31 Ibid., p. 301.
32 Ibid., p. 343.
33 Ibid., p. 364.
34 Ibid., p. 372.
which might otherwise blight the crops. Only through this violent succession can the fertility of the land be ensured. Therefore, there exists a vital magical connection between the drama of the dying and reviving god and the seasonal cycle:

In short, magic is a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as well as an abortive art. Regarded as a system of natural law, that is, as a statement of the rules which determine the sequence of events throughout the world, it may be called Theoretical Magic: regarded as a set of precepts which human beings observe in order to compass their ends, it may be called Practical Magic [...] the primitive magician knows only magic on its practical side; he never analyses the mental processes on which his practice is based, never reflects on the abstract principles involved in his actions.35

Magic is relevant to answering the question, why did the king have to die, and illuminates the role of the King of the Wood - for magic is a means of controlling nature. Frazer’s theory is that myth developed as a way of explaining and justifying ritual, which in turn acted upon philosophical assumptions deeply embedded within the mind. Man viewed nature with a set of irrational presumptions, and from this created an elaborate code of rituals, which are subsequently inherited by mythic narratives. For many anthropologists, like Andrew Lang, the killing of the priest was an irrational element within an earlier superstitious philosophy:

We regard low savages as very irrational and debased characters, consequently the nature of their myths does not surprise us. Their religious conception, however, of a ‘father’ or ‘Master of Life’ seems out of keeping with the nature of the savage mind as we understand it.36

Their intellectual powers were undeveloped, and most anthropologists regarded the hasty analogy made from their own unreasoned consciousness as their chief guide to surviving the natural forces of their changing environment. This ‘silly, savage, and irrational’ element

36 Andrew Lang, Myth, Ritual & Religion, Vols. I-II 1913 (London: Senate, Studio Editions, 1955), pp. 4–5. Lang, for obvious racial reasons, has difficulty in accepting, unlike Frazer, that orthodox religions derived from a Greek heritage are in any way evolved from a lower base of ‘superstitious’ evolution. For some Victorians, the idea that religious figures like Christ could have been born out of common level of philosophical progress was horrific to say the least. This is why Frazer, like Darwin, was nervous for the publication of his own work, and in later editions censored parts that obviously had given offence to his Victorian public.
survived in myth in the form of animism or analogous imitation.

Like other anthropologists, Frazer adopted voguish notions of historical inheritance. Jean-Baptiste de Monnet Lamarck, the French evolutionist, devoted himself to the traditional doctrine of the 'Great Chain of Being'. For him, nature was a graded series of natural types, arranged in order: from the simplest and most microscopic, to the largest and most complicated. Lamarck regarded evolution as an escalator where nature was endlessly on the move, and all creatures were caught up in the struggle to become as complicated as men. Two natural forces directed this onward and upward progress: the inherent drive towards increasing complexity, a higher stage of development, and the shaping power of the environment. Lamarck's theory was the most influential of all evolutionary theories until Darwin. In 1844, the publication of The Vestiges of the Natural History of the Creation, by the Scot Robert Chambers, gave further evidence of an unceasing transformation of what God had created at the beginning of time. But many social evolutionists took this as evidence to support their Lamarckian claims of a unilinear progress of humanity. With this framework, Frazer confidently argues that consciousness itself is also the product of a lengthy evolution. Like artifacts and institutions, primitive mentality represents one point low down on the developmental line. To explain that the ritual at Nemi was not automatically effective as a magic rite, Frazer resolves to discover the characteristic primitive way of thinking, and his anthropological method gave him the technique to do so.

The leading work of anatomists, zoologists, embryologists and linguists also adopted comparative methods of historical study to explain the differing forms of inheritance. In 1856, F. Max Muller (1823-1900), Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, in his essay, 'Comparative Mythology', used comparative Indo-European philology to give a historical understanding of the origins and meanings of myths. Like other anthropologist, or folklorists, Frazer was adapting evolutionary theories to recover the prehistory of mankind, by starting with a fundamental premise of the Enlightenment that unity exists among humanity, that similarities among cultures outweigh the dissimilarities. Robert Tylor had postulated the existence of an
organic law of development and progress operative in the growth of human institutions, and used the word ‘survivals’ to describe the notion of traits to pass on in time in other forms. Frazer too regarded human nature and development as relatively homogeneous, by demonstrating through artifacts and behavioral observations the historical existence of links in the evolutionary chain. The German folklorist Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831-80) theorized less than Tylor, and instead gathered empirical folkloric evidence by collecting and classifying hundreds of examples of the behavior of contemporary European peasants. Frazer extolled his work, and it became the source of a cardinal methodological tenet, ‘the law of similarity’.

Through this rationale of deductive and inductive thinking, Frazer had constructed a grand design, or an overarching metaphor of human development. Deductively, Frazer imitates Darwin’s method of gathering a vast range of empirical data, and inductively, he then collates the factual material - cross-cultural myths - to construct a grand theory that competes with Darwin’s theory of natural selection.37 By conceiving causal interconnections between disparate cultural sites of myth, and by explaining why the priest had to die, Frazer was expressing the triumph of scientific rationalism over the supernaturalism of religious myth. For the great anthropological detective, progress is measured by how much humanity has moved away from its irrational intimations towards the spiritual.38 The hermeneutics of mythic stories are really bound to a social basis, dispelling the fantasy and fancy of myths. Because the religious is a throwback to magical incongruities of logic, one is therefore led to believe that one should abandon one’s spiritual faith.

For the empirical philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the ‘synthetic’ design of such grand historical empiricism was impressive in the magnitude of its sources, but the inherent

37 See Rebecca Stott, *Darwin and the Barnacle* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), pp. xx-xxiii. She recounts how Charles Darwin spent eight years from 1846-54, collecting, dissecting, analysing and classifying barnacles after their discovery in January 1835 during his Beagle voyage on a Chilean beach. He carried 1,529 species bottled in wine spirits back to London in 1836. The deductive method helped him formulate and sketch out his theory in essay form when he discovered how divergent was the anatomy of the Chilean barnacle, called Mr. Arthrobalanus, from hundreds of other varieties. Marine zoology began in Edinburgh in 1825, and comparative anatomy was key to solving the riddle of evolution. Jean-Baptiste Lamarck claimed in 1809 that invertebrates were the key to understanding how all higher forms had evolved.

38 Frazer presents himself initially in the persona of a detective by posing the question of what is the motive for the priest having to die.
logic of its comparative method presumed too much in its capacity to unravel the symbolic riddle of varying cultural myths. Because it transposes the peculiar nature of mythic symbols out of their original context of human practice, the inductive process of Frazer’s grand research presumes an all-inclusivity of enquiry. In terms of symbolic similarities, Frazer’s theory is built on defining ‘natural connections’ in the context of evolutionary causality. So, for Wittgenstein, Frazer’s empiricism is ultimately limited by the way in which comparisons are made:

Even the idea of trying to explain the practice – say the killing of the priest-king - seems to me wrong-headed. All that Frazer does is to make these practices plausible to people who think as he does. It is very queer that all these practices are finally presented, so to speak, as stupid actions.

But it never does become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity. When he explains to us, for example, that the king must be killed in his prime because, according to notions of the savages, his soul would be kept fresh otherwise, we can only say: where that practice and these views go together, the practice does not spring from the view, but both of them are there.

It may happen, as it often does today, that someone will give up a practice when he has seen that something on which it depended is an error. But this happens only in cases where you can make a man change his way of doing things simply by calling his attention to his error. This is not how it is in connexion with the religious practices of a people; and what we have here is not an error.39

For Wittgenstein, Frazer was mistaken in thinking that a historical reconstruction could enable a religious-ritual’s beginnings to be traced to therefore explain the origin or motive of its festival, and so give reason to its expressive significance. Wittgenstein is questioning a tradition of analysis in which the concept of causality is used as a primary tool to show the ‘intentionality’ of the original deed – in the case the murder of the priest. By transposing the means of analysis to other domains, in this case a symbolic realm of human practices, Frazer is using similar terms, like utility, to determine how universal laws underpin human development, which in turn determine the validity of his comparisons. Within its causal

antecedent of a festival lies the myth's meaning or implied inner nature. As Frank Cioffi points out, Wittgenstein's attack on Frazer amounts to an attack on the causal account of history when applied to non-factual experiences. \(^\text{40}\) Wittgenstein often refuses to evaluate Christianity in rational terms:

Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather: believe, through thick and thin, which you can do only as a result of a life. \(^\text{41}\)

Wittgenstein does not treat religion primarily as a system of representation whose falseness or delusional character might be demonstrated in terms of objective reason. \(^\text{42}\) Frazer’s method involves reductionist causal explanation in the sense that religious phenomena are simplified without taking into account a different kind of ‘language-game’. By linking the myth to its origins, the sinister nature can be explained. \(^\text{43}\) Wittgenstein’s objections echo Eliot’s views on the philosophy of religion, when the poet contrasts the passion experienced in ritual action with the vapidity of a megalopolitan existence. \(^\text{44}\)

Frazer’s method of anthropology belongs to the later phase of English enlightenment thinking that developed from seminal works like David Hume’s *Natural History of Religion*, in which religious belief is equated too with a magical view of nature, and the unknown causes of a physical habitat are generally confused through the imagination:

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There is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious [...] Nor is a river-god or hamadryad always taken for a mere poetical or imaginary personage; but may sometimes enter into the real creed of the ignorant vulgar, while each grove or field is represented as possessed of a particular genius or invisible power, which inhabits and protects them.45

Hume also subjects the rational basis of religious belief to severe criticism, showing that it is without evidential support.46 But, Hume’s criticism of the ‘ignorant vulgar’ extends to ‘general thinkers’ who indulge in a fallacy of the general, abusing the empirical rules in the comparative discovering of natural or causal connections. In other words, empirical theories can be imaginative as well. In the case of Frazer, by returning to a historical beginning, or final-cause, he presumes it is possible to reconstruct a constant motive through a network of mythological variations. Each comparative point is investigated in a deductive manner as if factual material in a zoological schema like Darwin’s barnacles; and then the evolutionary scheme, which presumes a general structural pattern innate to historical development, is inductively figured to create a grand narrative of human development. According to Wittgenstein, Frazer is profoundly enmeshed in what he called ‘grammatical confusions’, because ingrained in his own habits of thinking there is a tendency to construct a symmetrical theory that is blind to the flawed empirical premises that underpin his world-view:

Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages, for these savages will not be so far from any understanding of spiritual matters as an Englishman of the twentieth century. His explanations of the primitive observances are much cruder than the sense of the observances themselves.

An historical explanation, an explanation as an hypothesis of the development, is only one kind of summary of the data – of their synopsis. We can equally well see the data in their relations to one another and make a summary of them in a general picture without putting it in the form of an hypothesis regarding the temporal development.

Identifying one’s own god with the gods of other peoples. One becomes convinced that the names have the same meaning.47


47 Wittgenstein, Bemerkungen über Frazer’s Golden Bough, p. 8e.
The shared belief in an assumed logic of scientific investigation took on wider perspectives beyond the minutiae of rock or plant formations, and with it evolved the myth that rationalism could subject a mythological history over-reaching all cultural differences to the same laws of science. Frazer believed he could discover in a ‘perspicuous way’ the priest’s motives, by arranging that the mythic data pass easily from one analogous part to another. Seduced by the rhetoric of a prevalent logic, the anthropologist was, therefore, tempted to view the spiritual as a natural process to be made explicit in rational terms. Wittgenstein reacts to a ‘destructive positivist’ method that denies the distinctive significance of human practices that are not governed by factual concerns. So, in turn, Frazer’s mythography is accused of being a form of historicism that collapses under the weight of its own rationale, where the causal inferences it is dependent upon have no objective external justification. For Wittgenstein, each mode of human thought should be accepted on its own terms, justified by its own internal standards.

So, given the epistemological context that framed the spiritual crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is odd that T.S. Eliot would draw upon a type of scholarly research that aimed to destabilize the sacred element of myths. It suggests that Eliot took Frazer’s conclusions too much to heart. The poem’s conflict of interests began when he adopted from Frazer a concept of historical paralleling that Eliot thought the contemporary artist should exploit:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history [....] Psychology [...]. Psychology, ethnology, and The Golden Bough have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method.48

Eliot's notion of manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity is similar to a view expressed in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent':

And he [the poet] is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.49

For Eliot, Joyce's 'mythical method' seemed to offer the appropriate technique of developing a set of images that could relate the past and present. This was essential if the poet was to respond to a complex age. Joyce's method is also allied to Frazer's scientific method that arranges/orders a view of the history of mythical and religious ritualism to create an overarching metaphor of human development. In terms of literary innovation, Eliot praised Joyce's mythic narrative because of its significant paralleling of the classical age and the contemporary, enabling the chaos of futility and anarchy to be shaped to give it an order. But, the mythic method fits uneasily with Eliot's concept of tradition and order, because it fails to give the present a symbolic continuity.

Joyce renders in *Ulysses* a continuous parallel by ironically echoing narrative events in Homer's epic, *The Odyssey*. For example, when an Irish nationalist in a pub in Dublin racially taunts Leopold Bloom - the everyman and noman, the drifter without family or function - for his Jewish ethnicity, Joyce makes numerous references to blindness and the eye:

I was just passing the time of day with Old Troy of the D. M.P. at the corner of the Arbour hill there and be damned but a bloody sweep came along and he near drove his gear into my eye.50

The parallel to Ulysses' confrontation with the Cyclops, when he escapes death by blinding the creature in his one and only eye, is intended to mock the mythic myopia of Irish

49 Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Prose*, p. 44.
nationalism - 'the tribal images or many Irish heroes and heroines of antiquity'.51 Joyce's mock-heroic technique extends to the narrator when describing the pub boor in obnoxious terms to parallel the mythic monster:

The figure seated on a large boulder at the foot of a round tower was that of a broadshouldered deepchested stronglimbed frankeyed redhaired freely freckled shaggybearded widemouthed largenosed longheaded deepvoiced barekneed brawnyhanded hairylegged ruddyfaced, sinewyarmed hero.52

As David Hayman points out, Joyce inverts Homer with the Jew as an uninvited guest to Ireland, and with the citizen representing a belligerent self-pitying nationalism generated by a hypocritical and self-serving morality.53 Joyce's 'mythical method' creates a dual micro/macro narrative, implying that through every living aspect of the everyman, back to the dawn of Homer's epic, runs the eternal stream of historical consciousness. The scaffold of myth provided by Homer frames the daily events portrayed in the novel to suggest that the present continually resonates with echoes from the mythic past. But, even though the novel simulates the mythic pattern of the homecoming through Mrs Bloom's final invocation of bodily pleasures, echoing the maternal womb of our mythic origins, it is through the comic parallel of Mrs Bloom as the adulteress - who is unfaithful to her wandering husband, and therefore dissimilar to Penelope (her Homeric equivalent) - that Joyce's 'mythical method' becomes more a burlesque of obfuscated allusions undercutting the mythical underpinnings of Irish nationalism. Joyce does not intentionally mock, or imitate, the mythographical method to express the despair of historical discontinuity in terms of a loss of tradition and symbolic order, but rather his multiple allusions are there to generate a range of comic effects.

Eliot, on the other hand, conscious of a break existing between contemporaneity and antiquity, caused by a pervasive loss of mythic roots, adopts Joyce's technique of 'continuous

51 Ibid., p. 284.
52 Ibid.
paralleling', interweaving the dying god theme into the present, to express a state of symbolic nihilism. The opening lines of the poem, by invoking an unnatural disruption of seasonal renewal and fertility, reveal the discordant effects of this rupture:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.\textsuperscript{54}

The cruel month of April is oxymoronic and breeding lilacs out of the dead land is contradictory, because in terms of agrarian husbandry impossible. Furthermore, being warmed by the winter is a reversal of our natural expectations. In fact, the general effect of the poem's disjunctive imagery implies a prevailing reversal of our natural expectations. When the symbolism is elucidated, via Frazer, an inverted pattern of vegetation myths is made apparent. If the reader literally takes up Eliot's helpful directive it soon becomes apparent that spring rain was principal in renewing the land after the hardships of the winter: stirring the dull roots, rekindling the little life within the dried tubers, and breeding lilacs out of the dead, infertile land. Frazer's priest of Nemi is the human-god, the symbol of magical renewal that the local agrarian community view, through their own science of magic, as causally connected to economic prosperity. If the crops fail, or the priest is frail, then a new candidate for the magical position must kill the old priest and pluck a golden bough from a tree in the woodlands of the goddess of Diana. Throughout the history of vegetation ceremonies, the symbolism of hope through agrarian renewal was acted out.

Levenson has argued in the opening lines that 'we have no single common feature connecting all the lines: one principle of continuity gives way to the next.'\textsuperscript{55} There is, though,

\textsuperscript{54} Eliot, \textit{The Waste Land and Other Poems}, lines 1-7, p. 23.
an overlapping principle in this part that is to be found in Frazer, and one that Eliot subverts to create a set of disturbed or perverted parallels. For Frazer, in agrarian communities the economic dependence on crop renewal encouraged the practice of rituals to magically inspire growth. Eliot instead inverts the magical principle of the vegetation myth to invoke a nomenclature of wastage—a heterogeneous scene of unnatural relationships divested of the necessary symbolic roots of fecundity and renewal. Eliot employs a range of vegetation images that are suggestive of Frazer's anthropological ideas in *The Golden Bough*: Earth, April, breeding, bloom, land, life, summer, winter dawn, roots, spring rain, feeding, planted, garden, grow, sprout, dig it up, sunlight, branches, sound of water, and shower of rain. This vision of seasonal change and agrarian rejuvenation is qualified by a set of opposing connotations to overturn the beneficial outcomes of primitive rituals: dull roots, dead land, cruellest month, dried tubers, dry stone, no sound of water, stony rubbish, dead trees give no shelter, handful of dust, dead sound, corpse planted last year in your garden, sudden frost, drowned, death by water. Eliot's phrase 'dead tree' (line 23) recalls Frazer's chapter 'The Worship of Trees' in which he discusses how in the religious history of the Ayran race in Europe the prevalence of tree-worship is linked to the idea that trees were supposed to provide rain and sunshine, and the tree-spirits to make the crops grow and grant offspring. Customs like the May-tree and May-pole in England are a part of the beneficent qualities ascribed to tree-spirits or other vegetation-spirits that are represented in human form.\footnote{Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, pp. 82-97.} The reference to the 'Son of man' (line 20) underlines how Eliot's set of vegetation images are linked to Frazer's idea of the deification of human sacrifice to redeem and secure the land. When added to a modern urban vision of London, through which he reiterates the feelings of death and loss, Eliot evokes a pervasive effect—that what we have lost is a tradition of historical continuity that connects the individual to the symbolism of a mythic past. The first

month of spring has naturally been expressed by various poets as the harbinger of joy and with other positive sensations of renewal.\textsuperscript{57} Eliot exploits instead the sensation of despair when rain is denied, so bringing drought, famine, blight and dearth within the promise of spring. Despite the negative inversion, rain is for Eliot a positive trope due to its mythological heritage. Traditionally, the experience of rain has evoked a set of mixed sensations amongst poets.\textsuperscript{58} Death and rain/water dominate the poem and Eliot is clearly relating the experience of agrarian death with other symbolic signifiers of death or sterility, parallels that repeat Frazer’s anthropological explanation of the magical causality behind seasonal rituals.\textsuperscript{59} So, from a context of mythography that demonstrates how the ritual theme of growth and renewal is integral to the theme of resurrection, Eliot dismantles a thematic pattern of myth to display instead the anarchic signs of a symbolic rupture.\textsuperscript{60}

Drawing from a range of cultural sources, Eliot depicts a vision of symbolic severance in cultural history; isolated from their original contexts, cultural artefacts are reduced to loose discrete textual elements, or disjunctive threads of cultural influence. Eliot is performing in his textual design a similar act of cultural dismantlement, breaking down the corpus of cultural continuity into the minutiae of imagistic fragments. And as buried textual allusions, they remain incomplete within the main body of the poem - singular, and spatial. Their intended signification is only made apparent when the reader has elucidated their inverted symbolism via a truncated appendix that opens up to an encyclopaedic library of Europe’s cultural past. Out of this induced reading method, one is reforming a sense of order from the broken imagery of the present to the past - a form of cultural exchange, or modern restitution.

\textsuperscript{57} ‘The sweetest thing, I thought / At one time, between earth and heaven / Was the first smile / When mist has been forgiven / And the sun has stolen out’, ‘April’ (1915), Edward Thomas, \textit{Collected Poems}, ed. R. George Thomas (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 70.

\textsuperscript{58} See Edward Thomas’ ‘Rain’ (1916).

\textsuperscript{59} In ‘What the Thunder Said’, ‘water’ is repeated ten times, ‘rain’ three times, and ‘spring’ twice. In ‘The Burial of the Dead’, the word ‘rain’ is repeated twice, and ‘dead’ with ‘death’ seven times. Part V recalls the sterility of Part I but there is a stronger tone of frustration that is momentarily relieved.

\textsuperscript{60} ‘The Burial of the Dead’ refers to the rites of the Church of England, and \textit{The Book of Common Prayer}, hinting at the need for renewal in the religious sense of resurrection.
similar to the anthropological method, that reads historical development out of 'survival forms' – contemporary traces/relics to older forms. Eliot uses the textual allusions discreetly to obscure their inter-textual connection. This invites the reader to reinvest order and meaning out of an assembling process and to return to a mythological past that upholds the principles of communal solidarity. With Eliot having inverted the symbolism of fertility to evoke images of sterility, the reader thinks he can formulate an underlying pattern to the poem by re-assembling the disparate allusions within the context of mythography.

Such a contextual reading is contrary to the author's intent, or what is implied within the chaos that Eliot expresses - for what is only half-alive is uprooted from its past spiritual roots, severed from the 'survival traces' of its mythic past. The reader should not assume that the author's intent is implied by providing a set of extrinsic clues to elucidating the poems. Because, even though Frazer supplies Eliot with the themes of myth, the poem's set of anarchic juxtapositions evoke a parallel between the decline in religious faith, existential despair, and a context of mythography:

He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience\(^6^1\)

The cyclical nature of decay and revival that underlines the theme of the dying priest-god is perverted by a sense of futile apprehension. Eliot's fragmented mythic allusions represent the broken relics or disembodied corpses of Europe's cultural memory. From this, the reader is prompted to trace a contextual pattern of signification that can restore order to the poem's chaos. Levenson refers to this as the submerged unity behind the poem's chaos of fragments.\(^6^2\) But, what Levenson terms a contextual development within an elaborate set of cultural parallels is similar to the analogous diffusion within Frazer's comparative method. Through certain ironic parallels, the poem is equating the present cultural decay and broken

\(^{6^1}\) Lines 328-30, p. 37.

corpus of cultural memory to certain epistemological effects provoked by a
discourse of mythography. We can search for as long as we like for a coherent pattern of unity
from the poem's mixed bag of cultural allusions, yet to reshape or unfold the poem's fractured
texture is to reorder the chaos into a new master-myth, one that does not substitute for what
has been lost or is absent. This is a new order of chaos that stirs up again the epistemological
effects of a culture in disarray.

For Eliot, the futility and anarchy is already embodied in modern forms of
substitution. Madame Sosostris typifies the 'mixed' culture of spiritualism and horoscope
readings, the superstitious eclecticism that has supplanted the rituals of a mythological past.
The ironic tone that is evident in the casual reference to her 'bad cold' imputes a personal
sardonic disapproval of her wise status. For Madame Sosostris represents decadent pluralism,
the modern fetishisms that have overthrown orthodox religious practices:

Many stages of civilization exist together. Even in London today one could find magic
and fetishism, medieval superstition, priest-worship and Bible-worship, as well as the
more innocent forms of Christianity [….] In London it means Christianity in many
forms; but these are not fundamentally different from the old religions of Arabia or
India.63

Madame Sosostris is a satirical image of a 'survival form' of older religious forms that now
exists in the 'new religions' of the modern world. For Eleazar M. Meletinsky, the spiritualist
embodies 'mythico-magical' qualities, a magical power similar to mana:

For primitives, an unusual stone or animal or a shaman is bearer of *mana*, just as
Oedipus is for Sophocles and Freud, Joseph for Thomas Mann, and Madame Sosostris
for Eliot.64

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pp. 82-92.

64 E.M. Meletinsky, *The Poetics of Myth*, trans. Guy Lanoue and Alexandre Sadetsky (London: Routledge,
To embrace such a spiritual activity would cut through Eliot’s theological attitude. The contemporary world of Madame Sosostris and her impressionable clients is integral to the ‘unreal city’ of London, where life is already marred by spiritual hopelessness. The progress of sceptical enlightenment, at the cost of orthodox religious authority, has culminated in the farcical spectacle of Madame Sosostris spiritually communing with ‘the drowned Phoenician Sailor’, ‘Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks’, and ‘the one-eyed merchant’. Madame Sosostris is a one-eyed false prophet counter-pointing the genuine myth figure of the omniscient Tiresias.

In his endnotes, Eliot views Tiresias as the most important personage, uniting all the rest: ‘What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem.’ Eliot re-employs the apperceptive Tiresias to serve as a unifying and over-arching voice from the mythic past:

But Jove […]
Did give him sight in things to come for loss of sight of eye
And so his grievous punishment with honour did supply.

Tiresias’ special ability to ‘see’, bestowed by an Olympian god, is in ironic contrast to the limited powers of Madame Sosostris who has adopted the name of an Egyptian pharaoh to disguise her true commercial identity. David Raeburn’s translation uses the word ‘clairvoyance’ to describe the special gift Tiresias is awarded from Jove in compensation for his loss of sight. Both share the same job title, but one has gained more prominence and prestige above the other. Eliot mocks this change of fortunes to reflect on a greater shift in historical and cultural perceptions. Whereas Madame Sosostris is forbidden to see the blank card in the Tarot pack, Tiresias perceives the vanity and indifference of undesired sexual assaults and exploratory groping. In the Ovidian source, Tiresias reads daily the fortunes of folk in the city, field, and town, and tactfully avoids giving offence to his customers. He bears

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65 Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, pp. 44-5. When thunder speaks this is another ominous voice, bringing temporarily hopeful signs of rain.

honour and renown wherever he goes, and the first event he foresees is that of Echo and Narcissus. The repeated phrase ‘The nymphs are departed’ foreshadows Eliot’s comic parallel of contemporaneity and antiquity where the mythic equivalent of unreciprocated relationship is placed in a contemporary setting of seedy unfulfilled desire. The tired and indifferent typist is the Ovidian equivalent of Echo. This is coupled with the ‘vanity’ of the carbuncular young man, Eliot’s equivalent to Narcissus.

In his endnotes, with reference to ‘The Fire Sermon’, Eliot quotes a lengthy extract from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, book III, when Tiresias, because he can experience love ‘from both angles’, is asked by two gods to prove if the female sex has more pleasure in bed.67 This part is full of sexual puns like ‘throbbing’ and ‘gropes’ so seeming to suggest that Eliot is full of jest in his erudite claim that, ‘[the] whole passage from Ovid is of great anthropological interest’.68 Eliot’s typist ‘lays out food in tins’ whereas Ovid’s Jupiter is ‘well-flushed with nectar’.69 Eliot expands on Ovid’s theme of narcissism to express the theme of sexual experience as an unsatisfying event:

‘Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.’70

‘Tereu’ is another allusion to sordid, depraved, or unnatural sexual acts when Tereus rapes and mutilates Philomela, the sister of his wife, Procne. Tiresias has come down in the world as he looks upon this scene with disdain, but he still bears in his voice the gravitas of prestige when he introduces himself as ‘I Tiresias’. Eliot, on the other hand, adopts an ironic tone as the narrator and introduces Madame Sosostris in the third person. Tiresias’ presence is parenthesized or peripheral. The words ‘bad cold’ and wicked pack’ are bathetic associations

70 Line 252, p. 33.
to the words ‘famous’ and ‘wisest’. The mock-heroic name and affected title, the vain epithets and the cant of her lame warning of everyday misfortunes - ‘One must be so careful these days’ - are pathetic gestures that devalue the visionary role of the prophet in ancient times. Madame Sosostris’ vanity, her fake identity, and her bestowed fame based on dubious popularity point to a general sense of misplaced egotism that ironically parallels the myth of Narcissus and Echo. Through this intricate code of ironic and deflating parallels, Eliot is comically echoing the devaluation in the status of myth within contemporary society. Madame Sosostris represents the cult of inner experience that has come about at the expense of traditional figures of myth.

In spatially configuring the voguish pass-time of Madame Sosostris’ spiritualism within an eclectic set of cultural parallels, Eliot expresses a critique of a contemporary culture that has relied too much upon spurious religious occults fabricated from a mixed bag of beliefs. Nonetheless, by drawing upon a diverse, or mixed bag, of cultural sources Eliot perpetuates the contrary forces of a comparative thinking that is built up on a methodical base of analogous apprehension. Eliot’s elaborate set of ironic and mock-heroic parallels is often offset further when condensing the two themes of resurrection and vegetation myths:

‘That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
‘Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?  
‘Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men,  
‘Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!’

The effect is to produce an incongruous or surreal image at first - the planted corpse in the garden is the only thing that is growing, and will bloom if the frost does not disturb its bed. A serious intent becomes more apparent, though, when the revival of the corpse is perceived to be linked to an overriding theme - the dislocation between the natural cycle of vegetation

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71 Line 59, p. 25.  
72 Lines 71-5, p. 25.
renewal and the conjunctive theme of spiritual resurrection. The burial of the dead is acted out within an unholy context, with the disturbing image perverting the logic of the dying-god theme. By conflating thematic parallels to disproportionate and absurd degrees, Eliot is exploiting the analogous conflations of Frazer's comparative method to further reproduce the distorting effects of a mythographic heterogeneity.

In 'What the Thunder Said', Eliot continues to borrow from Frazer the associated symbolism of renewal to create a babbling liturgy that echoes the parables of Nietzsche's madman and Zarathustra:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
If there were only water amongst the rock
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From the doors of mudcracked houses

If there were water

And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only

This is the poem's most mythopoeic dramatic sequence, lacking any punctuation to underscore the rush of despair towards the calming effect of its final sonorous words. Frazer, as well as Weston, recognised that water symbolized the eternal spring of hope through the renewal of vegetable life. In the Bible, water frequently symbolizes the purity of cleansing.

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Eliot is repeating a question that Nietzsche’s madman asks when seeking God amongst the crowd in the market place: ‘What water is there for us to clean ourselves?’ Eliot turns the religious symbolism into a dirge of desperation to again invert the signs of hope within the symbols of fertility, and to subvert a vital magical connection between the drama of the dying and reviving god and the seasonal cycle. For Eliot is asking: how is life to go on without recourse to a pattern of mythic symbolism to order our passage through the changing seasons of dry or cold wintry decay, and the spring of rain and renewal. Such symbolism is vital, like Frazer’s notion of the magic view, for enabling an appreciation of our physical and spiritual connection to nature – which is the first stage in providential development. The modern landscape is a dysfunctional wasteland, for this is a dead, arid, unyielding, and fallen land, where memory and desire are no longer rooted within the informing pattern of symbols predicated on a mythic past. For Eliot, the rule of civilization was built on the bed-rock of the mythical past. With its cluster of fallen cities - Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, and London - as representative of important cultural landmarks in the historical development of European intellectual evolution, and ‘Falling towers’ that echo a biblical theme of apocalyptic downfall, ‘What The Thunder Said’ underlines the prevailing symptoms of decline within a traditional order of culture, in which the urban masses move without a sense of collective purpose or destiny because there is a private and public state of disconnection:

I can connect
Nothing with nothing.\textsuperscript{74}

Eliot sees the modern European urban experience as an unreal, illusory, surreal, or hallucinatory nightmare, one that reflects a state of phenomenological disillusionment, because the individual has been severed from the mythic roots that underpin a shared sensibility of belonging.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} Lines 301-2, p. 34.
Mythography is implicated in this vision, but for Eliot the comparative accounts of the development of celestial mythology across other continents also reconfirmed the notion that the Judeo-Christian tradition was an important connecting symbolic theme, universally re-enacted within fertility ceremonies. So when looking for an organizing principle, a scaffold to shape his poem, Eliot was drawn to the two significant English anthropologists. Drawn from many times, places, and peoples, Frazer had amassed a huge quantity of empirical data to form a complete trans-cultural narrative. Jewel Spears Brooker sees this as an essential characteristic of Frazer's method of thinking, proffering a possible solution to what she refers to as the 'missing' abstraction of modern life:

He taught then how to take a heap of broken images, ruins on the horizon of history, and erect structures beautifully symmetrical, perfectly unified. His own construction (or, as he would admit, re-construction) of vanished myths, his projection of increasingly comprehensive abstractions of universal significance, is a triumph in intellectual history. He took fragments and gave back unified ideal edifices; he took chaos and gave back order; he took nonsense and gave back meaning.

However, from Frazer's mythography, Eliot does not revitalize a sense of universal symbolic significance in culture or erect a unified symmetrical construction. Eliot was also well aware of how such accounts generated a prevailing state of disillusionment within his own generation; and that the new religion of science embodied in *The Golden Bough* posed a flawed totality - because theoretically, despite its over-towering empirical muster, the book stands like a toppling stack of books:

[In] this conceptual crap game "truth" means using every die in the designated manner, counting its spots accurately, fashioning the right categories, and never violating the order of caste and class rank [.....] Here one may certainly admire as a

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75 Eliot reiterates the word 'home' in 'The Fire Sermon' to suggest that the womb of a nation resides in the myths of the past. The image of 'Cannon Street Hotel', on the other hand, represents an alienating experience.

mighty man of construction, who succeeds in piling up an infinitely complicated
dome of concepts upon an unstable foundation, and, as it were, on running water.\textsuperscript{77}

Seeing through the ‘conceptual crap game’ of Frazer’s method to its empirical baselessness,
an unstable foundation constructed on running water, Eliot preferred instead to infer that for a
long time in the history of human development man was symbolically at one with the
provenance inherent in our relationship with nature. The original drafts to ‘The Waste Land’
support the view that Eliot was at the time searching for a bed-rock of mythological truth:

\begin{quote}
I am the Resurrection and the Life  
I am the things that stay, and those that flow.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quote}

Out of the chaotic experience of human development, a ‘unified sensibility’ was being fused
together, and after the period of the metaphysical poets, these rooted branches of continuity
were severed: ‘In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we
have never recovered.’\textsuperscript{79} For Eliot, certain ‘psychological certainties’ underline primitive and
religious rituals that are related to a traditional unity of religious symbolism, or what is termed
a ‘sacramentalist’ identification with symbol and object.\textsuperscript{80}

No matter how the particular relationship of symbol and object is defined, whether as
transubstantiation or consubstantiation, the main point, grasped and adhered to
certainly by an act of faith, is that that symbol and object do exist in some sort of
unity, which though certainly undefinable is nevertheless “real”.\textsuperscript{81}

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\textsuperscript{79} Eliot, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ (1921), \textit{Selected Prose}, p. 64.
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The disjunctive effect of the poem's texture is to reflect this kind of symbolic rupture that Eliot saw as existing in the relationship between our inner circle of experience and the outer objects of communal symbolism.

Eliot also held an ambivalent view towards Jessie Weston for similar reasons. Her theory attempted to determine the origin of the Grail, and perhaps brings into question the Christian or Folklorist origin. But she also viewed the early spiritual speculations of primitives as indicating a sense of its provenance. A tradition intimating towards an obscure spiritual presence was integral to a type of existence in which the early 'primitives' engaged in a relationship between man, nature, symbol and object. From similarities between cultural variants, Weston inferred a unifying pattern of historical continuity based on the touchstone of religious sensibility:

The more closely one studies pre-Christian Theology, the more strongly one is impressed with the deeply, and daringly, spiritual character of its speculations, and the more doubtful it appears that such teaching can depend upon the unaided processes of human thought, or can have been evolved from such germs as are found among the supposedly 'primitive' peoples, such as e.g., the Australian tribes.

Weston cites many historical cultures, especially in the chapter 'The Perilous Chapel' that Eliot singles out as particularly important for understanding the themes of Part V. Grail romances prevailed throughout history, and despite their variations, for Weston, they pertain to a common human drive:

[One] thing we may be sure, the Grail is a living force, it will never die; it may indeed sink out of sight, and, for centuries even, disappear from the field of literature, but it will rise to the surface again, and become once more a theme of vital inspiration, even as, after the slumbering from the days of Malory, it woke to new life in the nineteenth century, making its fresh appeal through the genius of Tennyson and Wagner.

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82 'The background to Eliot's early poetry is a secular temporal world in which religious belief has become impossible.' Stephen Spender, Eliot: p. 14.


84 Ibid., p. 188.
The strange and terrifying adventure in a mysterious Chapel is fraught with extreme perils for the hero or heroine of the many Grail romances and symbolizes a rite of passage:

*For this is the story of an initiation* (or perhaps it would be more correct to say the test of fitness for an initiation) *carried out on the astral plane, and reacting with fatal results upon the physical.*

This physical adventure is set in various places, sometimes as a bridge that must be crossed to reach Paradise. Unlike Frazer, Weston does not explain away these mystery tales to prove that the triumph of rationalism has overcome the enchanted forces of the spiritual:

I believe it to be essentially a Mystery tradition; the otherworld is not a myth, but a reality, and in all ages there have been souls who have been willing to brave the great adventure, and to risk all for the chance of bringing back with them some assurance of the future life.

And she continues:

The poets and dreamers wove their magic webs, and a world apart from the world of actual experience came to life. But it was not all myth, nor all fantasy; there was a basis of truth and reality at the foundation of the mystic growth.

For Weston, even the half-gods of Adonis and Attis, and their congeners, reveal a folk craving for a more sensible contact with the unseen spiritual forces of life. Weston asserts that the abiding characteristic of all the cults is the insistence on life, life continuous, and ever renewing. Weston borrows the theme of the dying king from Frazer and emphasises the fact that the king never dies - but lives on in other personages or forms.

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85 Ibid., p. 182.
86 Ibid., p. 186.
87 Weston's book is an anthropological development from Frazer's, with both discovering universal cultural developments in mythology: ‘I avow myself an impenitent believer in Sir J.G. Frazer's main theory [...] I hold that theory to be of greater and more far-reaching importance than has been hitherto suspected.' Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, p. 10.
‘What The Thunder Said’ reflects Eliot’s specific interest in Weston by taking mythic themes from the ‘Chapel Perilous’ and Frazer’s chapters on the myth of Adonis, Attis, and Osiris. The incantation of the last two lines signals the spiritual fusion of cross-cultural influences:

Shantih shantih shantih.88

This harmonic finale hints at a denouement of spiritual reunion, signalling a process of initiation through a desert city of mystery and disillusionment that is symbolically allied to Weston’s notion of the adventure in the Perilous Chapel. Part V begins with an allusion to the Garden of Gethsemane:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the gardens
After the agony in stony places.89

The descriptions of shifting temperature from heat to frosty, and the unyielding physical materiality of stone, imply a transitional phase of physical initiation. Eliot’s buried allusion to Sir Ernest Shackleton’s famous expedition compounds this idea of a physical adventure that puts one’s life in peril, whilst symbolizing a spiritual crossing.90 Via this set of allusions the poem can be read as a spiritual rite of passage through the phenomenological chaos of the modern world: the poem begins with mythic discordance and ends on a note of spiritual resolution. The poem runs from ‘April is the cruellest month’ to ‘Shantih, shantih, shantih’.91

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88 Lines 432-3, p. 41. Eliot translates the first three words of Sanskrit from the statements of the prophet Prajapati in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad as ‘give’, ‘sympathize’, and ‘control’. The word, ‘Shantih’, Eliot translates as ‘The peace which passeth understanding.’ This alludes as well to ‘Phillippians’ IV, 7, ‘And the Peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.’

89 Lines 323-5, p. 37.

90 The symbolic conflation is compounded further with an allusion to an obscure third presence that could be either a hooded figure, The Hand God of Frazer that Madame Sosostris could not see in her wild pack of Tarot cards, or to the unseen, resurrected Christ journeying with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus.
Eliot wrote to Bertrand Russell (15 October 1923) that he was glad he liked the poem, ‘and especially Part V, which in my opinion is not the best part, but the only part that justifies the whole, at all.’ Part V partly mirrors part I by repeating or echoing some of its imagery: ‘dry stone’, ‘dry grass’, ‘dry bones’, ‘red rock’, ‘shower of rain’, ‘dry sterile thunder’, ‘stony’ ‘sandy’, ‘dead land’, ‘dead mountain’, and ‘sound of water’. Towards the end, Eliot hints at a restoring of the symbolic order that was unhinged by the reversal of expectations evoked in the poem’s opening lines. The allegorical density of the poem is necessary for experiencing the illumination of God, as the mystery of a divine experience has to remain obscure. Furthermore, the distilling of religious translations reaffirms the notion of a common thread of spiritual intimation running throughout culturally diverse religious cults.

However, the final mantra of the poem follows on from a dramatic crescendo of surrealistic effects where Eliot ironically echoes the playful and creative utterances of Tristan Tzara’s Dadaist performances. Ironically, the repeated utterances of the abbreviated ‘Da’ allude to the revolutionary art movement whilst at the same time imitating its avant-garde techniques of poetic form:

To make a Dadaist poem, Tzara proposed this recipe: ‘Take a newspaper. Take a pair of scissors. Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem. Cut out the article. Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag. Shake it gently. Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag. Copy conscientiously. The poem will be like you.’

Eliot seems at first to be shadowing an attitude that rejects the logic of coherent expression and that recognized nothing as sacred. But the root word, ‘Da’, as if said in the same breath, merges and evolves into the incanted words of ‘datta’, ‘dayadhvam’, and ‘damyata’. Eliot is

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lampooning the advocates of the illogical to instead reiterate the claims of Weston - that since the beginnings of human development, when man made his first verbal sounds, there has been always a universal intimation towards a sense of provenance in the natural world:

These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you.94

These two lines seem to be responding to the question in lines 19-20 in Part I. Cultural memory has already been shattered into a ruined relic, so Eliot applies the ‘mythical method’ to satirize the epistemological wreckage of a cut and paste application to the sacred roots of religious growth. The empty rooms, and the empty chapels – the tombs and sepulchres of God, the solitary existence of imprisoned individual cells, and the lack of communal rites are all intrinsic to the general image of an arid modern landscape of mythographic heterogeneity.95 So, despite invoking the need for a kind of spiritual ascendency or return to the symbolic order of myth, the poem simultaneously undercuts a reading of thematic continuity when piecing together, from the Dadaist fragments, a sense of religious sensibility. This is a form of reconstruction akin to Frazer’s comparative method. Eliot is not agreeing with Frazer’s empirical method but instead imitating the deconstructive techniques in a playful manner to accentuate their anarchic effects.

The poem’s technical method re-presents the collapse of a spiritual continuity that was to an extent brought on by a mythographical discourse, one that analogously throws together the disjecta membra of spiritual icons in order to fabricate a rational superstructure. The allusion to ‘The Book of Isaiah’, 38:6, reconfirms the desire to rebuild or reform the spiritual bedrocks or the hope of reuniting the modern world to a traditional order of mythic symbolism: ‘Thus saith the Lord, set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live.’

94 Lines 430-1, p. 41.

95 Eliot’s later poetry expresses more clearly the poet’s desire to keep in place the nomenclature of an institutional and traditionally established religion. ‘And the church does not seem to be wanted / In country or in the suburb; and in the town / [....] The world turns and the world changes, / But one thing does not change.’ ‘Two Choruses from ‘The Rock’’ (1934), The Waste Land and Other Poems, pp. 78-9.
Yet, for Eliot, we cannot set our cultural or symbolic landscape in order by reaffirming or resuming the same logic of phenomenological disorder:

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down  

The talismanic fisherman, a characteristic variant of many religious cults, is a human representation of vegetable life, which Eliot inverts to express an anti-epiphanic state of human existence cut asunder from such mythical reassurance, and isolated in the functional particularism of localised urban space:

*Dayadhvam:* I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison  

The key to regaining an abiding notion of spiritual, religious or mythological order does not lie in a poem that re-introduces the causes and effects of a spiritual collapse in modern culture. The poem is misleading in its technical method because it invites a reading that is distinctly at odds with Eliot’s personal criticism of modern life:

Some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the “disillusionment of a generation”, which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention. 

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96 Lines 423-7, p. 40.
97 Lines 411-14, p. 40.
Eliot was uncomfortable about being identified with the prevailing nihilistic disillusionment of his generation, to be seen to be expressing a belief in the causes of a post-mythic despair. Eliot was more attracted to a unifying pattern found in the method of English anthropologists, one that postulated a formal account of the social rituals running through our past social behaviour:

No one has done more to make manifest the similarities and identities underlying the customs of races remote in every way from each other [...] We can come to conclusions as to what men did at one period and another, and can come to some extent to see the development of one form out of another [...] What we can ever have, at best, is a continuous change of ritual in one direction. We can have enough cross-sections to interpret a process, if not a purpose ('purpose' in process is simply an interpretation not a description) at least a function of continuous change.100

Similar to Wittgenstein's criticisms, Eliot stresses the incapacity of Frazer to penetrate past a particular experience of consciousness, to speculate interpretatively on religious or spiritual matters. But, by concentrating upon customs and rituals, Frazer revealed that an underlying stability had always been present throughout the fluctuations of human development.

Eliot adapts Frazer's anthropological method because it supported his view that an integrated society was the incarnation of a religious sensibility mixed with customs and arts from a traditional past. In 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), Eliot writes:

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary.101

Modern culture is chaotic, irregular, and fragmentary because it is no longer bound by a

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101 Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', Selected Prose, p. 64.
context of myth in which the correlation of objects and states of consciousness, within the immediate apprehension of things, coheres in the knowledge of a symbolic tradition. With *The Golden Bough* unwittingly substantiating a notion of bedrock continuity practised throughout all religious rituals, Eliot saw anthropological science as reinforcing an organic view of culture. Aware of the relativist implications in *The Golden Bough* that came as a result of its ‘felicitous’ comparative juxtapositions, the theological Eliot preferred instead to see its compendious analogous data as positing a stable view of history.\(^{102}\) In ‘Notes Towards the Definition Of Culture’ (1948), Eliot reveals how his interest in anthropology encouraged him to believe that modern society was disassembling an ordered and shared sense of our cultural past:

> We need variety in unity: not the unity of organization, but the unity of nature.
> By ‘culture’, then I mean first of all what the anthropologists mean: the way of life of a particular people living together in one place [...] But just as a man is something more than an assemblage of various constituent parts of his body, so a culture is more than the assemblage of its arts, customs, and religious beliefs. These things all act upon each other, and fully to understand one you have to understand all.\(^{103}\)

Frazer and Weston exposed the poet to a positive view of how different cultures throughout history had functioned in various ways, and this in turn produced the negative view that a contemporary advanced and sophisticated Europe had disconnected itself from the organic model of a unified culture.\(^{104}\) Eliot understood how Frazer had become implicated in this disunified context as an agent of historical confusion and theological destruction. Therefore, forced to work in a ‘mythic vacuum’, Eliot undertook to express the ‘myth of mythlessness’:

> ‘[The] belief that humanity has successfully transcended the need for mythical forms of thought.’\(^{105}\)

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\(^{103}\) Eliot, ‘Notes Towards the Definition of Culture’ (1948), *Selected Prose*, p. 302.

\(^{104}\) Charles Moorman views Eliot’s basic attitude towards poetry and the world as seeking an enabling experience of the ‘unified sensibility’.

This is how the text functions and expresses Eliot's intent. The disruption between the inward circle of experience and the outward objects of communal life is reflective of the symptoms of disillusionment brought on by a mythographical state of disenchantment and iconoclastic dismantlement. Nevertheless, this is also inscribed within the poem's context, where, by supplying a referential framework that invites the reader on a fact-finding quest, a similar pattern of mythographic reconstruction is induced. In forming the poem's disjunctive texture, Eliot adapts Frazer's comparative method to draw upon a context of allusive references that cross differing cultures and periods of historical time. Tempted to read beyond the initial impression of fractured disunity, the reader locates outside of the poem the secondary sites to formulate a reading of unity. As in *The Golden Bough*, the disparate allusions represent the discrete elements of myth sites spread across human history, indices to the grand narrative of human development. Eliot sets up a type of reading method in which tracing allusions from the disjecta membra of the modern text to a prior cultural site induces an investigative process along similar lines to that of Frazer's mythic method. A deductive stage is first encouraged where the reader locates the scattered references within the fragmented lines. The synthesis, the total overarching reading, is acquired through a synthetic process by presuming an underlying pattern can be discovered in an inductive manner. The poem posits the expectation of deferred inference with the reader piecing together from its broken imagery a master-myth. From its broken parts it is presumed one can assemble together a buried sense of symbolic order or meaning. But, by sending the reader on a false trail of spiritual, mythic, or contextual reconstruction, the endnotes reproduce the 'end-game' of mythography, inviting us to reconstruct another false simulacrum.

If one is not to take up the endnotes as a guide where should one then be directed? Occasionally, a certain phrase or line hints at the textual trap set up for the reader if one was to take up literally the mythographic language game. Eliot frequently alludes to the type of subterfuge and nonsensical madness inscribed within the poem's technical design, especially
when offsetting the third-eye of Tiresias against the cyclopic vision of Sosostris.

William Carlos Williams wrote in his autobiography:

Then out of the blue, The Dial brought out ‘The Waste Land’ and all our hilarity stopped.\(^{106}\)

The hilarity did not stop here for Eliot. The depressive anxiety began when humanity declared its independence from God. So behind the nihilistic chaos, the voice of Eliot’s absurd laughter can be heard reminding us that this is an illusory game of disillusionment that we should do our best to see through. The ironic asides are an implicit warning to disregard the kind of mythic myopia that envelop London’s living dead, who with their eyes fixed before their feet have lost sight of the brown god for the brown fog. Even though Eliot’s critical voice is depersonalised to a few appearances they stand as more genuine clues to how we are to read ‘The Waste Land’. Like Nietzsche’s madman, Eliot is taunting the liberated pretensions of the secular crowd that believe they can live without God and the reviving or magical cleansing water of rain. With a line from Baudelaire’s preface to Fleurs du Mal, Eliot assaults the reader and draws him accusingly into the same plight of disillusionment: ‘You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, - mon frère!’\(^ {107}\) Irony is Eliot’s way of asserting and disguising his authorial presence, because he does not wish to be seen to be party to his own critique.

So the reader should be on his guard, ever alert to the poem’s twists and turns. Other lines are less obvious in the way they implicate the reader, but their significance accumulates through a dramatic movement that reaches its climax when the thunder speaks to signal the awaited fall of rain:

\[\text{In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust}\]


\(^{107}\) Lines 76-7, p. 25.
Bringing rain.108

With the rain comes the drip drops of hope. A crescendo that lifts and falters taunts the reader’s expectations. Limp leaves still wait for rain. And irony still echoes in the fluctuating cadences. When he takes from Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy the play’s subtitle: ‘Hieronymo’s mad againe’, and juxtaposes it before the last two lines, the motif of hope through spiritual reunion is overshadowed by an obscure voice of feigned madness.109 What are the rules of the language-game, when to the very end the poet parallels too closely these allusions to religion and madness? When the poem casually slips into the jazz phrases of chromatic, atonal, or non-referential musical soundings, like ‘Weialala leia / Wellalla leialala’, ‘Co co rico co co rico’, ‘Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug jug jug’, or ‘la la’, and the echoing rhythm of the water-dripping song - ‘Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop’ – they should remind us that, within this cacophony that is for ‘dirty ears’, there lies an absent melody that should reverberate more harmoniously throughout this land - the sound of flowing rain to bring back the voice of God.110 For they are also animal sounds signalling the call of spring. In fact, the final part can be taken as a rain song to justify the poem’s stony and sandy start – its dance of death. And when a fraught domestic scene emerges and voices clash with an earnest angst in an abrupt verbal exchange, a softly spoken voice creeps up to the surface:

‘My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
‘Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
‘What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
‘I never know what you are thinking. Think.’

I think we are in rat’s alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.111

108 Lines 393-4, p. 39.
109 Line 431, p. 41.
110 Lines 290-1, 392, 203-4, 306, & 357. Eliot’s prankish end-rhymes are worth noting too: ‘O the moon shone bright on Mrs Porter / And on her daughter / They wash their feet in soda water’, lines 200-3, p. 31.
111 Lines 111-6, p. 27.
To the neurotic anxious call a voice reflectively responds by commenting on a more general state of absurdity. And when asked if alive or not, or is there nothing in your head, the tune of an American ragtime song, 'O O O O that Shakespearean rag', brings a temporary sense of private reprieve from the series of nagging, poking, and disorientated questions.¹¹² This is Eliot shunning the long faces of the chattering public – the toothless reproductive drunken fools.¹¹³ The liberal procreative tendencies of the colloquial masses are another reminder of the poor substitutes that exist replacing the fertile, generative, and cyclical patterns of myth. What was once real struggles to live again, and what is living reality is no more than a fixated illusion.

So, when 'unreal' is repeated three times in three different parts, the general sense of madness that Eliot feigns is underscored:

Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog a winter dawn
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

Unreal City
Under the brown fog of a winter noon¹¹⁴

The crowd that flows over London Bridge, and Albert, who prefers to eat hot gammon than go to church on Sundays, do not see beyond their own feet, or dish of meat.¹¹⁵ Private alienation is a cut-off view, fixated within the fog of a city's squalor; the discarded rubbish of

¹¹² Lines 127-9, p. 27.
¹¹³ Lines 139-170, pp. 28-9.
¹¹⁴ Lines 373-6, 60-3, & 207-8.
empty bottles, sandwich papers, silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, and cigarette ends that normally float above the River Thames are as much part of the stony rubbish of broken images. A mythological iconography has been replaced by urban detritus. And to be part of this illusion one need only adopt a type of reading method that implicates itself within the causes of this cultural disorganization and process of anarchic displacement. The reader is a 'proper fool' to believe that just because the endnotes gave Eliot the scaffold they therefore should provide the rules of the poem's endgame - to create a controlling sense of order out of the futile anarchic chaos, to unfold the text's profusion of loose and disconnected threads in order to formulate another over-arching metaphor, or another abstracted master-myth. This is an illusory trap, a mythic myopia, which, like Joyce, Eliot undercuts through a set of comic effects. This is because Eliot is equating a modern unreal existence that has undone the masses, with a kind of 'one-eyed' conceptual crap game that has replaced the 'strong brown god' with a miasmic 'brown fog'.

By adapting the 'mythical method' or 'comparative method' as an organizing technical principle, the confluence of scientific ideas and mythopoeic fragmentation helped create a literary text that was distinctly at odds with Eliot's definition of a 'unified sensibility':

Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poem's complexity has to do with it absorbing the variety and complexity of anthropological ideas of a post-mythic age. Yet, in terms of 'transmuting ideas into sensations' it fails to square with a traditional symbolic order. For 'The Waste Land' does not

117 Lines 161, p. 29.
118 'I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river / Is a strong brown god – sullen, untamed and intractable [...] ', Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages', Four Quartets, (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), lines 1-2, p. 31.
119 Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), Selected Prose, p. 65
envisage in the modern world a fusion of man, nature, symbol or object which is meant to be vital unifying factor integral to religious sensibility. Rather, the mix of allusions, along with the futile drama of disconnected individuals, implicates the poem more into the disillusionment of an age that lacked such a unified sensibility. By expressing the effects of cultural and spiritual severance, the disunity of the poem becomes symptomatic, as well as reflective, of the general decay and chaos experienced through a loss of symbolic heritage - a continuous unity within history that communally binds people to its cultural environment. Whilst the poem pays homage to the abiding influences of a cross-cultural religious past, for Eliot, Madame Sosostris is a poor excuse for contemporary survival forms. Part I presents a chronic disturbance between the ‘magic view’, or ‘savage’ sensibility, of vegetation rituals that precedes myth and religious faith. The poem’s fragmentation mirrors this symbolic disunity.

Eliot’s definition of a unified sensibility is based on an understanding of John Donne’s metaphysical poetry that tended to function through a series of seemingly incongruous analogies, underpinned by an intense logic sustaining a consistent argument. For example, in ‘Air and Angels’, Donne moves from a seemingly illogical statement at the beginning of the poem, ‘Twice or thrice had I loved thee / Before I knew thy face or name [...]’, but emphasises the internal logic of his textual design, by adhering to grammatical connectives within the poem with phrases at the start of his lines like: ‘But since my soul [...]’, ‘And therefore what thou wert [...]’, or ‘Whilst thus to ballast love [...]’.120 Eliot, on the other hand, never uses adverbial connectives, denying the logical syntactical movement of Donne’s syllogism, and instead encourages the reader to understand the poem’s inner content via the endnotes. To understand why April is the cruellest month, and how a corpse planted in a garden can ever sprout or bloom, one has to elucidate the symbolism through the two named anthropological sources. If the poem has an internal argument then it can only be traced here –

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a logic that is not intrinsically rendered within the text's ontological status but extraneously reconstructed to produce another abstracted master-myth.


Thus, whilst voicing the heterogeneous, anarchic, and futile effects of a post-mythic age, 'The Waste Land' is nonetheless implicated within the historical conditions it reflects - reproducing, and re-presenting, the inherent 'felicitous' logic within the myth-status of mythography. With the poem's fractured texture mirroring the notion that a tradition of cultural continuity has been laid to waste, Eliot parodies the 'synthetic' qualities or graphomania of mythography - the extreme mass of data collected from multiple ethnographic cultural sites. However, given the textual status of 'The Waste Land', the reader is ultimately left unsure as to whether he is meant to discover another abstracted master-myth, or to view the poem as an expression of the cultural sterility brought on by the false synthesis of mythography. Either way, the poem implicates itself into the epistemological failings of mythography that had created a trans-historical metaphor of human scientific progression at the expense of cultural, and religious, coherency. In the end, what reverberates from the chaos is the oft misheard, and ironic, voice of an Eliot that asks: 'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish? [...] You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images.'

121 Lines 21-3, p. 23.
In Violence and the Sacred, René Girard argues that underlying the ritual machinery of sacrificial rites in primitive societies is the need to unleash violence as a preventive measure:

Primitive religion tames, trains, arms, and directs violent impulses as a defensive force against those forms of violence that society regards as inadmissible. It postulates a strange mixture of violence and nonviolence. The same can perhaps be said of our judicial system of control.¹

A primitive society that lacks a legal system is exposed to the sudden escalation of violence, and so the sacrificial catharsis succeeds in preventing the unlimited propagation of violence as a sort of infection. The tendency of violence is hurled onto a surrogate, dehumanized form under the deceptive guise of the sacred.² In The Scapegoat, Girard sees a universal pattern containing all the stereotypes of persecution within Sophocles' account of the myth of Oedipus in Oedipus Rex:

Oedipus's infirmity, his past history of exposure as an infant, his situation as a foreigner, newcomer, and king, all make him a veritable conglomerate of victim's signs.³

He then moves on from the paradigm of classical mythology to elucidate thematic and structural

² Ibid., p. 31.
Passion:

The victim [is] glorified as a result of the persecution in order to have sacredness in the mythological sense.  

Girard's approach is similar to a mythological approach in reuniting the profane and the sacred, the act of behaviour with its mythical meaning. Girard's aim is to investigate the psychology of violence that characterizes the motive behind what Frazer and Freud termed as the dark crime/deed. Girard argues that primitive societies are not necessarily less violent or less 'hypocritical' than our own society, because murderers as totalitarian bureaucrats of persecution also remain convinced of the worthiness of their sacrifices. Nevertheless, with the secularization of myths, the violence of victim persecution has been metaphorically displaced to another set of texts of persecution. Towards the late nineteenth-century Rousseau's figure of the noble savage had given way to the prototype of the primitive savage which invariably represented instead an excess of untamed violence or dark savagery. Even though the modern European tended to pride himself in having a sense of civilized progression - subduing violence, and instilling nonviolence through moral authority - as a post-Darwinian evolutionary entity, man had been brought ever closer to a forgotten, aboriginal, half-brother:

Evolution seemed to bring a terrible light to bear on everyday affairs, not least upon moralities, and not least because it ranked mankind as only quantitatively, not qualitatively, different from the animal kingdom, thus discountenancing the Christian God of previous generations, if not banishing him entirely. We were up from the Ape, not down from the Angels. We carried in our anatomies proof of the ancestral beast.

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4 Ibid., p. 198.
Science exposed an unpalatable truth that man was as much animal/beast as civilized human. For Nietzsche, this implied a whole set of evolutionary inversions, so confusing our likened relationship to the savage primitive. By projecting the propensity for violence onto our primitive forebears, the primal self was transformed into a twin self of our civilized self to be used as a metaphoric surrogate for society’s violence. Modern society had therefore shifted the mimetic attributes of violence from the extraordinary or the sacred to our biological ancestors.

Appropriated from anthropological sources, literature proliferated further the already popularized human/ancestral analogies. This is best exemplified in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) in which, despite their actual geographical distance, the Thames of London is perceived as not so far away from the Congo of Africa:

> “Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings.”

Joseph Conrad’s liminal vision of the two great rivers implies that the currents of time run deep across continents and cultural divides, evoking hidden connections of a psychological evolution. As Marlow ventures up the Congo, the modern self is re-orientated beyond the imperious veneer of civilization to where Kurtz has discovered more than the fortunes of colonial booty – a mythic touchstone. Marlow experiences the sensation of traveling back in time to a site of primal undoing to where the civilized self is exposed to its primal ‘horror’. Conrad’s novella was published at a time when anthropological studies took the Victorian scholar further and further out of the library and beyond the Outposts of Progress. With the Golden Age of Greek civilization overridden as the start of civilization by another final-cause in the history of human development, the beginnings of European success were viewed as situated in a new time zone – where the European mind was causally connected to an earlier, and more irrational, period.

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In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer travels backwards through time, like a European explorer, unraveling an ancient mystery that lurks as a dark crime behind the history of human development. In *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1913), Sigmund Freud examines contemporary psychological correspondences to this great crime, by using anthropological material to examine the origin of social institutions, of totemism and exogamy, and the prohibition of incest. In light of Darwin’s theory of the ‘primal horde’, the earliest type of society is ruled over by a powerful male, subjecting the younger males to his absolute power and keeping all females for his own use. Thus subjected, the sons were forced to live in complete abstinence and obedience, until one day they revolted and banded together, killing the father and eating his body. The ‘totem’ represented in later groups a sacred animal or plant which they were forbidden to eat or kill; yet on ceremonial occasions, a feast was held during which the ordinarily forbidden animal is killed and its meat eaten ritually. This ritual, according to Freud, is a symbolic representation and commemoration of the original parricide. Behind the hatred for the old man of the primal horde lay an ambivalent feeling of affection, and the sons soon after their criminal act felt the need for atonement and reparation. Since the women of the tribe had been the original cause of the murder, the sons therefore forbade marriage with the liberated women, and henceforth it was compulsory to marry outside the group. Freud’s theory therefore assumes that the rules of society had arisen out of the need to curb man’s unruly sexual and aggressive drives, and that its function is primarily suppressive:

But neurotics are above all inhibited in their actions: with them the thought is a complete substitute for the deed. Primitive men, on the other hand, are uninhibited: thought passes directly into action. With them it is rather the deed that is the substitute for the thought [...] ‘in the beginning was the Deed’.7

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Freud believed that at a remote period in history human beings lived in a state of heedless sexual and primitive egoistical motives, and throughout this time they had neither the ability nor the need to create myths since repression was unnecessary. In a single hypothesis, he explains the origin of society, of religion and law, of the incest taboo and exogamy, and of ritual and myths:

Unless psychical processes were continued from one generation to another, if each generation were obliged to acquire its attitude to life anew, there would be no progress in this field and next to no development. This gives rise to two questions: how much can we attribute to psychical continuity in the sequence of generations? and what are the ways and means employed by one generation in order to hand on its mental states to the next one? [...] Social psychology shows very little interest [...] in the manner in which the required continuity in the mental life of successive generations is established. A part of the problem seems to be met by the inheritance of psychical dispositions which, however, need to be given some sort of impetus in the life of the individual before they can be roused into actual operation.  

The origins of Freud's theoretical framework can be examined in the context of a late nineteenth-century interest in the reports of travelers and missionaries who had been to parts of Australasia:

There are men still living who, as we believe, stand very near to primitive man, far nearer than we do, and whom we therefore regard as his direct heirs and representatives [...] We are right in seeing in it a well-preserved picture of an early stage of our own development.  

What was termed 'totemism' was seen as the adoption of an animal as a special emblem for a clan. The totem could not be killed except when special killings were allowed. It was also said that the totem animal might be an ancestor of the clan. The empirical findings taken from the culture of the aboriginals were soon extended into the theories regarding classical antiquity. The return to the past brought a newer, and older, beginning to human history.

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8 Ibid., p. 158.
9 Ibid., p. 1.
Freud's own thinking was an extension of this positivistic tradition in which he was trained when a medical student. Freud, throughout his life, considered himself faithful to the precepts of Hermann Ludwig von Helmholtz, who applied the positivistic faith to the science of physiology, and pledged to destroy vitalism: 'No other forces than the common physical-chemical ones are active within the organism.' Expressing materialism in a pure form that denies that life might involve forces transcending 'the forces of attraction and repulsion', positivism in opposition to 'metaphysical dogma' declares another kind of exclusivity, in claiming that existence is no more than an object of either physical or chemical properties. During the last half of the nineteenth century, the Helmholtz school of medicine completely dominated physiological and medical thinking, and it was into this intellectual atmosphere that scientific psychology was born. With physiology reduced to chemistry and physics, it was not long before psychology was to be reduced to physiology. Freud was expected to carry out his own work in a similar vein.

To most psychologists it was immediately obvious that the techniques of continuity, generalized and extended from organisms to other animals, could be theoretically applied to the consciousness. In Totem and Taboo, it is clear that Freud's own conceptual imagery of the brain was a product of his schooling. At seventeen, Freud entered the University of Vienna as a medical student in pursuit of anatomy, botany, chemistry, physics, physiology, and zoology. And during this period he received a thorough grounding in the positivistic science of the nineteenth-century. Anthropologists in England also received a similar range of subjects in their scientific studies. Lamarck had already applied a behavioral theory of evolution to the stretching neck and legs of the giraffe or the crane. So, science was seen to validate the notion of how small changes are then passed on to the next generation. The doctrine of 'inheritance of acquired characteristics'.

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was an acquired precept in various fields of scientific research. Consequently, it was seen by psychologists that a cumulative effect, a process that continues generation after generation, could be also rendered in the consciousness:

As a convinced Lamarckian, Freud assumed that the phylogenetic events of *Totem and Taboo* were, with countless repetitions over the millennia, organically impressed upon the unconscious recesses of the mind [....] The ontogenetic acquisition of remorse, guilt, and moral sense now became conceivable to Freud as phylogenetic precipitate from the primal father complex of early man.11

The principles of variation and universality, as applied by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, reflect arguments that had already been generated in the scientific community. Lancelot Whyte shows that there was a parallel tendency in philosophy and psychology, showing a growing interest in biology from the eighteenth-century, and spatial metaphors were often related to temporal discoveries revealing a similarity of discovery in the sciences. Even though Whyte makes it apparent that 'no clear fundamental idea of the essential character of transformation has yet been formulated in any branch of knowledge', rational enquiries showed certain similar methodological principles.12 The evolutionary ideas extended by Lamarck, for example, appear in various other scientific accounts of history. Previous thinkers had initiated concepts of historical transformation, which attracted a universal appreciation. Freud employs also static abstractions of historical change in his persisting entities of the Superego, Ego, and Id, into which the mind is assumed to be divisible. Freud's spatial concepts of the mind show striking similarities to the German psychologist, G.T. Fechner (1801-1887), who compared the mind to an iceberg moved by hidden currents as well as winds of awareness. It can be shown that Freud's topography of the mind is based on 'an unconscious celebration', or uncritical assumptions, of scientific theories; in

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particular, the principal development of anthropology in Victorian science, an interdisciplinary field that emerged from philology, travel writing, folklore, law, philosophy, physical anthropology, and ethnology. E.B. Tylor termed these new scientists as socio-cultural evolutionists. In earlier decades of the nineteenth century, science as a whole comprised of loosely coordinated efforts among diverse practitioners. Science later transformed itself into an organized body of professionals committed to shared methodologies. Anthropology, and other sciences, were deeply pervaded by and embedded in other social discourses. Sociocultural evolutionists regarded religious belief as subject to the same forces of evolution as physiological development. In this respect, distinctions between British and other peoples were blurred, suggesting that they shared similar cultural/evolutionary processes. The complex of the Freudian father, or the ambivalent attitude of the child to his parents, a notion used in psychology, owed itself to a certain extent to the knowledge gained through anthropology in its research on the subject of the God-Man saviour-figure:

The belief in the physical fatherhood of God has not been confined to Syria in ancient and modern times. Elsewhere many men have been counted the sons of God in the most literal sense of the word, being supposed to have been begotten by his holy spirit in the wombs of mortal women.13

This is generally because the study of mythology and ritual provided a genealogical structure upon which Freud could plot the contents of the mind. The application of a totem/taboo theory to some aspects of Christianity, in particular the feelings of longing for, and fear of, the father, is briefly outlined by Freud in relation to the act of Christian communion:

A son-religion displaced the father-religion. As a sign of this substitution the ancient totem meal was revived in the form of communion, in which the company of brothers consumed the flesh and blood of the son – no longer the father – obtained sanctity thereby

and identified themselves with him. Thus we can trace through the ages the identity of the totem meal with animal sacrifice, with theanthropic human sacrifice and with Christian Eucharist, and we recognize in all these rituals the effect of the crime by which men were so deeply weighed down but of which they must none the less feel so proud.\(^{14}\)

The Christian communion is viewed as a fresh elimination of the father, a repetition of the guilty deed committed at Nemi. Freud backs up his argument with a statement from Frazer: ‘the Christian communion has absorbed within itself a sacrament which is doubtless far older than Christianity.’\(^{15}\)

Religion, for Freud, represents the externalization of man’s unconscious conflicts and their raising to the cosmic level. In one of its aspects, it provides substitute gratifications for primitive drives, in another it acts as a suppressive force against primitive drives. The initial specific goals of primitive societies were conditioned by practical considerations. The idea that civilization has an ever-increasing tendency to suppression, through a double-binding substitution, is clearly developed from Frazer’s hypothesis of mythic variation displacing the antecedent ritual – the killing of the priest. Frazer saw magic as becoming confused with religion in ancient societies:

For example, French peasants used to be, perhaps are still, persuaded that the priests could celebrate, with certain special rites, a ‘Mass of the Holy Spirit’, of which the efficacy was so miraculous that it never met with any opposition from the divine will; God was forced to grant whatever was asked of Him in this form, however rash and importunate might be the petition.\(^{16}\)

Frazer also traces the crucifixion of Christ to an earlier historical model where his treatment by the Roman soldiers at Jerusalem is compared to that of the mock king of Saturnalia.\(^{17}\) The divine

\(^{14}\) *Freud, Totem and Taboo*, pp. 154-5.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 155.


\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 666.
king who mocks the trickery of the magician replaces the priest, and Christ too is placed in this tradition of false sacred figures that are destroyed as accursed effigies. Each follows a line of development or sublimation. Psychological trauma is the latest human condition, the blocking out of this ancient riddle – the original trauma of man. Cultural development is a gradual withdrawal from the primal trauma into sublimated forms. For Frazer, magic was deduced from the elementary processes of reasoning when man essayed to bend nature to his wishes by the force of spells and enchantments ‘before he strove to coax and mollify a coy, capricious, or irascible deity by the soft insinuation of prayer and sacrifice’. These specific ways of adapting to reality are based on imaginative inventions. And they bear a resemblance to attempts made by primitives when wanting to control the forces of nature:

Children are in an analogous psychical situation, though their motor efficiency is still undeveloped [...] They satisfy their wishes in an hallucinatory manner, that is, they create a satisfying situation by means of centrifugal excitations of their sense organs. An adult primitive man has an alternative method open to him. His wishes are accompanied by a motor impulse, the will, which is later destined to alter the whole face of the earth in order to satisfy his wishes.

Here Freud’s notion of the ‘omnipotence of thoughts’ is clearly extended from Frazer’s ideas on the subject of magic and its laws of association (imitative and contagious). Freud thinks that he can carry the associative theory further and deeper, by identifying the dynamic factor of the primitive’s practices as a ‘willing wish’ that is at odds with ‘the other picture of the world – the one which we seem to perceive’. What Freud calls an ‘over-valuation of the mental processes’ is the belief that the external world can be altered by mere thinking. The neurotic by homologous structural correspondences inherited the same protective formulas that existed in the magic stage of history. The neurotic is equally superstitious in his psychical reality, as he tries to manipulate

18 Ibid., p. 52.
at pleasure certain natural forces as a way of warding off primal fears. Freud’s analogy
between primitive men and neurotics is established on what he calls a ‘historical reality’.20 Freud
later makes the analogy with acts of magic by primitives:

The kind of representation of a satisfied wish is quite comparable to children’s play,
which succeeds their earlier purely sensory technique of satisfaction. If children and
primitive men find play and imitative representation enough for them, that is not a sign of
their being unassuming in our sense or their resignedly accepting their actual impotence
[...]. As time goes on, the psychological accent shifts from the motives for the magical
act on to the measures by which it is carried out – that is, on to the act itself.21

Freud sees himself as psychological historian in the same way that Frazer views himself, in
discovering a causal chain stretching from the beginning to the present day.22 The reductionist
tradition of empirical philosophy, whilst explaining away symbolic rituals as bio-social givens,
was encouraging a widening speculative vision.23 Rather than being traced back to a single
factual source, seemingly inexplicable movements of the psyche are, in Freud’s terms, considered
as being ‘over-determined, having two or more simultaneous determinants’.24 The beginnings of
psychoanalysis were adding to the findings of anthropology, by expanding its theoretical
precedents, maintaining a line of continuity from old simple rituals as they are inherited into new
more complex forms. Religion is seen as based on a similar sense of guilt and the remorse that is
attached to the common crime. The paternal principle is fundamental for Freud in building up a
personal genealogy of his patients. The notions of God, and the relations with God, parallel those

20 Ibid., p. 160.
21 Ibid., pp. 84-5.
22 ‘One of the great achievements of the nineteenth century was to run shafts down into the low mental stratum in
many parts of the world, and thus to discover its substantial identity everywhere. It is beneath our feet – and not very
far beneath them.’ Frazer, The Golden Bough, p. 53.
23 Freud cites certain thinkers from an empiricists’ tradition: Francis Bacon, Charles Darwin, J. Long (Encyclopaedia
Britannica), Emmanuel Kant, David Hume, Robertson W. Smith, H. Spencer, E.B. Tylor.
24 Freud, Totem and Taboo, p. 100.
that exist in relation to the father. This psychoanalytical proposition is established from Freud's analysis of sacrifice, whether animal or human, as a commemoration, or re-enactment, of the original murder of the father - 'a repetition of the guilty deed'. The guilt about the act of parricide remains, and from this first great sacrificial act religion is said to begin to develop. The condition of neurosis is also presented in the allegory of original sin:

This creative sense of guilt still persists among us. We find it operating in neurotics, and producing new moral precepts and persistent restrictions as an asocial manner of atonement for crimes that have been committed and as a precaution against the committing of new ones.25

Freud chooses the Oedipus myth to support a claim that the myth of uncertain paternity is at the core of personality, and that father-murder, as derived from anthropological studies of totemism and expressed more variously and elaborately by Greek myth, is a cursed issue of history. Because an evolution of morality has repressed from our consciousness an awareness of the source of 'horror and self-punishment', the tragedy of Oedipus casts a yet undiscovered mystery over the history of religion and morality. Freud interprets the symbolism and action of two dead-father tragedies into a typology where 'depth' is equated with both a lost archaic memory and the unrevealed dark impulses of the modern consciousness. To penetrate the deepest layer is to discover a compounded psychological stratum. Freud's language echoes the geological metaphors of socioevolutionsists similar to those employed by Fechner. The mind is compacted like a geological dig where the lowest layer indicates a prehistoric past, and, in a Lamarckian sense, testifies to a simpler form of human development, which is on the same line of history moving towards a more complex form of human behavior:

The notion of a man becoming a god or of a god dying strikes us to-day as shockingly presumptuous; but even in classical antiquity there was nothing revolting in it. The

25 Ibid., p. 20.
elevation of the father who had once been murdered into a god from whom the clan claimed descent was a far more serious attempt at atonement than had been the ancient covenant with the totem.  

Freud frequently cites British anthropologists, especially Frazer, to support his theoretical claims:

To their thinking gods and men were akin, for many families traced their descent from a divinity, and the deification of man probably seemed as little extraordinary to them as the canonization of a saint seems to a modern Catholic.

The sacrifice is another example of the symbolic elimination of the father figure, as well as a cathartic event for the exorcising of guilt. Developed from Frazer, Freud constructs an extended theory in which the process of substitution, or sublimation, is expressed in a line of emotional and conflictual continuity:

As time went on, the animal lost its sacred character and the sacrifice lost its connections with the totem feast; it became a simple offering to the deity, an act of renunciation in favour of the god. God Himself had become so far exalted above mankind that He could only be approached through an intermediary – the priest.

The priest of Nemi is replaced by the sacrificial animal, and then through the history of religious development substituted with an effigy:

[These] sacrificial rites can be traced into late times, with an inanimate effigy or puppet taking the place of the living human being [...]. The original animal sacrifice was already a substitute for a human sacrifice - the ceremonial killing of the father.

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26 Ibid., p. 149. Edward B. Tylor states a similar argument: [The] conception of the human soul is, as to its most essential nature, continuous from the philosophy of the savage thinker to the modern professor of theology. Its definition has remained from the first that of an animating, separable, surviving entity, the vehicle of individual personal experience. The theory of the soul is one principal part of a system of religious philosophy which unites, in an unbroken line of mental connexion, the savage fetish-worshipper and the civilized Christian. 'Primitive Culture, Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion Language, Art, and Custom, vol. 1, fifth edition 1913 (London: John Murray, 1929), pp. 501-2.


28 Ibid., p. 150.

29 Ibid., p. 151.
Freud explores the sacrificial connections further to surmise that neurotics regularly commit suicide as self-punishment for someone else’s death. What is new in Freud’s account of murder as sacrifice is that he draws it into a modern condition, where this factual event of the past is placed in a psychical context. Each symbolic act is further substituted in a continual movement throughout history. The neurotic represents a further advancement of this substitution:

The memory of the first great act of sacrifice thus proved indestructible, in spite of every effort to forget it; and at the very point at which men sought to be at the farthest distance from the motives that led to it, its undistorted reproduction emerged in the form of the sacrifice of the god.

Here Freud signals key concepts in his own thinking (memory, sacrifice, to forget), which can be referred back to *The Golden Bough*. Memory is a form of ritualistic inheritance in human society, but moreover operating as actions of unconscious sublimation because they are not played out on the surface. Memory is consequently viewed as a repository of past events - primarily traumatic childhood events - actualities in the mind, giving them the quality of remembrance.

History as memory seemed to Freud not bound by time or place, but was independent of categories of the external world, not limited to past and personal events. We today often describe the ‘unconscious’ in spatial metaphors - contains, contents - but Freud preferred metaphors that give the primary processes/memory a correlative that reaches further back from the history of the personal and present. Freud, along with Jung, helped to establish the ontological ground of psychology upon empirical proof to demonstrate historical associations in the case material of neurotic patients. The therapeutic situation unfolds in terms of a narrative called ‘a case history’, where ‘mythemes’ provide basic patterns for the tales of their lives. To Freud, totem theories underpin the dramatic mythemes of classical tales, and together they in turn underpin his own

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30 Ibid., p. 154.
theoretical claims on the universal father complex. The tales themselves had a psychopathological aspect because the mythical propensity followed bizarre patterns of murder, guilt, and sacrifice.

Freud relates closely the 'science of mythology' to the yielding of the 'memory'. Freud quotes Frazer in relation to the unifying significance of the totem in primitive culture: 'The totem bond is stronger than the bond of blood or family in the modern sense.'32 This pre-historic bond is transformed by Freud into a powerful form of emotional identification that endures into the modern:

My patient's husband purchased a household article of some kind and brought it home with him. She insisted that it should be removed or it would make the room she lived in 'impossible'. For she had heard that the article had been bought in a shop situated in, let us say, 'Smith' Street. 'Smith', however, was the married name of a woman friend of hers who lived in a distant town and whom she had known in her youth under her maiden name. Consequently the article that had been purchased here in Vienna was as taboo as the friend herself with whom she must not come into contact.33

Freud also quotes an example from Frazer to indicate a primitive analogy:

A Maori chief would not blow a fire with his mouth; for his sacred breath would communicate its sanctity to the fire, which would pass it on to the pot on the fire, which would pass it on to the meat in the pot, which would pass it on to the man who ate the meat, which was in the pot, which stood on the fire, which was breathed on by the chief; so that the eater, infected by the chief's breath conveyed through these intermediaries, would surely die.34

The most striking point of agreement between the obsessional prohibitions of neurotics and taboos is that these prohibitions are equally lacking in motive and equally puzzling in their

31 Ibid., pp. 151-2.
32 Freud, Totem and Taboo, p. 3.
33 Ibid., p. 28.
34 Ibid.
origins. They share the logic of a magic view. As in the case of taboo, the principal prohibition, the nucleus of the neurosis, is against touching. Obsessional prohibitions involve just as extensive renunciations and restrictions in the lives of those who are subject to them as do taboo prohibitions. Certain actions are performed as necessary to ensure sanctity, and thereafter these actions become compulsive or obsessive acts. A continual conflict between the prohibition and instinct to do something is what Freud refers to as a psychical fixation. The principal characteristic of this psychological constellation is described as the subject’s ambivalent attitude towards a single object, or an act connected with that object. The transmissibility of taboo is a reflection of the tendency for the unconscious instinct in the neurosis to shift constantly along associative paths onto new objects.

This universal law of contagious contact is derivative of empirical notions concerning causal connections. Frazer uses the term ‘association of ideas’:

If my analysis of the magician’s logic is correct, its two great principles turn out to be merely two different misapplications of the association of ideas. Homoeopathic magic is founded on the association of ideas by similarity: contagious magic is founded on the association of ideas by contiguity.35

Locke was the first to use the expression when, for example, he recounts how someone who learnt to dance in a room in which there happened to be an old trunk might so connect being able to dance with the presence of the trunk that he could thereafter dance well only in a room containing the trunk or one like it. Locke contrasted ideas associated in this way with those which have a natural correspondence and connection with one another. David Hume used the universality of the principles of association to explain how it is that different people make similar associations. The more frequent was the concurrence, the more firmly grounded was the belief.

35 Frazer, The Golden Bough, p. 27.
Frazer uses this empirical idea to certify myths as mistaken beliefs going back to similar practices. And Freud develops the idea to certify neurotics as misguided in the compulsive ‘unnatural’ association they make between objects and their sanctity. We can see that Freud is continuing a practice of causal analysis inherited from Frazer down to Hume and Locke. Because Freud sees the mind as historically palimpsestic, the layering of mental associations could be time-less: a legacy of psychic pressures starting with the deed at Nemi. Their world of natural connections is as self-justifying as our own commonplace assumptions.

Freud shares with Frazer an interest in the original motivation; for it explains the ancestral conflicts. In obsessional neuroses, the survival of the omnipotence of thoughts is clearly visible. The primary obsessive acts of neurotics are of an entirely magical character. Freud relies heavily on Frazer’s exhaustive repository of mythic and anthropological fact, for revealing psychological connections between totemism and exogamy, and to construct a relationship between the totems symbolism to communal moral restrictions. Despite his acknowledgement that a constant united significance between totemism and exogamy did not always exist, Freud continues to advance his theory on this presumed premise. This tenuous relationship between what is scientifically verifiable and what is theoretical elaboration existed as a part of the interdisciplinary nature of the subject. The phrase ‘crossing and blended’ characterizes the methodology of both Frazer and Freud. Empirical knowledge collapses in upon itself as the critical armature advances further and further away from the evidence – the cited models of primitive experience. On empirical grounds, both mythographers claim a methodological site; but the distinction between mythography and anthropology becomes blurred as analogies are crossed and blended.

Nevertheless, Freud helped to popularize the anthropological concept of man as evolutionarily related to a primal crime figured in the sacrifice of a human-god like the priest at

36 'Certainly in the English-speaking world Frazer was responsible, beyond all others and long before Freud, for the way educated persons came to see their lives as somehow problematically related to a primitive substratum of the self.' Robert Ackerman, 'J.G. Frazer Revisited', ASCH vol. 47 (1978), p. 232.
Nemi. Freud's psychological insights into Frazer's notion of the dying god emphasizes the modern theme of guilt in the denial of the great crime, psychological degeneration, the descent from a lower form, and the abnormal reversion or neurotic regression to a pre-historical animal state. Charles Darwin, in *The Descent of Man* (1871), also refers to how points of structure and constitution to the lower, and less highly organized, form still remain, and how modern man is still liable to the occasional lapse. The laws of inheritance prevail in various points of correspondence. Man is the modified descendant of some pre-existing form bearing homologous structures.37 Freud believed the foundation of society, and a monotheistic religion, was central to the superior concept of God, the father-surrogate overcoming the animal side of man, and, like Frazer, believed too much in the existence of certain fixed religious conditions at different epochs of man's experience like animism, and totemism. But, Freud compensates for modern man having repressed the race memory of mankind in favor of an ego-ideal projection, by concentrating too much on the 'lower levels of culture', the animalistic nature, or dark crime, of primitive religion. In a way, the momentum of psycho-anthropological discourse intruded too quickly into mainstream popular culture for theoretical refinements to check the increasing flow of speculations, leaving the new sciences to successfully construct myths of the divided self, or a savage darkness that reigned within the psyche of modern man.38

The geographical trajectory of Marlow’s journey up the Congo repeats a similar spatial metaphor of psychological bifurcation between the primal and the modern self. Africa is seen as an alien world, Europe’s antitype, described as dense vegetation and pullulating with hidden evil. The jungle is a present reminder of Western prehistory, with sailing up the Congo 'like travelling


38 Malinowski, in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* [1927] (London: Routledge, 2001), disputes the summation of Freud's critical analysis: '[It] is impossible to assume origins of culture as one creative act by which culture, fully armed springs into being out of one crime, cataclysm or rebellion [...] if the real cause of the Òedipus complex and of culture into the bargain is to be sought in that traumatic act of birth by parricide; if the complex merely survived in the 'race memory of mankind' – then the complex ought obviously to wear out with time.', p. 133. Malinowski believes that this haunting memory ought to have disappeared within the 'highest culture'.
back to the earliest beginnings of the world. For K.K. Ruthven, Conrad describes the primitive lure of Africa as though experiencing an act of penetration to the most ancient core of the European mind, arguing that the novella develops this Frazerian-anthropological element in a manner that curiously anticipates Freud or Jung. Anticipation, though, suggests foresight rather than imaginative development. The reverting to barbarism, and the deterioration of white man’s morale let loose from European restraint, as a voyage into the dark recesses of the psychological mind, repeats a spatial metaphor of the dual self that was already established within the field of the new sciences of psychological-anthropology. The pre-historic self exists within the civilized self but is also located in a primal past. For some this kind of knowledge is too much to bear. So, for the living who hold onto positive, pre-Freudian, notions of humanity’s progress, the full bearing of Kurtz’ last words is too much to take:

‘To the very end’, I said, shakily. ‘I heard his very last words [....]’ I stopped in fright. ‘Repeat them,’ she murmured in a heart-broken tone. ‘I want – I want-something-something-to-to live with.’ I was on the point of crying at her, ‘Don’t you hear them?’ The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. ‘The horror! The horror!’

‘His last word – to live with,’ she insisted. ‘Don’t you understand I loved him – I loved him-I loved him!’

I pulled myself together and spoke slowly. ‘The last word he pronounced was-your name.’

As a civilized realist, Marlow creates a false memory for succour, thus further reinforcing the vicarious effect of Kurtz’ psychological regression. Through multi-layers of narratorial distancing, the novella is structured as a quest to salvage hope from the depths of a forbidding underworld. Marlow comes back empty handed - recovering nothing to comfort the human soul. His manly adventure brings back an unbearable insight into the hidden depths of our eternal soul,


40 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, p. 251.
exposing a Victorian taboo of our psychological ancestry. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* locates a rational truth at the beginning of a superstitious mystery. Freud, in *Totem and Taboo*, turns this scientific myth into the psychological paradigm of murder and buried guilt. Marlow's physical odyssey recovers the secret of an inscrutable horror: that the mystery of man's darkest desires is located in the heart of man, and in the heart of our ancestral past. Conrad is suggesting, similarly to Freud, that the civilized body of modern man has not yet cast off all psychological connections to his primal states. These hidden drives can be our undoing if rediscovered, and are best kept buried in cultural memory. And like Freud's modern man, Marlow, in telling a lie, acts out the processes of repression, denying the irrational roots of our mythical ancestry.

*Heart of Darkness* more than anticipated Freud's theories - it went a long way to establish further the rhetoric of the divided self as naturalized myth. By having Marlow go up the Congo into the epicenter of Africa, into its deepest biological region, Conrad dramatizes a Freudian psychological journey in which the civilized self is returned to his prehistoric origins. Conrad plays out the unraveling of the ego of the superiorly cultured self to the primal id, a dual spatial trajectory of the geographical and the psychological that was underpinned by late Victorian theories of a reversion to savage type. Kurtz submits himself to the jungle's maelstrom, and loses self-control of his civilized inhibitions. Marlow, on the other hand, maintains his cultured identity because he is given the role of the realist, witnessing the strange events to a third anonymous narrator. And yet, Marlow admits to censoring the whole truth to a female, Kurtz' intended, whilst revealing all to the male listener. The use of an outer and an inner narrator reinforces the notion that the whole story is told as a dream/nightmare to be repressed. Conrad is dealing with an anthropological truth that psychologically we have yet fully to come to terms with. For Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies* (1957), myth is a type of speech, a mode of signification conveyed by discourse. Conrad exposes the rhetorical falsities of a colonial myth based on a Manichean struggle of godly light against evil darkness, and goes some way to demystify the notion of
Victorian progress concomitant with the stridency of colonial force. But, the novella, nevertheless, remains ambivalently inscribed into the conventional rhetoric of Imperialism. Kurtz' undoing, unraveling, or reversion is an exposition of self-division – a duality that is traced through the journey up the Congo that dramatically simulates a Frazerian/Freudian mapping out of human development through history. Conrad avoids direct implication into the imperial myth of racial superiority, but the novella presents a symbolic metaphor that complies with an en-cultured myth of human duality.

*Heart of Darkness* is built upon various sources that together make up a context of antinomian categories: Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent, In Darkest Africa; The Congo*, Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out; How the Poor Live*, R. H. Benin's *Benin the City of Blood, The Benin Massacre*, and Tylor's *Anthropology*. William Booth in 1890 makes the analogy between the two tribes of savages, the ivory raiders and the publicans who flourish on the weakness of the poor:

This summer the attention of the civilised world has been arrested by the story which Stanley has told of 'Darkest Africa' and his journeyings across the heart of the Lost Continent [...]. As there is a darkest Africa is there not also a darkest England? Civilisation, which can breed its own barbarians, does it not also breed its own pygmies? May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone's throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest? The more the mind dwells upon the subject, the closer the analogy appears [...] The two tribes of savages, the human baboon and the handsome dwarf.41 Each one complies with a basic taxonomy of racial otherness. Drawing from the works of William Booth and George R. Sims' *How the Poor Live and Horrible London* (1889), Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903) brings to the slums of East London masses the analogy of the far-off savage tribe in comparing the British poor with the Indians of Alaska. Jack London

enters into the under-world of London with the attitude of an adventurous explorer:

But O Cook, O Thomas Cook & Son, pathfinders and trail-clearers, living sign-posts to all the world, and bestowers of first aid to bewildered travellers – unhesitantly and instantly, with ease and celerity, could you send me to Darkest Africa or Innermost Thibet, but to East End of London, barely a stone's throw distant from Ludgate Circus, you know not the way!42

Despite his journalistic intentions, the author relies too easily on the metaphor of descending into the abyss, a physical domain cut off from the normal habitat and morality of civilized humanity. Still, Jack London maintains a civilized refuge from the slums:

While living, eating, and sleeping with the people of the East End, it was my intention to have a port of refuge, not too far distant, into which I could run now and again to assure myself that good clothes and cleanliness still existed. Also in such port I could receive my mail, work up my notes, and sally forth occasionally in changed garb to civilization.43

Jack London leads a double life and attracts the sort of curiosity that makes him feel like a strange animal. The author's explorations take him beyond a familiar urban space, but his clothes remain as indices to that initial self. Jack London is fearful of losing himself, of not being able to return to the origins and territory of civilization. The East End is metaphorically mapped out as marked off, like the deepest heart of Africa, from the cleanliness of a writer's refuge. Jack London's exploration into the poor underworld takes up similar visual metaphors to describe what is unfamiliar. Henry Mayhew, in London Labour and The London Poor (1849-61), avoids homogenous visual metaphors when he attempts to classify the subtle gradations of London's street-folk.44 But the role of classifying objective onlooker is often tainted with prescriptive associations that the venturing explorer packs with him before setting out on a journey into the

43 Ibid., p. 17.
underworld. Jacob A. Riis, in *How The Other Half Lives, Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890), conjures up an image of the stricken populace of the city poor as a rising force of nature:

The sea of a mighty population, held in galling fetters, heaves uneasily in the tenements [....] The gap between the classes in which it surges, unseen, unsuspected by the thoughtless, is widening day by day.45

The otherworld of social anonymity often bears a sense of the uncanny depths of an underworld. George Orwell, in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), also enters into and departs from the underworld of poverty like an explorer:

My story ends here. It is a fairly trivial story, and I can only hope that it has been interesting in the same way as a travel diary. I can at least say, Here is the world that awaits you if you are ever penniless. Some day I want to explore that world more thoroughly.46

Throughout the nineteenth century, the literary tradition of transcribing unknown geographical regions was informed by various scientific theories of evolution. The latest cognitive ideas on evolution influenced the literary devices of Jules Verne who launched his literary career within a series called *Extraordinary Journeys in the Known and Unknown*. In his *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), Professor Lidenbrock travels down through the geological layers of past to reach the centre of the earth, encountering along the way artefacts of man’s evolutionary past:

Within that area, of perhaps three square miles, was accumulated the whole history of animal life, writ too small in the recent ground of the inhabited world [....] He was


presented with a priceless assortment of Leptotheria, Mericotheria, Lophiodia, Anopltheres, Megatheres, Mastodons, Protopithecae, Pterodactyls — of every monster from before the Flood, all in a pile there just for gratification. Imagine the famous library in Alexandria that Omar burned, suddenly and miraculously reborn from the ashes; and transport a fanatical book-collector into it [...] Thus, in a single move, man had leaped many centuries up the ladder of time [...] It is of the white race, it is of our own race! [...] It was indeed an amazing sight, that of generations of men and animals mingling in his cemetery [...] Was some man of the abyss also still wandering along these lonely shores?47

The time-space equivalence for describing the descent into the earth bears the hallmarks of Lamarckian evolutionary theory, a literary device and familiar trope of travelling backwards through time and for describing the unknown demographical regions of earth:

One apparently scientific example central to the novel is the time-space equivalence: by going down into the Earth, the heroes go back through the layers of past time. They leave the nineteenth century, pass through the successive geological ages, and become 'prehistoric' or 'fossilized'.48

Various modernist texts contain visions of descending into hell; for example, in the works of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The word 'descent' bears a post-Darwinian, and a quasi-theological signification. The under-world also has connotations of a vast substratum of vice, the idiosyncratic 'lays' of the city.49 The word 'Avemi' ('the Underworld') indicates a source of inspiration within medieval ideas of an underground Hell:

"Let us descend into the blind world now,"
The poet, who was deathly pale, began;
"I shall go first and you will follow me
[...] Let us go, the way that waits is long."
So he set out, and so he had me enter

48 Ibid., introduction, p. xxii.
On that first circle girdling the abyss.\textsuperscript{50}

Lidenbrock is a scientific adventurer's equivalent to Virgil, embodying the extremes of a driven, and obsessive, pursuit to map out various underworlds. The title to the first chapter of Jack London's \textit{The People of the Abyss} is 'The Descent'. Similarly to Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, in \textit{The Soul of London} (1905), projects a vision of London as an evolved metropolis overshadowed by a double and obscure topography:

\begin{quote}
We know that equatorial swamps have evolved tribes, short legged, web-footed, fitted to live in damp, in filth, in perpetual miasmas. There is no reason therefore why London should not do as much for children.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

Alluding to James Thomson's apocalyptic poem, 'City of Dreadful Night' (1874), Ford sees a visual link between the raw, naked poor humanity of its black, walled in, submerged desolation, its inhuman, soulless, useless, self-indulgences, and a reversion to the primeval swamps from which London originally arose. This repeats Booth's visual analogy. Notions of an unknown race of people were often underpinned by conventional literary devices, reinforcing the distorted image of a subhuman, or pre-historic, type.

The scramble for Africa often took on connotations of an uncovering adventure, descending into the dark abyss of a past time, a trope that helped to support notions of a racial superiority in the West. Edward Said argues that the Orient existed in the imagination of the West as a place isolated from the mainstream of European progress in the sciences, arts, and commerce. Notions of backwardness, and degeneracy, were associated with ideas about the biological bases of racial inequality, compounded by second-order Darwinianism that


accentuated the 'scientific' validity of the divisions of races into advanced and backward. The binary typology of regions designated as 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and linked to elements in Western society: delinquents, the insane, women, and the poor. The Western male often posed as an advanced intellect traveling into unmapped regions of the earth. A white specialist with highly refined scientific techniques could do the sifting and reconstructing with a vocabulary of classifying generalities. Outsiders, isolated from the familiar, could be uncovered, searched out, and defined within a geographical space:

Geography was essentially the material underpinning for knowledge about the Orient. All the latent and unchanging characteristics of the Orient stood upon, were rooted in, its geography.52

Murray Pittock identifies the significance of the traveler's status as having an established tradition in the construction of a cultural identity in Britain:

Travel also formed part of a high cultural representation of its own identity, both in practices such as the collection of artifacts, and in the new genre of travel writing, as well as in the custom of having one's picture painted abroad53

The civilized traveler tended to construct a notion of an obscure identity according to popular cultural representations. This included spatial metaphors of unfamiliar territory. The geographical site that characterized the uncivilized outsider was framed by the concept of anthropological origins in the historical development of the human race - the myth of a primal self lurking underneath the civilized modern man.

Late nineteenth-century anthropology created an awareness of an excluded or long-lost

psychological member of humanity’s family tree, bringing with it a cultural anxiety of a
force of nature that civilization had yet not tamed. For Freud, the danger is that the ideal of
human civilization depends on forgetting the nature of our animal origins:

The fateful question for the human race seems to be whether, and to what extent, the
development of its civilization will manage to overcome the disturbance of communal life
caused by the human drive for aggression and self-destruction. Human beings have made
such strides in controlling the forces of nature that, with the help of these forces, they will
have no difficulty in exterminating one another, down to the last man.54

Freud’s Totem and Taboo foreshortened the line of historical continuity between modern man
and the primitive, and such psychological metaphors of self-division became scientific myths that
in turn became popularized literary metaphors. Conrad’s novella compounds the anthropological
trope of man as a thinly disguised animal, and that at the heart of Africa is a place where time has
stood still. Kurtz crosses a cultural divide to discover within himself a buried ancestral self. In a
way, Kurtz expresses the horror felt when Acteaon is transformed into a stag – the realization that
life is a tragic suspension between two states of being: beast and man.

In Kurtz, Conrad inverts the monomaniacal quest of the European mind to control his fate
and to conquer the unknown. Kurtz is idolized by Marlow, even though he has reverted to a dark
ancestral source. Captain Ahab, in Moby Dick, is an earlier representative of an ungodly man
beset with an obsessive curse inherited from the European imagination. Moby Dick, the white
god, is a primitive symbol of metaphysical immanence, a universal legacy of fertility mythology:

Wherefore, for all these things, we account the whale immortal in his species, however
perishable in his individuality. He swam the seas before the continents broke water; he
once swam over the Tuileries, and Windsor Castle, and the Kremlin. In Noah’s flood he
despised Noah’s Ark; and if ever the world is to be again flooded, like the Netherlands, to
kill off its rats, then the eternal whale will still survive, and rearing upon the topmost crest

of the equatorial flood, spout his frothed defiance to the skies.55

Within a hunting narrative, Captain Ahab pursues the mysterious thing that has shaped his mortal frame, to give chase to the seemingly inexplicable, the insensible, the unknown, the unimaginable causality of his agonizing wound, the eternal grief that befalls mankind:

For thought Ahab, while even the highest earthly felicities ever have a certain unsignifying pettiness lurking in them, but at the bottom, all heart-woes, have a mystic significance, and, in some men, an archangel grandeur; so do their diligent tracings-out not belie the obvious deduction. To trail the genealogies of these high mortal miseries, carries us at last among the sourceless primogenitures of the gods; so that in the face of all the glad, haymaking suns, and the soft cymballing, round harvest moons, we must needs give in to this: that the gods themselves are not for ever glad. The ineffaceable, sad birthmark in the brow of man, is but the stamp of sorrow in the singers.56

Ahab’s Puritan imagination anticipates the terrible woe of Kurtz. Like the hunter Actaeon, Ahab, and all who sail with him bar one, is punished for transgressing the immutable and sourceless laws of nature; for Ahab needs to discover the source of his physical injury and the eternal woe of man, the curse imposed by the gods. Moby Dick is a mysterious supernatural creature of our mythological ancestry or of mystic significance that for D.H. Lawrence is hunted by the maniacal fanaticism of our white mental consciousness so as to replace the sacred for the idea that knows every source to mystery of human existence. Moby Dick is, ‘Hunted by monomaniacs of the idea.’57 The cause of Ahab’s suffering is the intensity of will that attempts to lift the veil of Maya to take on the suffering of the world, arrogantly believing he can be the master of fate and the captain of his soul amidst the terrible fatality that is our human condition. As Bertrand Russell would put it,

56 Ibid., pp. 495-6.
[the] cause of suffering is the intensity of the will; the less we exercise will, the less we shall suffer.  

But in the great hunt, amidst the mythic characterization of the primal states of nature and of human consciousness, Ahab re-invokes the eternal animal instinct to kill its prey, whilst perverting the hunter myth, thwarting its ritual purpose by setting himself above the supernatural agent of natural fertility. Ahab is condemned to live at the level of being, haunted and scarred by an invisible source of the absolute that he tries to wrestle with, cut into, and cut out of his soul. As W.H. Auden puts it, the whole book is an elaborate synecdoche, with the White Whale appearing as a symbolic vision, numinous, a declaration of the power and majesty of God which transcends any human standards of ethics. For Ahab, it is a speechless brute that he blasphemes. Against the metaphysical, Melville marks man off. For Moby Dick is an eternal creature of ancestral myth, a visible physical embodiment of the deep universal patterns of life. Similar to the cruel irony of Actaeon’s fate, Ahab ends his life symbolically stuck to the back of the thing he hunted and hated, taking his obsessive curiosity beyond the bounds of the temporal and metaphysical. Melville reverts to the epic nature of the hunting myth to symbolically retell a cautionary tale of man’s futile attempts to understand the mysterious cause of his marked doom. Because Ahab cannot accept the cause of his woe, or conform passively to the human level of being, he breaks the codes of the hunter, and his obsessive pursuit becomes irrational and animalistic, as well as vengeful.

Ahab is a prototype of a modern lust to pursue to the point of death an idea which has to rationalize the mythic, and to destroy or control our symbolic heritage. Conan Doyle’s Sherlock


60 Ibid., ‘The Romantic Use of Symbols’, pp. 9-12.
Holmes, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), is too a lonely figure set on a cause, this time representing the 'upholder of high imperial normality' in his capacity to solve through his deductive thinking the curse of the Baskervilles. The origin of the Hound of the Baskervilles goes beyond the death of Sir Charles Baskerville in direct line to Hugo Baskerville during the time of the Great Rebellion, the early eighteenth-century. The hound in its local region takes on a legendary horrific status haunting the moors of Devonshire and the Great Grimpen Mire. For Holmes's intellect, the fantastical does not tease his credulity:

'I find that before the terrible event occurred several people had seen a creature upon the moor which corresponds with this Baskerville demon, and which could not possibly be any animal known to science. They all agreed that it was a huge creature, luminous, ghastly and spectral. I have cross-examined these men, one of them a hard-headed countryman, one a farrier, and one a moorland farmer, who all tell the same story of this dreadful apparition, exactly corresponding to the hell-hound of the legend. I assure you that there is a reign of terror in the district, and that it is a hardy man who will cross the moor at night.'

'And you, a trained man of science, believe it to be supernatural?'

Holmes, like Frazer, in solving the crime, is able to demystify the supernatural myth. The enormous coal-black, savage, and hellish hound, outlined in a flickering flame that sprung out from the shadows of the fog, is a pure bloodhound reared and painted with phosphorous and half-starved by the true killer, Mr. Stapleton, in his attempt to inherit the ill-omened estate of the Baskervilles. Like Jack London, Holmes can retreat to a refuge in London, to the front of a blazing fire in the sitting room of Baker Street, after solving the Baskerville mystery, the story of the family hell-hound, and Sir Charles' death. Holmes can lead a double life; adopt the garb of traveling gypsy beggar in the moors to disguise his official identity within the milieu of an alien country. Whilst Holmes is the agent of surveillance and policing, a paradigm of rationality, he nonetheless camouflages the doubt and anxiety underlying the allegiance to reason in a bourgeois

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The more outre and grotesque an incident is the more carefully it deserves to be examined, and the very point which appears to complicate a case is, when duly considered and scientifically handled, the one which is most likely to elucidate it.63

Holmes leads another double life for he can only find relief from the monotony of the world through his obsessive compulsion to solve problems:

‘My mind,’ he said, ‘rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram, or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation.’64

Holmes is a rarely recognized development of Nietzsche’s bored aristocratic anarchist, racked by morbid thoughts, bent on self-destruction, who can only find a routine to his daily existence by regulating the criminal disturbances of a civilized society into Euclidean formulations. The hell-hound, like Moby-Dick, symbolizes the ancestral creatures of a pagan past, a spectral myth that has to be rationalized into more acceptable and plausible terms. In 1901, while recovering in Norfolk from his South African experiences, Fletcher Robinson amused Conan Doyle by telling him some Dartmoor legends, including one about a spectral hound:

The dog of death has the most ancient pedigree of any canine species, well recorded as far back as Anubis, the sinister jackal-headed undertaker-god of Ancient Egypt, who must derive from a much older fear. The North European Mesolithic people began breeding the hostility out of wolves at least as far back as 7500 B.C [...] But the terror of the ancestry has persisted the world over. In Britain this lycophobia has lingered longest in the Black Dog group of legends.65

63 Ibid., p. 180.
The dog of death, in Conan Doyle’s tale, represents more than a criminal threat to Edwardian society. It is Sherlock Holmes who murders by dissecting - anatomizing causal parts to create a total picture of the crime, and the supernatural wonder that haunts, like Frazer’s goddess of Nemi, the Devonshire moors at night. The irony is that, whilst Holmes ventures out in the guise of dispossessed country folk, the down and outs of a provincial landscape, in order to solve the riddle of an ancient curse, back at his gentlemanly furnished bachelor apartment in Baker Street remains the evidence to a sinister aspect of the jaded detective. Holmes, under the influence of a seven-per-cent solution of cocaine, is aroused to excitement with the after-effects of a black reaction. For Holmes, detection is, and ought to be, an exact science, treated in the same cold and unemotional manner. Holmes tries to demarcate emotions and the powers of reasoning into two identifiable camps, yet cannot control his own psychological dependence on artificial stimulants to ward off chronic ennui. Holmes is quite capable of killing off, through the powers of deduction, visible symbols of man’s age old fear of the unknown conjured up in the hostile surroundings of a wild nature, but remains deficient in conquering his own addictive habits, illicitly performed in his domestic dwelling place. Holmes fails to recognize the ambivalent failings and the illusions of his logical thinking:

Reified rationality is incomplete and therefore insufficiently rational. It cannot grasp or explain the human condition in its totality [.....] Partial fragmented rationality [is] elevated to the status of an absolute guiding principle of human behaviour66

Sherlock Holmes can solve social disturbances, denounce the archaic symbols of evil, deduce discrete causal principles via the fragmented signs of a disconnected phenomenal world, and induce the totality of a crime scene, but is quite incapable of speculating further on the elemental causes of his alienated malaise. Holmes’ rage for an order of scientific law signifies the superego

65 Ibid., Foreword by John Fowles, p. 8.

66 Ernest Mandel, Delightful Murder, quoted from Kestner, Sherlock’s Men, p. 205.
of progressive authority that is unable to confront the sinister signs of its own 'underworld' of individual demons.

Holmes is detached from his dark soul, because what Freud calls the death drive, the aggressive self-destruction of civilized humanity, is often played out on the surface or projected onto the savage darkness of a far-off geographical region. The spatial metaphor of Kurtz' undoing within the heart of Africa presents a typically modern view of the religious theme of 'evil' that distances the subject from the very source. The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886), by Robert Louis Stevenson, is another example of the Victorian awakening consciousness towards the split personality of the civilized self:

"I learned to recognize the thorough and primitive duality of man [...] If each, I told myself, could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable."  

As if to make a comparative study, the doctor is able, by a compound draft, to experience the double-consciousness, or the plurality, of the self, as separate physical identities. Hyde is the irrational other, the buried historical antecedent, whilst Jekyll is the respected, sexually-restrained, Victorian doctor. Jekyll wakes with his good qualities from his temporary deformities seemingly unimpaired. Through Hyde, the doctor experiences the horror of the other self. The split personality is a sharp divide of equal selves, but Stevenson suggests that Jekyll, the good self, conceals the bad half. This is despite the fact Hyde takes final control, and the split personality breaks down as the two selves overlap. For the eponymous hero, there can be no return to a normal life, as soon as one has awoken the chaos, violence, and anger of the dormant, and addictive, double. Only death cures the aberration of the primal illness. Here science is seen to discover, and rekindle, the unknown mysteries of our savage half-breeds. Jekyll describes his

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irrational transformation as being in the throes of a violent change, regenerating a selfishness that the good side must, but cannot, circumscribe. A symbolic duality is presented, demonstrating the late Victorian ambivalent fascination with science as a redemptive cure for the sins of history. Stevenson's figurative monster is a modern psychological manifestation of the human condition, where the metaphor of self-division replaces the religious strains of good and sinfulness. Human drives are no longer contained within the composite whole of the individual subject. Sin exists in a repressed divided primal self. Hyde is a sexual beast with a separately named identity, controlled with the use of medical drugs. Even the symbolic schematic order collapses, evil is still perceived as located, and is therefore metaphorically displaced, from the actual self. Repressed violence is moved onto a figurative surrogate to disguise the human source of violence.

Dracula is another sexual aberration of scientific fantasy. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), belonging to a flowering of horror fiction in this period, signals a late nineteenth-century clash between scientific progressivism, and the ancient world of pagan superstitions. Dracula is an immortal demigod defying the laws of nature, and posing an immoral threat of sexual and biological degeneracy to the Victorian civilized home of England. Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1892), it is an imperial adventure going beyond the familiar, and known, of the empirical west into the geographical unknown. The figure of the vampire has its historical antecedents drawn from the folklore that Stoker studied in the British Museum. For Dracula is the demonic double of the blood-guzzling Christian. Yet, his unearthly presence symbolizes an unholy threat to the new civilized world. Dracula embodies the contemporary anthropological trace of a pagan god that has to die. The triumph of the modern rational world, whilst exploiting ancient tools of superstition, coincides with Dracula's demise. The Transylvanian gypsies, the wolves of the forest, the battlements of his castle are reminders of a forgotten, subconscious, age. Even so, Dracula desires still the natural consummation of death,
a Christian closure, above his bloodlust for female innocence. With his death comes peace:

He was deathly pale, just like a waxen image, and the red eyes glared with the horrible vindictive look which I knew too well. As I looked, the eyes saw the sinking sun, and the look of hate in them turned to triumph [...] I shall be glad as long as I live that even in that moment of final dissolution there was in the face a look of peace, such as I never could have imagined might have rested there.68

Dracula dies a dead man to the relief of Mina Harker and the party of English gentlemen carrying Winchesters. The 'Holy Circle' has protected them from the wolves, and they thank God with an earnest 'Amen' that Christian order has been restored. For his demonic followers, Dracula was a cult figure like Kurtz, a pagan god that ruled over their superstitious dominion. Dracula is told with a sense of disbelief or incredulity as though such a 'wild story' was unfathomable even to its witnesses. Seven years later after the journey to Transylvania, Jonathan Harker struggles to comprehend how the 'blotted out' traces relate to the 'living truths'. Narrated as a Freudian memory between several fragmented accounts, Dracula represents a fantasy of the imagination, a desire to recapture a sense of a mythological age, and a fear of the subconscious other, the irrational embodiment of our dreams. The novel dramatizes a conflict between the growth of new beliefs and old beliefs that are outside empirical accounts of the known but like 'corporeal transference', 'astral bodies', and 'hypnotism' confuse our belief system.69 Each witnessing account is an attempt to personally come to terms with a sense of the unknown that allowed for a temporary moment of anarchic displacement before the voice of empirical authority reassures the reader but the finale of a return to the world of consciousness, or ideological norms. In both Dracula and Heart of Darkness, the threat to Victorian civilization is set within a mythic context.

69 'But yet we see around us every day the growth of new beliefs, which think themselves new; and which are yet but old.', Ibid., p. 191.
Dracula represents a demonic power and Kurtz speaks the words of his evil undoing. Dracula and Heart of Darkness re-awaken the mythic, whilst distancing the modern mind, for sanity's sake, from its insurmountable truth; for the modern cannot deal with what is unleashed when the mythic is awoken — its forces of degeneration and regression. Each narrative symbolizes the theme of evil within a narrative of Imperial adventure, and deals with the nature of evil by placing it within a metaphorical narrative of the pre-historic past.

In She (1887), H. Rider Haggard narrates the adventure as a voyage into the forgotten past. The Western visitor is both curious and sceptical:

'Ah, my Holly,' she said, 'thou art of a truth like those old Jews — of whom the memory vexes me so sorely — unbelieving, and hard to accept that which they have not known.'

The immortal Ayesha, whilst echoing the parables of Jesus, embodies an over-arching historical memory. Unlike Holly, her knowledge of history is not gained solely through books, or secondary accounts, for she has witnessed human development throughout its ages. She represents the eternal mysteries of the mythic past, posing no immoral threat to the modern nomenclature. Holly, on the other hand, represents the unbelieving empirical reader that requires ready to hand material facts to overthrow any given knowledge of the world. The novel sets up a romantic fantasy of the mythical unknown, made real with Ayesha deflecting the resolute pronouncements of a peculiar English 'empirical' bent. In a way, Holly is the fictive persona of Frazer, and Ayesha, like Dracula, is the dying-god of a pagan world - Tylor's 'species' or 'survivals in culture' in 'arrested development'. She is the trace of belief, or practice, the remaining arte-fact stuck in her original, or earlier stage, of human development, whilst the West has moved on.

She embodies Frazer's over-arching metaphor of anthropological history, a sophisticated

fantasy of the Victorian anthropological quest — time-travelling backwards in the present where Ayesha has stood still in time. The return to the shores of England, setting foot on the quay at Southampton, marks the end of a ‘wild and seemingly ridiculous quest’. Here Haggard seems to acknowledge the limitations of human knowledge to comprehend ‘unborn’ times. The reader is asked to both suspend disbelief within the fantasy, and then maintain a certain degree of moderate scepticism. To give science satisfaction, because myths of superstition and ancient folklore have to be killed off, Haggard commits the impossible by killing off Ayesha: ‘Dead! He gasped. ‘Impossible! She who never dies — dead, how can it be?’ For Haggard, the novel’s end was a necessary evil — climax and anti-climax [...] the whole thing is an effort to trace the probable effects of immortality upon the mortal unregenerate. She’s awful end is also in some sense a parable — for what are Science and Learning and the Consciousness of Knowledge and Power in the face of omnipotence?

Her death gives resolution to the modern enlightenment quest to overthrow the pagan old world. Like Dracula, Ayesha defies the natural life cycle of phenomena, transcends the laws of science, whilst acting out a fantasy role in the mythical other for the late Victorian reader. Her final demise is a necessary act of repression, for the Victorian fantasist can journey out, enter into the occult mysteries of the east, but must not return home psychologically transformed, undone, by its inscrutable truth. (Imagine a homecoming Kurtz.) Haggard’s interest in primitivism and oral cultures provoked orientalist fears within the Victorian Empire that the author allays by psychologically containing in the novel’s closure. Modelled on anthropological concepts of the primal being, late Victorian fantasies dealing with mythical underworlds act out in a safe condition the fascination for the occult, the mysterious, the savage, and the irreligious. In turn,

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71 Ibid., p. 277.
72 Ibid., p. 270.
they compound modern myths of a divided self.

H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), like Stoker’s *Dracula*, plays on fears of regression, the reversal of progressive trends in human evolution, and human degeneration to the polymorphous level of the subhuman being. Doctor Moreau corrupts the natural laws of God to artificially graft evolution onto exotic creatures, the beast folk of Noble Isle. Through the triumphs of vivisection, Dr Moreau attempts to humanize animals, grafting bone and skin to replicate the physiology and chemical rhythm of the evolved creature of homo-sapiens. The sophistry of his science does not mask the horrific abominations he manufactures. Doctor Moreau is an inhuman creational god in a godless world, boasting of his painful experimental studies, and like Victor Frankenstein, narrow-minded enough to not fully appreciate the total anatomical make-up of the human form:

But it is in the subtle grafting and re-shaping one must needs do to the brain that my trouble lies. The intelligence is often oddly low, with unaccountable blank ends, unexpected gaps. And least satisfactory of all is something that I cannot touch, somewhere – I cannot determine where – in the seat of the emotions. Cravings, instincts, desires that harm humanity, a strange hidden reservoir to burst suddenly and inundate the whole being of the creature with anger, hate, or fear [...] Each time I dip a living creature into the bath of burning pain, I say, This time I will burn out all the animal, this time I will make a rational creature of my own.\textsuperscript{74}

Wells’ vision of sadistic and macabre eugenic engineering, performed on hapless specimens, anticipates the cruelty inflicted by Nazi social engineering or eugenics. Doctor Moreau creates a nightmare of scientific immorality out of his solipsistic imagination. H.G. Wells blurs the moral boundaries between humanity and the animal kingdom when the half-humanized beast folk revert to animal type. The Leopard Man forms a lair somewhere in the forest, becomes solitary, and learns to hunt and kill again for blood and flesh. But in the end, the ranking order of the animal kingdom is resumed, and Edward Prendrick escapes the island and returns to normal civilization

\textsuperscript{74} H.G. Wells, *The Island of Dr Moreau* (London: Everyman, 2003), pp. 75-76.
of mankind:

I was almost queer to men as I had been to the Beast People. I may have caught something of the natural wildness of my companions. They say that terror is a disease, and anyhow, I can witness that, for several years now, a restless fear has dwelt in my mind, such a restless fear as a half-tamed lion cub may feel. My trouble took the strangest form. I could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast People, animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls, and that they would presently begin to revert, to show first this bestial mark and then that. But I have confided my case to a strangely able man, a man who had known Moreau, and seemed half to credit my story, a mental specialist — and he has helped me mightily. 75

Wells’ horror story reflects real concerns that human beings had not truly cast off their animal nature, and that rational thinkers were prone to losing sight of the human instinct for sympathy and compassion. The laws of evolution may have become commonplace knowledge amongst the fraternity of the scientific world, but this, nevertheless, did not mean that the grand-scale of evolution could simply be technically imitated, or transplanted. Despite the human voice of optimism that protects the virtues of a noble being, the gothic-horror conventions of the story means that the events of vivisection-sadism are framed within a far-off, isolated, and obscure, geographical region that deflates the full significance of its barbaric overtones. This suggests that the civilized mind of the time could not deal fully with the true extent of a strange hidden reservoir that could burst suddenly and inundate the whole being of the creature with anger, hate, or fear.

William Golding’s Lord of the Flies (1954) also deals with the theme of human reversal and degeneration to a primitive type, and similarly sets the place of transformation on a deserted exotic island, where a group of schoolboys turn savage when removed from the sense of civilized order:

75 Ibid., p. 128.
The world, that understandable and lawful world, was slipping away [...] ‘What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or savages? What’s grown-ups going to think? Going off – hunting pigs – letting fires out – and now!’ A shadow fronted him tempestuously. ‘You shut up, you fat slug!’

With the outward vestiges of an old order slipping away like a garb that signifies a proper mode of behaviour, the novel creates levels of association between the terrifying beast, children’s cruel banter and propensity to form bullying gangs, social alliances and tribal pacts, and the precarious state of civilization under the pressure of raw nature. Removed from the world of adult chastisement, the bloody intent of some boys is exposed:

‘Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!’ said the head [...] ‘You knew, didn’t you? I’m part of you? Close, close, close! I’m the reason why it’s no go. Why things are what they are?’[...] The Lord of the Flies spoke in the voice of a schoolmaster. ‘This has gone quite far enough. My poor, misguided child, do you think you know better than I do?’

Golding suggests, like Wells, that the darkness of man’s heart cannot be suppressed by the countenance of civilization. Because they are only partially socialized, the children regress easily to a primal state. This ironically juxtaposed with the appearance of an adult on the island. Man continually parades in his everyday fashion the signs of brutal mastery and control:

He staggered to his feet, tensed for more terrors, and looked up at a huge peaked cap. It was a white-topped cap, and above the green shade of the peak was a crown, an anchor, gold foliage. He saw white drill, epaulettes, a revolver, a row of gilt buttons down the front of a uniform [...] On the beach behind him was a cutter, her bows hauled up by two ratings. In the stern-sheets another rating held a sub-machine gun [...] Ralph looked at him dumbly. For a moment he had a fleeting picture of the strange glamour that had once invested the beaches. But the island was scorched up like dead wood – Simon was dead [...] The tears began to flow and sobs shook him. He gave himself up to them now for the first time on the island; great, shuddering spasms of grief that seemed to wrench his whole body [...] Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy.

77 Ibid., p. 158.
78 Ibid., pp. 222-25.
Like Conrad, Golding is portraying the primitive as located inside, tormenting the individual with a beckoning mysterious voice, and yet our bifurcated nature is only to be truly encountered if removed and isolated from the trappings of the uniform, or the fig leaf, of civilization's nomenclature. Anthropologists fundamentally altered the image of man, helping to perpetuate a concept of our individual sensibility. Man had not yet shaken off the survival traits of his ancestral primitive savage. William Golding's depiction of a savage type linked to animal psychology has somewhat moved on from the racial pride of the English gentleman traveler, the belief of the glory in English civilization that was bound to the tangible economic and scientific success of British Imperialism. However, despite the fact that the book was published post-war, the novel frames the process of human reversal to savage type within the setting of an alien, obscure, and unfamiliar, geographical location, suggesting again that the modern European had not fully measured the depths of its innate self-destructive drives.

For Nietzsche, cultural superiority can entail murderous policies. The savage in humanity is intrinsic to the will to power. Nietzsche's deepest fears were posthumously acted out within the mythology of racial superiority and the racial other during the twentieth century, when quantitative science was inflected with qualitative politics and the punitive rhetoric of racial mastery. Because of the dictator's wish to incorporate the quest of the Holy Grail, and the occult of the Aryan race, into his ideological policies, Adolf Hitler's rise to power played out, in the history of Germany, the twin myths of science and a mythological past. *Comparative Thinking* (1856), by F. Max Muller (1823-1900), was influential in the anthropological circles of Germany in giving rise to the idea that, just as there was a common language, Latin, lying behind and explaining many of the peculiarities of romance languages, so there was a common language, Aryan, lying behind Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Zend, Celtic and Gothic. Aryan was a mother tongue.

of the human race. The Aryan race in its primal state was part of a mythopoeic age. Comparative mythology undertook to work back from Greek or Latin or Indian myths to their supposed Indian roots, and from the Aryan roots tried to identify the solar event originally signified in words. But as a scientist, like Charles Darwin, Muller's attempts to understand the origins of human development, that were later extricated for ideological abuse. Muller saw inherent in all languages to some degree a slippage between words and things. Myth was a disease of language.

Bertrand Russell, instead, blames the romance of the self as a principal factor in his irresistible ascension to the powers of tyranny:

It is not the psychology of the romantics that is at fault: it is their standard of values. They admire strong passions, of no matter what kind, and whatever may be their social consequences [...] but most of the strongest passions are destructive [...] Hence the type of man encouraged by romanticism, especially of the Byronic variety, is violent and anti-social, an anarchic rebel or a conquering tyrant.80

Hitler's aristocratic cult of the noble superman that likes ruthless wars, and loves music, is a romantic type that can be traced through the eulogized characters of nineteenth-century literature, in for instance Emily Bronte's Heathcliff, Melville's Captain Ahab, or Conrad's Kurtz. Marlow's admiration of Kurtz' greatness verges on hero-worshipping:

I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness [...] He was a remarkable man.81


A journalist speaks to Marlow and turns the cult of Kurtz into the romance of evil, outstripping the Byronic love of Napoleon:

He electrified large meetings. He had faith – don’t you see? – he had faith. He could get himself to believe anything – anything. He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party [...] He was an – an – extremist.82

Kurtz is perceived as an extremist adopting falsely the Nietzschean creed of the nihilistic overman that can transfigure the darkness of horror into a political movement for galvanizing men’s hearts. Kurtz is romanticized as an extremist who anticipates monomaniacal dictators of the twentieth century and is figuratively aligned to the sub-human species of ancestral primitive beasts. Bertrand Russell is right in viewing the rise of evil in Germany as prefigured by romantic male types. In Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui, by creating a historical parallel to the rise of Hitler within the setting of Chicago’s mafia, Bertolt Brecht challenges the Aristotelian notion of cathartic theatre to re-present Hitler as a social reality that is transferable to any given society. Brecht’s technique of ‘verfremdungseffekt’ breaks down the illusion that theatre creates for the audience to make the viewers then think more in a detached way about the historical determinants of history.83 The concept that their leader possesses the powers of a Nietzschean overman allows for the social reality of evil to masquerade as an ineluctable demonic force.84 For Brecht, there existed instead a range of human choices that could have resisted the mythological sources to

82 Ibid., p. 244.
84 Hitler is still regularly conceived of as an atavistic force of romantic passion, with allusions to the split demonic persona of Mr. Hyde: ‘Their [Hitler, Stalin and Mao] motivation [...] was a passion – a need – to dominate, which they combined with a belief about themselves that they were men of destiny, chosen to play a great role in the world.’ Alan Bullock, Personality and Power: The Strange Case of Hitler and Stalin (London: German Historical Institute, 1995), pp. 5-6. Bullock compares Hitler to Nietzsche’s view of the overman, evaluating his need for power as an exceptional psychological drive. On the other hand, Joachim Kohler argues that Hitler was following a voice summoning him to become leader of the German people, to guide first the German volk enshrined in the sublime experiences of Wagner’s music. Wagner’s Hitler, The Prophet and his Disciple, trans. Ronald Taylor (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 7.
Hitler's acceptance into Germany's political hierarchy. But, one should not underestimate the seductive power of a political rhetoric that played on racial stereotypes embedded within a stronger rhetoric of myth. Hitler's racial fascination for a national unity derives from misplaced readings of 'purity' in the science of mythologies:

Each animal mates only with one of its own species [...]. All great civilizations of the past became decadent because the originally creative race died out, as a result of contamination of the blood [...]. It would be futile to attempt to discuss the question as to what race or races were the original standard-bearers of human culture and were thereby the real founders of all that we understand by the word, humanity [...]. Every manifestation of human culture [...] is almost exclusively the product of Aryan creative power [...]. He is the Prometheus of power, from whose shining brow the divine spark of genius has at all times flashed forth [...]. Should he be forced to disappear, a profound darkness will descend on earth.\(^\text{85}\)

Hitler divides mankind into three categories — founders, bearers, and destroyers of culture. His notion of human types is informed by myths of cultural race and post-Darwinian analogies of man and animal. Hitler, of course, wanted to construct the myth of national identity on a false premise of racial roots: 'There is no such thing as Revolution in art: there is only one eternal art — the Greek-Nordic art'.\(^\text{86}\) The concept of rabid nationalism tends to be based on the myths of tribalism and false antecedents. Hitler also symbolizes the Freudian divided self, the leader of the most civilized nation bent on genocide. He embodied the qualities of a systematic drive for national reconstruction, and a savage racial hatred towards the old Jew as the stereotypical other.

In a post-war culture, the drive for imperial territorial control in the scramble for Africa, the ideological wars of the twentieth century and the romantic quest for the mythical other are generally politically disparaged. In a pre-war era, the confusing of the boundaries between science and myth created in the twentieth century a heterogeneous type of thinking that seemed

\(^{85}\text{Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf, trans. James Murphy (London: Hurst and Blackett Ltd., 1939), pp. 238-43.}\)

ever amorphous:

What is important is that we are becoming more and more interested in this qualitative aspect [mythological thinking], and that science, which had a purely quantitative outlook in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, is beginning to integrate qualitative aspects of reality.\(^{87}\)

Through the misappropriation of racial concepts of ancient mythopoeic purity based on fabricated scientific ‘truths’, Europe’s descent into the ‘abyss’ of fascism marked a high point in the romance of science as a politically purposeful myth. This was the nightmare of ideological nationalism as a mythological totality that Friedrich Nietzsche feared – a romantic indulgence in a false historicism:

Defying his compatriots, who were worshippers of “pure race”, Nietzsche proclaimed racial cross-breeding as the origin of the Germans; in other words, he declared them to be racially heterogeneous.\(^{88}\)

A too positivist or biological approach to the history of man led to crude definitions of a nation’s beginnings. For Paul Ricoeur, whenever a particular myth is considered the founding act of one community to the exclusion of all others, the possibility of corruption inevitably arises. Fascist movements unscrupulously exploited Germanic and Roman myths:

We are no longer primitive beings living at the immediate level of myth. Myth for us is always mediated and opaque […] Modern man can neither get rid of myth nor take it at its face value. Myth will always be with us, but we must always approach it critically.\(^{89}\)

In a way, the Third Reich validates Freud’s theoretical claims that an arrested genetic pool of


repressed violence, a death drive, lies close underneath the surface of a civilizing rhetoric.

Even at the very heart of Europe’s darkness, writers are restricted in their expression of the horror they experience. Within the throes of evil, they seem limited to the use of tired tropes to explain the transformation. Sebastian Haffner, in *Defying Hitler, A Memoir*, describes his life and the political events in Germany from 1914 until 1933. As a native Jew, the real citizen, Raimund Pretzel, tries to comprehend how Hitler’s rise to power had gripped the nation’s imagination:

Rathenau and Hitler are the two men who excited the imagination of the German masses to the utmost; one by his ineffable culture, the other by his ineffable vileness. Both, and this is decisive, came from inaccessible regions, from some sort of ‘beyond’. The one from a sphere of sublime spirituality where the cultures of three millennia and two continents hold a symposium; the other from a jungle far below the depths plumbed by the basest penny dreadfuls, from an underworld where demons rise from a brewed-up stench of petty-bourgeois back rooms, doss-houses, barrack latrines and the hangman’s yard. From their different ‘beyonds’ they both drew a spell-binding power, quite irrespective of their politics.  

Again, two distinctly divided selves are described within the same person: one characterized as culture and the other as a vileness found in an obscure region. Even in the midst of its social reality, writers still struggle to describe the origins of our destructive urges. The unprecedented scale of state violence, under the Third Reich, was executed through the instruments of a mobilized political force that slipped easily into the democratic chambers of a floundering government of the Weimar Republic in 1933. Pretzel blames, like Russell, the excesses of romantic egoism wrought through a popular indulgence in base forms of cultural activity. Pretzel is reluctant to pin the source down to a civilized source - it is demonic, beyond, from a jungle. Elsewhere, the author admits to lacking the vocabulary to identify the psychological roots of Nazism’s fantastic adventure, and so instead resorts to other generalizing metaphors that seem to

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derive from a distaste for the regional and cultural heritage of Germany:

The monotony hangs, as it always hung, over the great plains of northern and eastern Germany [...] With it comes a *horror vacui* and the yearning for 'salvation': through alcohol, through superstition or, best of all, through a vast, overpowering, cheap mass intoxication.91

Pretzel never describes the rise of Hitler as being underscored by the infrastructure of a long-standing civic order. The mass hysteria is an epidemic of moral degeneration bred and charged by a romantic creed based on deception, doping, mumbo-jumbo, or an artificial fit of drunkenness, fabricated by the Nazis:

Being young German men, all that we needed to show, quite automatically, that we were at heart National Socialists, was to be removed from our deceitful bourgeois environment and our dry-as-dust legal files and put in the right surroundings.92

The temptation to imitate acts of evil is equated with the illusory effects of ideological training stamping out the sensitive side of the human soul. Here, the double-life of a functioning bureaucratic collaborator is measured in terms of the right surroundings that transports and transposes the individual from a more familiar social space, whilst side-stepping the idea that the rise of German nationalism acted out a collective and 'natural' predilection for aggressive self-destruction, or an inner self-wrought drive to commit evil that Judeo-Christian scripture at least does acknowledge. Evil is often described in the Bible as dwelling within, or possessing, the heart of the individual. You do, resist, be, and speak of evil: 'For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts', and 'All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.'93

To some extent, Pretzel's personal account of the Third Reich's ideological hold on the nation's masses does not penetrate enough beyond the rhetoric of propaganda. But Victor

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92 Ibid., p. 237.
93 Matthew XV:19 & Mark VII:23.
Klemperer in his diaries 1933-41, *I Shall Bear Witness*, records the provoked causes of racial hatred as rooted elsewhere in the sources of academic studies:

The ideology also rages with a more scientific touch. The Academic Society for Research into Jewry is meeting in Munich; a professor (German university professor) identifies the eternal traits of Jews: cruelty, hatred, violent emotion, adaptability – another sees ‘ancient Asiatic hate flickering in Harden’s and Rathenau’s eyes’. The Psychological Association is meeting somewhere else, and Jaensch condemns the materialistic psychology of the Jews, especially of Freud, and contrasts it with the spirituality of the new theory.94

Klemperer seems more aware of how the cult of the self penetrates into every aspect of German life:

> For some days now divine right has been given ever more prominence. Again and again in the newspapers: He is the instrument of Providence – the hand that writes ‘no’ will wither – the sacred election.95

For Klemperer, tyrannies survive by the suppression of the urge to ask questions within the people. The hero-worshipping of Hitler cannot be staged without a political machine systematically working together to suppress the will of independent, and defying, thinking. Whilst maintaining the old bureaucratic infrastructure, the civic duties of governmental officials mechanically cross over, by the nature of their given vocational roles, into the proposed rationale of a new government. The temptation to evil can be legitimized and contained by functional devices and practices inherent to the nature of social regulation, the logical outcome of a monomaniacal rage for a single idea. By positing the roots of evil as elsewhere, beyond the realities of a normal life of daily civilized routine, few writers then deal directly with the concept of an everyday evil as an underlying reality of our human condition.96

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95 Ibid., April 1938, p. 309.
Primo Levi is one of those special writers that survived to bear witness to the fact that the unimaginable horror of systematic murder under the Nazis had a ruthless logic that forced the heroic few to remain silent and prisoners to collaborate against their fellow victims. Violence is a calculated force within the civilized system. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi tells us how willed incredulity or ignorance, and self-catalyzing consolatory truths, led to a misplaced trust in the law of institutional control:

The German Jews were almost all bourgeois and they were Germans: like their ‘Ayran’ quasi-compatriots they loved law and order, and not only did they not foresee but they were organically incapable of conceiving of a terrorism directed by the state, even when it was already around them.\(^9^7\)

Levi also refers to a mental blockage that allowed for racial stereotypes as well as a quiet acceptance of a closed system of political change to prevail. Primo Levi is somewhat rare because he arose from the paralyzing horror to penetrate beyond what most written memoirs describe as the non-credibility of a nocturnal dream:

Human memory is a marvellous but fallacious instrument [...] But it also true that a memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallized, perfected, adorned, which installs itself in place of the raw memory and grows at its expense.\(^9^8\)

One stereotype of the human act of violence that has crystallized and fixed into our collective memory has been the repeated pattern of displacing the roots of social disturbance or evil elsewhere onto bifurcated symbols of man’s intrinsic nature. This too implies a psychological blockage, an inability to confront the guilt, or shame, attached to acts of violence.


As a postmodern film, *Apocalypse Now* (1979) revisits Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, by refiguring Conrad’s Kurtz as a Colonel in the American forces ‘going native’, and Willard taking a terrifying river journey through Vietnam to Cambodia. Towards the end of the film, the camera glances past Colonel Kurtz’ reading material – Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, and Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* can faintly be seen in a Cambodian temple. The soundtrack largely involves The Doors’ epic song ‘The End’, with Jim Morrison’s lyrics alluding to Freud’s ‘Oedipus Complex’ and St. John’s *Book of Revelation*.99 Like T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ (1922), the film expresses the chaos of modern mythical heterogeneity. But, as an interpretation of all these ‘symbiotic’ sources, the film signifies more the horror of irrational mythical disorder. Colonel Kurtz has forgotten his purpose in life as a highly trained killer, breaks on through to the other side, and goes native. The director, Francis Ford Coppola, visualizes the immorality of the whole conflict, the impossibility of distinguishing between good and evil. The Colonel recounts how he learnt to imitate the ruthless ways of his enemy. When American forces went into certain villages they would vaccinate the local children against polio with injections to their arms. Returning back to these places later, the Colonel saw how the enemy had cut off their arms as retaliation. For Kurtz, his mission is from this point onwards no longer a ‘holy one’ to save the country from a communist invasion, but a brutal one of revenge, to kill as many of the opposition as possible in the best or most effective way. Kurtz thenceforth abandons his identity as a civilizing crusader to instil moral justice in a foreign land.

Through scenes of savage death and revenge killings, the Vietnam War is pictured as a horrific mess of dehumanization. In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare sees vengeful sacrifice as piteous, irreligious and unchristian. Violence is inscribed into the history of corrupt politics like the precedent of a patterned myth. In Coppola’s film, the savage idiocy of war is concomitant

99 Ibid., pp. 11-12.
with the breakdown of mythical narratives upon which we can pin a framework of morality. Kurtz has gone primitive, turning into the ignoble, or dishonorable, savage of the wild jungle. His horror is that he cannot return to the rational order of fighting on the right side. This is why he plays out the rituals of death in his jungle camp, and secretly longs for death. Unlike the New York drugs-detective Doyle, in *French Connection II*, who is forced to become a heroin-addict by the drug dealers he chases across the Atlantic to the back-streets of Marseilles, the inculcating system of values is never retainable or repairable. Kurtz has forever forsaken the moral laws of his land, and so is to be terminated by one of his own kind, Willard, in order to salvage a sense of Western democratic cause and principle. The Colonel, at the end of film, is viewed as Frazer’s dying-god (not of fertility rites), and the killing priest, Willard, retreats from his temple, and irreligious followers, to return home to America:

Coppola’s Kurtz may be understood in the light of both *The Golden Bough* and *From Ritual to Romance*. He may be identified with the ageing King of the Wood, killed by the younger man, namely Willard. However, here usurpation does not lead to renewal; death does not lead to new life. Willard refuses the role of king, and departing from Kurtz’s community, effectively gives the all-clear for its destruction. The ‘myth and ritual’ structure has been used, but with severe irony.\(^{100}\)

Coppola is suggesting that the Colonel, in becoming native, re-enters into the world of pagan rituals, and that the modern democracy of America is no different from the Imperial Might of the British Empire – a highly trained soldier can be camouflaged from the savage enemy in the jungle, but the heat of the jungle will eventually eat into the soul of the righteous invader to demask the camouflage of his civilized self. The film blurs the boundaries of cultural differences that construct the binary typology of the moral might of an advanced democratic society and the savage paganism of native jungle guerilla-fighters. In order to clear a beach area for a surfing display, Colonel Kilgore leads a helicopter-bombing raid on a Vietnamese village to the sound of

Wagner. He loves the smell of napalm in the morning. The film at times collapses the boundary between the overt violence of a civilizing force and the covert brutality of a jungle militia. Ultimately, though, despite the moral or mythical confusion, the last image of the film leaves the viewer thinking that one has to struggle, like Willard, to hunt down in deep jungle to finally overcome the primal demon.

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The cultural fear of the psychological other has often been projected onto mythical symbols, which in turn have to be killed off to reassure the modern civilized self of its triumphing sense of rational order. The racially stereotyped subhuman Jew, the savage murderer lurking in the night-time fog of a moor, the spectral beast of a cursed family estate, the black dog of provincial folklore, the eternal subterranean creature of the deep ocean, the primitive tribal black, the under-world of the poor in the East End, the parentless bullying schoolboy on a deserted island, the modern obsessive neurotic, the aboriginal totem worshipper, the cave dweller of a male horde, the evil genocidal tyrant, the jungle native of ritual human sacrifice, the pagan immortal goddess, the demonic blood-sucking demigod, the sexual beast, the emotionally-stunted doctor of an esoteric science, and the surgically-engrafted Darwinian ape or manufactured polymorphous abomination, are together metaphorically, and negatively, associated to help make up an opposing, and successful, image of the modern man as civilized and evolved, belonging to a European culture that has progressed from the dark roots of its ancestry. What once were mythic symbols, implying the evil nature of man's inner destructive impulses, still exist, underpinned this time by anthropological concepts, as literary tropes defining the typology of our dual nature. Even Freud's notion of a sub-stratified consciousness bears a visual image of a dark, ancient, and hidden, cavernous, site, implying a spatial region of geological and evolutionary
depth. Western culture frequently, whilst continuing to reproduce the medieval image of a descent into an underground of hell, displaces the potential cruelty of modern civilization onto the symbolic plane of physical beings that are strange mythical oddities to a mainstream nomenclature. This suggests that the temptation to evil exists within an extraneous and reified creature, manufactured, or ontologically other to our own intrinsic nature. And this furthermore suggests that, in a civilized Europe, sacred, or surrogate, forms in which to unleash socially controlled violence have been replaced by a new set of metaphoric guises.
In the Actaeon tale the hunter is transformed into a stag after espying the Goddess of the hunt, Diana, naked. The roles of the hunt are reversed when he is physically transformed beyond all recognition - losing the capacity of the human voice to be heard whilst bearing still a human mind to comprehend his plight. Through a landscape where Actaeon had often led a chase to slaughter numerous animals, his trained pack of hounds pursue the master of the hunt, round on him, and brutally tear his body apart. The tale ends speculating on the issue of punitive revenge:

So fierce was cruel Phoebe’s wrath, it could not be allayed
    Till of his fault by bitter death the ransom he had paid.
Much muttering was upon this fact. Some thought there was extended
    A great deal more extremity than needed; some commended
Diana’s doing, saying that it was but worthily
    For safeguard of her womanhood.¹

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Arthur Golding, 1565 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2002), lines 303-309, p. 102. ‘[It] is said that not until his life was ended by so very many / wounds was the anger of Diana of the quiver satisfied. / Opinion was divided: to some the goddess seemed / more savage than was fair, others praised her and called her worthy / of her strict virginity; both sides could find their reasons.’ Ovid, *Metamorphoses I-IV*, trans. D. E. Hill (Warminster, Wiltshire: Arts & Phillips LTD., 1985), Book III, lines 251-55, p. 101.
In his rewriting of the myth, by suggesting that the extreme wrath outweighs the incident of an ill-fated peeping tom, Ted Hughes exonerates Actaeon:

Destiny, not guilt, was enough  
For Actaeon. It is no crime  
To lose your way in a dark wood.

Yet, as a cautionary myth, poetic justice is meted out warning man to keep to an allotted, humble place in the ranking order of the sacred ancient world. Actaeon’s curiosity took him beyond his natural realm to a scene denied to the human onlooker. Diana was his Goddess; a sacred figure of his daily activity, and seeing her ‘bare’ Actaeon crossed a threshold that divides the world of human perception and the transcendent other to what should remain invisible, beyond prying human eyes.

For Franz Kafka, the self needed to be protected from prying eyes of modern sciences that laid bare the mysteries of the symbolic. Such a concern was manifested in a self-conscious fear, or a paralysis towards the outside world:

Whoever leads a solitary life and yet now and then feels the need for some kind of contact [...] And even if his state is such that he is not seeking at all and merely steps to the window-ledge as a weary man, letting his eyes wander up and down between the public and the sky, and he is reluctant to look and has his head tilted back a little, yet for all that the horses down below will drag him into the train of their waggons and their tumult and so in the end towards the harmony of man.

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2 Ted Hughes, Tales from Ovid. Twenty-four Passages from the Metamorphoses (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 105. G. Karl Galinsky also sees Actaeon’s gruesome death as divine injustice, ‘a penalty that is out of all proportion to his innocent trespass.’ It is really the pique of Diana that is Actaeon’s downfall. Ovid’s Metamorphoses, An Introduction to the Basic Aspects (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), p. 66. But for Mircea Eliade, myths of primitive societies relate to a sacred history. ‘For persons of the myth are not human beings; they are gods or culture heroes, and for that reason their gesta constitutes mysteries; man could not know their acts if they were not revealed to him.’ The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: A Harvest Book, 1987), p. 95.


The solitary inhabited room is a metaphor for his protective self, and the window his curious eyes, the pull of the outside world that is the social harmony of man. Beyond his ‘prison cell, his fortress’, Kafka’s existential symptoms are made visible in the streets of Prague expressing a deep fear of merging or being overcome by the crowd. Despite a secret desire to meet things more passively, to adopt a similar attitude to the inert mass of life, or a leaning towards the support of others to satisfy his loneliness, Kafka frequently reveals a fear of intimate human contact:

It has always seemed quite incomprehensible to me when someone got entangled with me, and I have destroyed several human relationships […] from a logical disposition of mind that always believed more in an error of the other person than in miracles.

Other people rarely measure up to the high standards imposed on himself, and so Kafka generally struggled for an absolute in the self, untainted by common concepts of the mob.

From dwelling too much within his own being, human identity became an alien concept for Kafka. So, to protect the anonymity of his self-absorption, he entered into the physical form of the animal.

Out of a struggle to come to terms with the modern human condition of the alienated self, Kafka resorted to the figures of lowly creatures to dramatise his inner existential fears, or

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6 For Kierkegaard the concept of absolute individuality has as its ideal a paradigm of selflessness. However, the notion that God was revealed through the human mind’s capacity to generate myths, according to David F. Strauss in his two-volume *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, translated by George Eliot in 1835-6, brings the pantheism of the God-man down to the level of the mob. ‘If order is to be maintained in existence – and that, after all, is what God wants, for he is not a God of confusion – then the first consideration must be that every human being is an individual human being, becomes conscious of himself as an individual human being. Once people are allowed to merge in what Aristotle terms the animal category – the crowd, then this abstraction (instead of being less than nothing, less than the least significant individual human being) becomes regarded as something […] the *summa summarum* of all people overawes God.’ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death, A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*, 1854, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 151. Harvic Ferguson sees the self-absorption of melancholy as being justified in the context of a new cosmology – the microcosm of the individual – in reaction to external reality. Truth lay in the inner infinity of the human being, so producing fruitless introspection and endless self-preoccupation. *Melancholy and the Critique of Modernity, Søren Kierkegaard’s Religious Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 18-9.
the psychological effects of self-scrutiny. In ‘The Burrow’, the narrator is a mole that busies itself all day digging more and more labyrinthine tunnels to confuse his imagined internal enemies, and is persistently defensive in accounting for his behaviour, excusing itself to an imaginary invisible reader: ‘But you do not know me if you suppose that I am a coward or that it is out of mere cowardice that I build my burrow.’\textsuperscript{7} Kafka’s burrowing mole expands on Nietzsche’s notion of the instinctive, and sensitive, animal:

\begin{quote}
The animal assesses the movements of its friends and foes, it learns their peculiarities by heart, it prepares itself for them […] and can likewise divine from the way they approach that certain kinds of animals have peaceful and conciliatory intentions.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

Like Actaeon, the mole maintains a human consciousness, but, unlike him, has the capacity of human logos - a level of articulation as intricate as is the subterranean construction. In the ancient world of Ovid’s tales, to be transmogrified into an animal was a curse exacted by the gods for acts of human transgression. For Kafka, physical transformation is a punishment expressing symbolic transgression, because in the modern world the self is too often undone by literal explanation.\textsuperscript{9} Like the private psychological terrain of the self, the burrow safeguards the individual’s integrity against the impending threat of mysterious outsiders:

Alas! So many things might happen, but in any case I must have reassurance of knowing that there is an exit somewhere that is easy to reach and quite unobstructed, where I can get out without any further labour at all, so that there is no fear that while I am burrowing away there desperately, even if it is only in loose soil, I might suddenly feel – Heaven protect me! – the teeth of the pursuer in the flanks.\textsuperscript{10}


\textsuperscript{9} Gustav Janouch recalls that for Kafka writing so about animals is an expression of a longing for a free natural life. ‘Human existence is a burden for them [writers], so they dispose of it in fantasies […] Men are afraid of freedom and responsibility. So they prefer to hide behind the prison bars which they build around themselves.’ \textit{Conversations With Kafka}, trans. Goronwy Rees (London: André Deutsch, 1971), p. 23.

The burrow is a literal figuration of a place that the author can retreat to away from the basic commotion of collective struggle:

But the most beautiful thing about my burrow is its stillness; admittedly this is deceptive, at any moment it may be shattered and all will be over.\(^1\)

To preserve the sanctity of a private self, desperate labour is prerequisite in maintaining the level of ‘stillness’. The need for self-preservation outgrows its ends, and the mole confines itself in order to remain free, growing more sensitive to disturbances in the burrow: ‘My thoughts dwell too much on the burrow.’\(^2\) As a result of dwelling too much within the internal/inner world, the mole, like the introverted solipsist, constructs its own trap to ward off outside danger. The burrow instantly implies an intended analogy of self-protection: the upper world represents the outside world of human contact and external contamination, and the expanded metaphor of the burrow serves as a protective literary construction to defer immediate contact with the outside world of the reader.

Similar to the subterranean world of the burrow, the numerous animals that feature in Kafka’s stories operate as metaphorical transmogrifications to obfuscate the self. Imaginary adventures of animals describing human actions, motives, and emotions have existed since primitive man lived in close contact with wild and domestic animals. Such stories represent imaginative projections, eventually extending into grander myths; and in Greek civilisation fables became a part of rhetorical training. Even though men are distinct as creatures from the animal kingdom, Aesop’s symbolic analogies draw on similarities to visually illustrate meaning. And in case the reader is still unaware as to the fabulist’s intentions, Aesop often steps out of the short narrative to give us its definitive symbolic reading. ‘An Ass in a Lion’s Skin’ tells how the status quo exists to avoid confusion:

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 187.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 193. It is worth contrasting Kafka’s short story with Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* (1908 London: Egmont Books, 2000), p. 7: ‘Spring was moving in the air above and in the earth below and around him [The Mole], penetrating even his dark and lowly little house with its spirit of divine discontent and longing.’ The Mole is happy to explore the upper world, to ramble busily beyond the safe haven of the riverbank.
An ass put on a lion's skin, and both men and animals took him for a lion and fled from him. But when a puff of wind stripped off the skin and left him bare, everyone ran up and began to beat him with sticks and cudgels.

Clarity in Aesop's fables was an intrinsic element of his allegorical intent, so simply recounting the story is not enough - he additionally states the implied moral inference:

A poor commoner should not try to ape the style of the rich. By doing so he exposes himself to ridicule and danger; for no man can make his own what does not belong to him.13

Aesop's fables are intentionally pedagogical or didactic. Kafka, though, did not inherit the conventional readings of fables to use animals as emblems of human behaviour; he identified this kind of hermeneutic closure with closed rational systems.14 Deriving from a need to express a state of individual existence that will not be summed up in a non-symbolic way, Kafka's mythic-animal tales, like esoteric parables, do not yield straightforwardly to textual exegesis.

So to protect inner meaning, whilst denying a metaphysical direction, Kafka adopts the aphoristic, and paradoxical, symbolism of mythic narratives15:

Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial vessels dry; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance and it becomes a part of the ceremony.16

14 Jack Zipes argues that turning to the imaginative use of folklore in fairy tales was a characteristic national form in German literature often in opposition to arbitrary socio-political repression. '[Writers] have turned to the fairy tale not only to seek refuge from German misère but to comment on it and suggest that the misère need not be, that change is possible in reality.' Breaking the Magic Spell, Radical Theories of Folk & Fairy Tales (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 39. Nevertheless, Kafka adopts the pessimism of Myths.
Here Kafka allegorises the deconstructive discursive process that works by drawing on mythic sources, whilst emptying them of their sacred symbolism, inevitably becoming a part of the self-generating cycle of mythic narratives.\(^{17}\) This clearly happens in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* where the sacred rituals of history are emptied of their integral meaning, supplanted in turn by a modern reading to reconstruct another totalising myth. And in Freudian psychoanalysis, symbolic form of myths is often related to the symbolism of dreams that represent unconscious content.\(^{18}\) Kafka is drawn, instead, to the symbolic work of myths for both conveying and preserving esoteric meaning by making difficult word-for-word renderings:

The whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread [...] A symbol always transcends the one who makes use of it and makes him say in reality more than he is aware of expressing [...] \(^{19}\) It is hard to speak of symbol in a tale whose most obvious quality just happens to be naturalness.

But Kafka’s post-romantic imagination was also inclined to mock the figurative language which offers symbolic succour. Kafka writes a parable to explain the art of parables, and the fruitless exercise of relating their meaning to a comprehensible daily reality:

There were many who complained that the words of the wise are always mere parables, and of no use in daily life, which is the only life that we have [...] \(^{20}\) All these parables mean really no more than that the inconceivable is inconceivable, and that we knew already [...] One man then said: ‘Why do you resist? If you followed the parables, then you would become parables yourselves, and thus free of your daily cares.’ Another said: ‘I bet that is also a parable.’ The first said: ‘You have won.’ The second said: ‘But unfortunately only in parable.’ The first said: ‘No, in reality, in parable you have lost.’

\(^{17}\) For Roberto Calasso this aphorism expresses how all literary reading is allegorical in that it follows narratives in which the meaning lies outside the narratives themselves. There is no sharp distinction between symbol and allegory. ‘Now, if myth is precisely a sequence of simulacra that help to recognize simulacra, it is naïve to pretend to interpret myth, when it is myth itself that is already interpreting us.’ *The Forty-Nine Steps*, trans. John Shepley (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 266.


For Kafka, the language of outdated parables belonged to wise philosophers who leave the incomprehensible beyond as an undesignated, eternal, bliss. Kafka exploits a notion of the poetic devices found in Christ’s parables.\textsuperscript{21} For Nietzsche, they are riddles that only the ideal reader can understand, and the task of the attentive listener is not to unravel the riddle to its finite point of disclosure so as to achieve a satisfactory spiritual goal. The real point is that there is no definite final point. As Jesus said:

“The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving” (Mark 4: 11-12)

In ‘The Parable of the Sower’ Christ derives his meaning from the circumstances and context in which his teaching is delivered, and yet the word will remain mysterious to those who are not immediate to this experience. An esoteric explanation is exclusive to his discerning and privileged circle of disciples. Geza Vermes sees Christ’s Gospel parables bearing no exegesis as by their nature they are allusive and are expected to speak for themselves. The parable of the ‘sower’ and its exposition is an exception:

Those who were not part of the inner circle were not meant to grasp them [….] [E]soteric teachers […] would have used parables as riddles or enigmas to conceal from the general public the true meaning of his words. However, the truth is that preaching conveyed in parables had different effects on listeners or readers depending on whether they were Jews or Gentiles.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} At school in Prague, Kafka had been tutored in the classics. He was well acquainted with the Greeks – he had read them abundantly. As a student at university, he was introduced to the writings of Nietzsche, temporarily converted to atheism, but more importantly encouraged to transform his metaphors into individual symbols that defied proselytising interpretations. At school, Kafka read Der Kunstwort, a cultural monthly influenced by Nietzsche, and spent much time reading aloud from the works of Nietzsche. Max Brod provoked an argument when he described Nietzsche as a ‘fraud’. See Nicholas Murray, Kafka (London: A Little, Brown Book, 2004). Also see Patrick Bridgewater, Kafka and Nietzsche (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1974). In summer 1900, Kafka read Thus Spake Zarathustra, and Nietzsche cultivated in him a hatred of generalizations and abstractions, sharing his abhorrence of the flattening and degrading aspects of modern materialistic civilization. This was counter-balanced by an interest in philosophy, and the history of religion.

\textsuperscript{22} Geza Vermes, The Authentic Gospel of Jesus (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 171. For Heinz Politzer, most of Christ’s parables carry an allegorical set of correspondences: ‘When, in the Gospel according to Luke, the prodigal son feeds on the husks that the swine eat while his father is fattening a calf which will satisfy his son’s hunger, the images of the husks and the calf stand clearly for the son’s fallen state and the father’s forgiveness.’ Parable and Paradox, p. 85.
Christ’s sayings are characteristically vivid, drawn from life, and rely on features of exaggeration to illustrate, and make obscure, meaning. Kafka’s style of hyperbolic German expressionism grotesquely satirizes the transparency of modern thinking, its readiness to make clear all that is mysterious in the emptying of mythic, esoteric possibilities, by turning image or symbol into rationale. For Walter Benjamin, Kafka’s form of metaphoric writing exasperates the process of elucidation:

The word ‘unfolding’ has a double meaning. A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper. This second kind of ‘unfolding’ is really appropriate to the parable; it is the reader’s pleasure to smooth it out so that he has the meaning on the palm of his hand. Kafka’s parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom. That is why their effect resembles poetry.  

For Aesop, there is a literal explanation to be unfolded from the human-animal fable that flattens out its poetic elaboration. Kafka exploits a metaphoric language that provokes an unfolding response, yet preserves its original poetic shape. Whilst acknowledging the limitations of a figurative language to express actual feelings, Kafka recognised the need to use a metaphoric language so as to distinguish the separateness of his inner world from the outside. Kafka echoes Nietzsche’s analysis in The Anti-Christ of how Christ’s poetic universal metaphors were plundered for mythic exegesis. Kafka subverts through a dialogic exercise the implied essentialism of metaphorical language. To parody false science and a present age devoid of all originality, Kafka also adopts Nietzsche’s sense of parody as an

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24 Whilst trying to avoid the pretext for spinning-out a trite platitude, The Fables of Jean de La Fontaine, in the seventeenth-century, follow in the tradition of Aesop’s cautionary and edifying lessons in presenting animals endowed with human qualities to highlight our own shortcomings and folly, beasts of nature serving as the mnemonic ‘hard core of vital truths’. See A Selection, trans. Elizur Wright, 1867 (London: Bloomsbury Books, 1987), p. 74: ‘A fly and ant, upon a sunny bank / Discuss’d the question of their rank. / ‘O Jupiter!’ the former said, / ‘Can love of the self so turn the head, / That one so mean and crawling, / And of so low a calling, / To boast quality shall dare / With me, the daughter of the air?”’, ‘The Fly and the Ant’.

25 ‘The aphoristic quality of Nietzsche’s and Kafka’s writing is an obvious consequence of living in a period of cultural disconnection and discontinuity; the aphorism not only lays claim to certainty, it is also self-contained and refers the reader back into itself [...] back into the inner problems and inner logic of the particular work of art in question.’ Bridgwater, Kafka and Nietzsche, p. 21.

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artistic mode of expression. This provides means for critical observation reflecting the death of God and that the world had become a fable:

Fabulization, understood as the weakening of the principle of reality, consists in the recognition that the world is increasingly identified with a proliferation of Weltbilder, of images of the world which give rise to conflict of interpretation. The knowing subject can no longer secure the object – that is, as an object of knowledge – because the very limits between the subject and object have become opaque. The subject and object have become hybrids of each other.

Kafka developed the technique of fables to create ontological bastardizations that illustrate the modern confusion that exists in the exchanging of properties or characteristics between the animal sphere and the human one. The fabulization extends beyond God to include the image of man.

An epistemological ideology, where everything is abstracted to an idea, meant the continual pre-emption of the sacred realm within the individual’s imagination. Whilst echoing modern discursive trends by adopting deconstructive techniques, Kafka’s aesthetic perspective reveals sympathy for the poetics of the imagination and the truth-values of human story telling. His own version of the legend of Prometheus acknowledges that, through each act of re-interpretation, myths were organically modified, and so forever transformative in nature with the process of explaining the inexplicable continued:

Four legends tell of Prometheus: [....]

According to the fourth, everyone grew weary of what had become meaningless. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily.

There remained the inexplicable mountain of rock. - The legend tries to explain the inexplicable. Since it emerges from a ground of truth, it must end in the inexplicable again.

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26 See Sander L. Gilman, Nietzschean Parody, An Introduction to Reading Nietzsche (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1976). ‘Science, be it the natural sciences or philosophy, structures its phenomenological universe to provide predetermined answers to unintelligible questions [....] the role of the artist is to express the inner confusion of man confronted by humanity’s drive for formal expression.’ p. 17.


Kafka is aware that myths are self-reconstructing literary texts, generating their own momentum through the interpretative process that ever accretes new myths to the vanishing point of an ur-myth. To rationalise the poetic mysteries of myths, to make the unknown known, is to transform the irrational into a new metaphoric frame of reference. The final clause of Kafka's short story states the myth's final destination in the pursuit of human knowledge, with the myth maintaining its figurative difference. As a meta-myth Kafka foregrounds this hermeneutic unwinding process of deconstruction and recreation. Instead of delivering his meaning through prosy examples that attempt to paraphrase through definition, the effect is to demonstrate the very act of mythic perception as mythic rewriting. Piotr Parlej argues that the eroding movement of the parable about Prometheus is Kafka aestheticizing the logic of the metaphor to destabilize the process of translation, thus characterizing his anti-metaphorical style in general.29 It is the case also that the intense rationalism implicit in Kafka's metaphoric language mocks more the process of exegesis existing as a truism or an enlightened account30:

Art flies around truth, but with the definite intention of not getting burnt. Its capacity lies in finding in the dark void a place where the beam of light can be intensely caught, without this having been perceptible before.31

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30 Gerhard Schepers, in 'The Dissolution of Myth in Kafka's Prometheus and The Silence of the Sirens', Humanities: Christianity & Culture vol. 18, (May, 1984), pp. 97-118, argues that sketches like 'The Silence of the Sirens', 'Poseidon' and 'Prometheus' do not demythologize the myth but are radical reversals of the historical process that has led to the modern idea of demythologization. 'Truth [... ] is not something that emerges as the result of a process of analysis and reflection, but it is what has always been there like the "mass of rock", something which we can only accept as it is [...] Kafka points back to a pre-mythological stage [...] Myths and legends emerged when man began to reflect on these [extraordinary natural] phenomena.', pp. 108-9. Kafka does adopt a post-Nietzschean anti-mythical perspective. Manfred Beller argues that Kafka is paralleling the aetiological model where natural phenomena are explained through myths, but, under the influence of Nietzsche, is problematizing the search for the cognition of truth through the veil of myth. 'No explicator of the myth ever attains the truth which lies at its roots. Man is aware of the truth which remains unattainable for him.' The Fire of Prometheus and the Theme of Progress in Goethe, Nietzsche, Kafka, and Canetti', Colloquia Germanica: Internationale Zeitschrift Für Germanistik vol. 17, no. 1-2 (1984), p 6.

Kafka is obsessed with the absolute as an uncovered aesthetic and sacred place that is figurative like Diana’s secret grove. Kafka’s form of protection is the secrecy that rests within the mythic qualities of his language. This in part accords with Adorno’s argument that the hermetic character of Kafka’s oeuvre subverts the classical, determined by its inner form only, to defy comfortable and conventional notions of interpretation. Kafka resists the deflation of mythic truth, and subverts the aesthetics of redemption by illustrating that the riddle, and the answer to the riddle, ends as it begins - in the inexplicable, or at the same place within the myth. Kafka denies, whilst parodying, a mythographic resolution to the process of myth telling to reconstruct and obfuscate mythic meaning at the same time. By presenting a deconstructionist riddle about the very nature of myth reading, Kafka’s version of a classic myth involves the process of exegesis that continually brings the reader back to its own self-wrought mystery, to thereby demonstrate the acceptance of the intrinsic value of myths as textual creations. This is how mythos acts as both the unifying and signifying force in Kafka’s short stories.

For Kafka, the transfigurative poetic of a mythic tale is unhinged when its buried meaning is revealed, and having your inner-being read through is equivalent to the commonplace strategy of reading myths as gainsayable, or instructive, parables. In ‘The Judgement’, Georg Bendemann commits suicide after visiting his ailing, immobile father. Just before the moment of his death, as a motor-bus noisily passes him by to cover the noise of his fall into the water, he called out softly, ‘Dear parents, I did always love you’. Despite the emotional barrage he has received from his unfeeling father, Georg’s last words are a

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32 ‘Knowing the deepest self rather than the fragmented psyche was Kafka’s highly individual mode of negativity [...]’, Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon, The Books and School of the Ages* (London: Papermac, 1996), p. 448. ‘Kafka’s word for evasion was “patience,” a preparatory trope or metaphor for the practice of his art as a writer.’, p. 450.


declaration of a love that he had always felt within himself. When he runs out of his father’s room, speeding down the stairs, he collides with the morning cleaner who cries, ‘Jesus!’

This is an ironic reference to a Christ-like sacrifice, preaching love despite the forsaken love of his father. Georg’s last utterance, when drowned out by the arbitrary noises of the city, is doubly ironic, underlining the alienation caused within an unreciprocated relationship. And worse still, his embittered father gains sadistic pleasure in speaking on his behalf:

‘How you amuse me today, coming and asking me if you should tell your friend about your engagement. He knows it all already, you stupid boy, he knows it all! I’ve been writing to him, you see, because you forgot to take my writing things away from me. That’s why he hasn’t been here for such years now, he knows everything a hundred times better than you do yourself, he crumples up your letters unread in his left hand while he holds up my own letters to read in his right!’

Like Actaeon’s punishment, Georg’s cruel destiny is out of proportion to the cause. His father casts the final judgment upon his servile son, and Georg takes his own life. Only in the last transitory moment of life does he voice the words that had never passed between father and son. Georg’s suicidal sacrifice is unnecessary and absurd for the emotional bond underneath the sense of betrayal and hurt was one of love. The story judges Mr. Bendemann for harshly judging his son, and for blighting him with quick assertions that suppress his natural instincts. Georg’s love for his father is a type of discreet language similar to the expressive qualities of animal behaviour. Is a dog’s wagging tail a clear indicator of its happiness, appeased desire, or satisfied hunger? Are its moods so transparent through physical displays? For Kafka, a private sense of individuality is too often over-determined by interjecting pre-suppositions.

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., p. 46.
37 Some critics see Kafka’s portrayal of personal victimization as anticipating the brutal exploits carried out in death camps during the Third Reich: ‘In our chosen metaphors, it was they [the Nazis] and not their victims who were the beasts. By treating fellow human beings, beings created in the image of God, like beasts, they had themselves become beasts.’ J. M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 65. But Kafka is not so interested in the brutalization effected within the persecutor.
38 See also Raimond Gaita, The Philosopher’s Dog (London: Routledge, 2002). ‘Like Wittgenstein, he [Coetzee] seems to believe that we misunderstand the importance of the infinitely subtle inflexions and demeanours of the
Similarly, Gregor Samsa’s authentic voice is suppressed by a series of interpolative interpretations. Marina Warner points out that the title ‘Die Verwandlung’ is the German translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

Certainly there are resonances, far beyond the direct echo in the title, [...] Both writers take us into the process of transformation so closely that even whilst they concentrate on its physical effects on the victim’s body, the reader experiences the change viscerally, from the inside, as it were [...] Kafka communicates his protagonist’s plight with such convincing particularity and intense identification [...] that we, the readers, experience his fate from within his mind and feelings, from his point of view, and share his anguish, and his lost form [...] But, unlike Ovid, [...] we follow the fate of the bug after the change.39

Like Actaeon, Gregor Samsa undergoes the superimposition of an alternative identity. But placed at the very bottom of the Judaeo-Christian thinking in terms of human body-soul relations, Gregor does not undergo an integral change from his original identity.40 His denatured transmogrification subverts the Pythagorean doctrine of eternal rebirth implicit to Ovidian themes of ‘animus mutates’. This represents a more radical destabilization of selfhood to epitomize the split between being and consciousness.41 Freud created the notion that the individual is a stranger to his own thinking self, and Kafka dramatizes this process of self-dispossession via the process of physical decomposition. The central character is fully alert to its changing and decomposing form, yet simultaneously denied the human capacity to communicate directly with the rest of his family:

Gregor gave a start when he heard his own voice coming in answer; it was unmistakably his own voice as of old, but mixed in with it, as if from below, was an irrepressible, painful squeaking; and this only left the sound of the words clear for a moment, before distorting them so much that one could not tell if one had heard them properly.42

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Later on, when someone from his workplace arrives at his home to check on his whereabouts, and as his condition deteriorates, Gregor feels painfully the frustration of trying to be heard beyond his condition:

Why on earth didn’t I report it to the firm! But one always imagines one can get over an illness without having to stay at home. Oh sir! Spare my parents! All the accusations you’re making now are quite unfounded; no one has ever mentioned a word about them to me before.\(^{43}\)

Gregor’s trapped inner voice conveys the sense that what is happening to him is very natural. Kafka insisted the front cover to the first publication should not visualise Gregor in a way to suggest the short story belonged to the genre of fantasy, but rather to emphasise the natural state of Gregor’s peculiar condition.

The surreality of the miraculous transformation that confounds natural laws is underscored by presenting it as naturally as possible, as though events are taking place not in a dream state but as plausible and fully conscious acts of causal occurrence: “What has happened to me?”

\(^{42}\) Franz Kafka, ‘Metamorphosis’, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, p. 78.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., p. 84.
he thought. It was no dream. Why the travelling salesman would have changed into a big insect is never explained, yet the natural surroundings allude to a cause. The pressures of his workplace and home have continually determined his livelihood and identity, and so Gregor lacks the self-assurance required to determine his own identity:

Oh God, he thought, ‘what an exhausting job I’ve chosen! [...] The devil take it all! [...] If I didn’t have to hold back for the sake of my parents I’d have handed in my notice long since, I’d have marched in and given the chief a piece of my mind.'

Kafka ascribes to his central character an animal identity to counter the rhetoric of authorial, or paternal, interpretations. In returning to a mythical dimension of human storytelling, the lowly insect represents a denial of the modern world in its belittlement of imaginary expectations. As a cowering away from a form of human experience that is acted out in many spheres of society, Georges Bataille argues that such animal incarnations represent a retreat to a childish nascent state:

It is thus (by childishness) that humanity, in its nascent state, shows its essential nature. In a way an animal is never childish, but the young human being connects – sometimes even passionately – the sense suggested to him by the adult to some other sense which he cannot connect with anything.

Being animal represents not only the state of social exclusion, a sphere apart, but expresses as well the need to protect an innocent perception of his world:

[Kafka] wanted an irrational world, which escaped classification, to remain supreme and to provide an existence only possible to the extent in which it called for death [...] To survive without betraying oneself requires a relentless, austere, agonising struggle: this is the only chance of maintaining that delirious purity which is never tied to logic and can never fit in the mechanism of action – that purity which drags all its heroes into the mire of a growing guilt.

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44 Ibid., p. 76.
His mythical transformation represents the psychological climax in the frustrated throes of an individual’s attempt to articulate outside of their instinctive terms. And it is only when Gregor has withdrawn into the symbolic that his presence is fully perceived. Prior to this, it is only his absence that is noticed, condemned to work for a firm where the smallest omission at once gives rise to the gravest suspicion. Members of his own family try to account for his strange appearance and behaviour in terms of a neurotic peculiarity. His unnatural transformation allows for a brief encounter with an unknown world removed from the physical world where he is already spoken for in other people’s terms:

‘He’s not well,’ said his mother to the chief clerk, while his father was speaking by the door, ‘he’s not well, believe me. Why else would Gregor have missed a train? The boy thinks of nothing but his work.’

In Ovidian tales, the tragic nature of fate coincides with a metamorphosis, where ontological barriers break down and polymorphous transformations are acted out. Even though the symbolic predicates the inevitability of his demise, the final denial of social acceptance, it at least allows Gregor Samsa a momentary experience of solitary difference. Ontological deformation moves him beyond a given world that had already prescribed a process of self-negation. In Pagan-Greek myths, despite his temporal limitations, the metamorphosis of man to creature symbolized that their ‘quintessential substance lives on’. Kafka exploits further the psychological aspect of metamorphosis to be found in Ovid’s anthology of human conflicts, to satirize the temporal limitations besetting the modern individual. Without

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48 Joseph K.’s tragic demise is also premised on extraneous speculations on his integrity: ‘Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.’ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 7.

49 Franz Kafka, ‘Metamorphosis’, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, p. 82.

50 The half kitten or lamb, in ‘A Cross Breed’, is a hybrid, grotesque animal similar to polymorphous monsters of Greek fables, defying taxonomical differentiation. Here, Kafka describes a creature as plural admixture of differing species: ‘I have a curious animal, half kitten, half lamb [...]. Not content with being lamb and cat, it almost insists on being a dog as well [...]. That is why it feels unhappy in its own skin.’ Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China and Other Works*, pp. 75-6.

51 G. Karl Galinsky, *Ovid’s Metamorphoses*, p. 45.
prefiguring a final cause to its hidden meaning, Kafka uses animals as metaphoric
transmogrifications of the human individual to exalt the symbolizing activity of the human
imagination. Even though Gregor’s peculiar transformation seems at face value a physical
manifestation of a psychological type, visualizing a condition that looks plain for all to see,
the individual self is obfuscated further within the embodiment of a non-specific creature:

Metamorphosis [...] certainly represents the horrible imagery of an ethic of lucidity. But it is also the product of that incalculable amazement man feels at being conscious of the beast he becomes effortlessly. In this fundamental ambiguity lies Kafka’s secret.52

Kafka’s human-animals present the ontological oscillation encountered within a
reversal of perceived historical or human progress in which various biological sciences
equated man with a primal origin. In The Descent of Man Charles Darwin posits a theory of
man’s animal origin, and in Totem and Taboo Sigmund Freud viewed certain neurotics as
displaying signs of a reversion to an earlier form, or human primordial type. Human
development was traced back along the lines of a biological evolution to the stage of a pre-
historical animal. By allowing Gregor to inhabit a physical body of lowly form, Kafka defies
zoological or typological classifications, and breaks down the traditional or natural hierarchy.
The surreal admixture of animal physical form and human introversion subverts a scientific
value-system that had to return to an animal origin to explain the development of humanity,
where the human-animal type represented a process of evolutionary regression. Kafka
compounds a sense of modern alienation in the form of bizarre bildungsroman narratives that
delineate human-animals struggling for being-ness. Kafka is not answering the question of
what it is like to be an animal, but what is it like to be a human that is degraded to an animal –
both conscious and an alien figure at odds within its habitat. The laws of science have
confined his state of being-in-the-world to an abstracted order, because humans are measured
by values or standards imposed on animals.

52 Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus & Other Essays, p. 94.
Kafka expands the anthropocentric analogy of the animal kingdom to its literal and therefore absurd conclusion, so that in the process of metaphorical transformations the real metamorphosis is that of a common figure of speech:

Kafka’s sole point of departure is [...] ordinary language [...] More precisely: he draws from the resources on hand, the figurative nature [Bildcharakter], of language. He takes metaphors at their word [beim Wort].

Kafka transforms a familiar metaphor into a fictional being to create a metaphor that literally exists. Metaphors generally work as similes, comparing one form to another, but Kafka equalizes opposites in treating the unreal as real to avoid defining authentic nature through the narrative mode of naturalism. This is why the factual character of the Kafkan metaphor is emphasized. Stanley Corngold argues that the metamorphosed metaphor is distinguished from the ‘extended metaphor’, alluding to a certain tradition of Romantic allegory before abruptly departing from it:

His [Kafka’s] art reveals at its root a powerful Romantic aesthetic tradition [...] which criticizes symbolic form and metaphorical diction in the name of a kind of allegorical language [...] [Romantics] replace the dogmatic unity of sign and significance with the temporal relation of the sign to luminous source.

Gregor therefore remains principally opaque, with his exaggerated, luminous form ironically in contrast to the horror of translucency. The sickness of Gregor’s alienation takes on an exaggerated visual form, to testify to the psychological mutilation of the human form - its absurd reduction to the nth degree. Like a God-Man, or totem-animal, Gregor takes upon himself the ritual sacrifice, the humiliation, and the renunciation of the knowable world, in


54 Kai Mikkonen also argues that metamorphosis is interesting as a trope in metaphorically turning something into something else because it dramatizes the metaphoric order of discourse and thematizes the relationship between the same (or self) and the other. It is a self-reflexive metatrope. By transforming the human form, in drawing on animal analogies, Kafka expresses more keenly the human condition. ‘Theories of Metamorphosis: from Metatrope to Textual Revision. (Rhetoric and Poetics)’, Style, vol. 30, no. 2 (Summer 1996), pp. 1-2.

order for a sense of poetic exaltation to be preserved. Whereas scientific naturalism is a form of empirical realism, the symbolism of human-animal myths leaves the unexplained as causally mysterious. From a radicalized anthropocentric perspective, Kafka adopts a fabulist discourse to simultaneously obfuscate the genuine self and to re-humanize the human subject.

Both Actaeon's and Gregor Samsa’s physical transformation and demise is concomitant with the loss of speech and human identity, and it is from this notion that Kafka re-invents the use of mythic animals to challenge the rationalisation of human existence perceived through human speech. For example, Freudian psychoanalysis works on the principle that the accidents of human speech, ‘Freudian slips’, are deducible signs that concord to form a notion of one’s personal neurosis; and the symbolism of dreams is a picture-puzzle that can be given a literal translation through a process of psycho-analytical decodification, revealing the link between the innocent linguistic surface and latent emotional depths. The logic of contemporary anthropological analogies is typified when Sigmund Freud compares the unconscious and the infantile to an animal stage in humanity. Exploiting Freud’s metaphors, various critics have attempted to psycho-analyze Kafka’s alienation as a form of stunted psychological growth, suggesting that his animals express a nascent state of being. This is Anthony Storr’s evaluation of Kafka’s detachment and emotional isolation:

The source of the schizoid’s individual’s persistent sense of inner weakness and inadequacy is amply confirmed in [the ‘Letter to my Father’ and other passages from Max Brod’s biography].

Kafka is characterized as a type of person that psychiatrists designate ‘schizoid’. ‘The Judgement’ does correspond to certain parts of the letter:

If you sum up your judgement of me, the result you get is that although you don’t charge me with anything downright improper or wicked (with the exception perhaps

56 ‘Language clothes what is indestructible in us, a garment which survives us.’ Gustav Janouch, *Conversations With Kafka*, p. 121

of my latest marriage-plan), you do charge me with coldness, estrangement, and ingratitude.58

But Kafka’s short story parodies the anticipated attitude of psychological authorities that accentuate or multiply his father’s judgments.59 In Darwin’s Descent of Man, and Freud’s Totem and Taboo, where values are gleaned from the natural world, often an analogy is made between a modern nascent state of being and a primitive original type: ‘Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin.’60 Darwin sees a biological continuity in the sequence of generations, Frazer one of scientific progress, whereas Freud sees a psychical continuity:

The Christian communion [...] is essentially a fresh elimination of the father, a repetition of the guilty deed. We can see the full justice of Frazer’s pronouncement that ‘the Christian communion has absorbed within itself a sacrament which is doubtless far older than Christianity’.61

At the site of human prehistory, there is psychical reality that helps to explain modern subconscious biological drives. For Kafka, this type of hermeneutic analysis presents an epistemological reduction and preconditioning of human imagination, fixing humans into an over-determined psychological condition. The mystique of myth promotes a reverence for vitality in life, whereas the laws of science fix man within the parameters of reason:

More promising [than rationalizing myths by eliminating their fanciful elements] have been attempts to treat myth allegorically, as the bearer of metaphysical truths for which no precise literal language would be adequate.62

In reaction to an allegorical intrusion into the private realm, Kafka parodies the objectifications of Freudian psychology via a literal transformation of a Freudian dream world to visualise neurotic symptoms as if they are psychological symbols. As an existential suicide expressing the ontological malaise of modern man, Gregor Samsa's physical decomposition is a symbolic/metaphoric reaction to such positivist projections:

Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose.63

Gregor is treated like a sick animal, but in his demise there is a sign of divine decomposition. In parodying the symbol of the neurotic symptoms, Kafka exposes the logic of human-animal analogies that posit a biological source to the transcendental.64 With man likened to an animal state within Darwinian discourses, man's special place in the story of creation is undermined. Gilbert Meilander argues that long since Homer's *Iliad* man has ignored his animal nature, unwilling to acknowledge that we are less than immortal gods. Man occupies a central position, or special place, between beast and god.65 Kafka echoes Nietzsche's pessimistic Darwinianism to deflate the notion of human progress to inflate the sensibility of the inhuman. Whilst Darwin tried to bring man down to the position of the beast, Kafka elevates the beast towards the position of God.

As a satire on human evolutionary progress, 'A Report to an Academy' also exploits the anthropological notion of biological regression. An ape is captured after being shot twice in the Gold Coast by a hunting expedition and is brought back to Europe on a Hagenbeck steamer inside a cage. Here, confined as a wild beast, squatting with knees bent and trembling all the time, with the bars of the cage cutting into its flesh, sobbing, hunting for fleas, beating

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64 '[The] only remaining value is self-annihilation. The sole method by which a human animal can establish value is self-annihilation.' Marian Scholtmeijer, 'What is "Human"? Metaphysics and Zoontology in Flaubert and Kafka', *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*, ed. Jennifer Ham & Matthew Senior (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 138. Scholtmeijer concurs with the notion that Kafka's creations are infused with negative transcendence.

its skull against a locker, the ape feels there is no way out. Prior to this, the ape had felt relatively free: 'Up to now I had always had so many ways out, and now I had none. I was stuck fast.' To be free is a concept that the ape expresses as an experienced sensation:

I fear that it may not be understood precisely what I mean by a way out. I use the term in its most ordinary and it fullest sense. I deliberately do not say freedom. I do not mean that grandiose feeling of freedom in all directions. Perhaps I may have known that as an ape, and I have come across men who yearn for it. But for my part it was not freedom that I sought, either then or now. Let me say in passing: freedom is all too often self-deception among men. And if freedom counts as one of the most sublime feelings, equally sublime is the deception that corresponds to it.

The ape, Red Peter, goes on to mock man’s theatrical attempts at imitating the gestures of his primordial ancestors, as well as scoffing at other ‘apish inventions’. The ape has survived his ordeal by imitating human behaviour as a theatrical performer. By ‘aping’ the accepted forms human behaviour, the ape is able to accelerate the evolutionary process of humans, and, by being able to converse with academic experts, the absurdity of pre-established notions of human progress or a civilizing process is emphasised. This echoes a similar satire about ethnological research:

The Negro who, having gone mad from homesickness, was taken home from the World Exhibition and, in his village, surrounded by the lamentations of the tribe, with the most solemn face, by way of tradition and duty, demonstrated the pranks that delighted the European public, who believed they were the rites and customs of Africa.

Similar to Red Peter, who performs the pre-requisite manners necessary for human conformity, the Negro shows itself to be advanced in the art of imitating perceived modes of cultural behaviour. Human behaviour is seen to be a mockery of its own authentic nature, with the ape mocking the formulated notion of ‘freedom’ that is epistemologically given, proving instead to have already acquired a full ontological understanding. Kafka attributes

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67 Ibid., p. 190.

existential concerns to the position of the ape, whilst deflating the philosophical notions of science that delimit human potential to the stage of the animal:

We no longer trace the origin of man in the ‘spirit’, in the ‘divinity’, we have placed him back among the animals.\(^{69}\)

‘A Report to an Academy’ reverses the physical transformation dramatized in *Metamorphosis* to invert the process of humans imitating apes. This is a Darwinian role reversal to subvert Darwinian teleology.\(^{70}\) Modern science and human behaviour is made the specimen here, the object of study. The ape’s adoption of mimetic gestures proves to the academy that it is far more than a biological automaton. Its lack of human speech did not preclude an advanced state of ontological awareness prior to the process of humanization, or accelerated evolutionary conversion. Kafka mocks the biological rationale of evolutionary theories that equate the self to only the adaptive mechanism necessary for survival or other biological drives.

Kafka was opposed to such causal explanations, for humanity is more than this. Being and becoming are essential qualities that define human life:

The lowest forms of animals are born in one moment and die almost in the same moment; the lower animals grow very rapidly. The human being grows the slowest of all created beings, and thereby he confirms the well-informed man in believing that man is the noblest creation.\(^{71}\)

Nietzsche visualizes a similar image of the lowest form of being:


\(^{70}\) Max Brod sees, in *Franz Kafka, A Biography*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts & Richard Winston (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), p. 135, Kafka degrading Gregor to an animal, and raising Red Peter to the level of the human being as expressing the idea that mankind cannot raise himself to God’s level, and must sink deeper still.

Consider the cattle, grazing as they pass you by: they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored. This is a hard sight for man to see; for though he thinks himself better than the animals because he is human, he cannot help envying them their happiness – what they have, a life neither bored nor painful, is precisely what he wants, yet he cannot have it because he refuses to be like an animal [...] Thus the animal lives unhistorically: for it is contained in the present\textsuperscript{72}

Like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Kafka was interested in the levelling or mediocrizing of man in a ‘divineless’, or industrious, age. For Nietzsche, the modern European is a sick animal, honest but gloomy:

The nineteenth century is more animalic and subterranean, uglier, more realistic and vulgar, and precisely for that reason “better”, “more honest,”; but weak in will, but sad and full of dark cravings, but fatalistic.\textsuperscript{73}

Rather than the honest animal, Nietzsche frequently derides a moral animal for cultivating an abundance of contrary drives and impulses within himself. The herd animal is equated with the human-animal tamed by the forces of civilization or Socratic virtues. To express the peculiar modern condition of a post-Nietzschean existential entrapment, Kafka’s animal is also subterranean whilst remaining ‘non-transparent’:

Human beings of greater profundity have always felt compassion with animals precisely because they suffer from life and yet do not possess the strength to turn the sting of suffering against themselves and understand their existence metaphysically; and the sight of senseless suffering arouses profound indignation. That is why at more than one place on this earth the conjecture arose that souls of guilt-laden human beings were trapped inside the bodies of these animals, and that suffering whose senselessness at first glance arouses indignation acquires sense and significance as punishment and penance when viewed against the backdrop of eternal justice. Could one conceive of a harsher punishment than to live in the manner of an animal [...] To cling so blindly and madly to life, for no higher reward, far from knowing that one is punished or why one is punished in this way, but instead to thirst with inanity of a horrible desire for precisely this punishment as though it were happiness – that is what


it means to be an animal [.....] But where does the animal cease, where does the human being begin?\textsuperscript{74}

Kafka's human-animals are ontological confusions that reflect Nietzsche's idea that man suffers more than the senseless sufferings of an animal because he is profoundly sensitive to his metaphysical needs. Kafka is dramatizing our fallen state where we cling so blindly and madly to life for no higher reward. We are punished, but what is our crime? The punishment becomes the source of happiness because it is more visible than the cruel and eternal justice of an invisible god. Like Nietzsche, Kafka resists the Darwinian-animal that represents a herd mentality, and does not deny a concept of man as indivisible from the animal side of humanity:

Animal nature is at the centre of Nietzsche's thought [.....] It is one of Nietzsche's basic beliefs that man is, before all else, an animal being, and that to attribute other origins to him is an illusion [.....] To this extent Nietzsche is a Darwinian.\textsuperscript{75}

It is here that Nietzsche anticipates Freud by recognising that human instincts are often distorted through various acts of repression.\textsuperscript{76} Nietzsche demythologises the notion of the divine by drawing on evolutionary theory to question the origins of religious morality in relation to a system of values driven by animal survival instincts. Nietzsche cuts humanity off from its metaphysical roots, and brings man closer to the ape by devaluing the idea of human progress - the conviction that the quality of life is steadily improving. Nietzsche manipulates


\textsuperscript{76} Pierre Klossowski argues, in \textit{Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle}, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 153, that Nietzsche 'submitted to himself to "the most beautiful invention of the sick" — that is, to a sovereign malice [.....]'.
Darwinian parallels and inverts the ‘positive’ positivism of anthropological philosophy by extending the distinction between biological and moral aspects. Nietzsche was not in denial of an evolutionary past. Nevertheless, he often polemicises against the view that Darwinian evolutionarism posits an eternal truth, where the blind biological purposes of ‘growth and reproduction’ are identified as pure determining factors in the history of humanity. The danger is this would provide a common prevailing concept of human destiny. Certain writers opposed the genetic movement in evolutionary theory to emphasise instead the abrupt disconnection in the lateral movement of metamorphosis:

The mythic consciousness does not see human personality as something fixed and unchanging, but conceives every phase of man’s life as a new personality, a new self.

For Nietzsche, a quantitative outlook is of limited value. Man can easily evolve back again, and for Nietzsche the ‘domesticated animal’, or tamed civilized household pet, was a current reminder that man can devolve or degenerate like the wolf to the dog. Kafka shared to an extent this view in conceiving of man’s soul as trapped in the body of an animal, longing for a higher reward. Like animals, we have been defrauded of a metaphysical disposition, and merely hang onto life with no higher aim to hang onto. Modern man is a sick animal because he displays the symptoms of being trapped in the prison-walls of self-consciousness like a trapped animal that suffers with a full sense of its being. Yet, Kafka’s natural dramatizations of animal-analogies serve as a ‘metaphysical’ benchmark to the human condition; for they posit that the process of humanization is a discrete cultivation of a sensibility, defying the

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77 See Dr Gowan Dawson, “‘Frightful Satyr-Like Features”: Darwin’s Natural History and the Sexualised Simian’, work-in-progress paper given at University of Leicester, English Department, 2005. Darwin inspired a popular culture of satirical human-ape analogies.


79 ‘His objections are not based on any empirical study of Darwin’s own data. They are broadly philosophical in being concerned partly with Darwin’s methodological premises and partly with some of his ideological inferences. Chief among these is Darwin’s idea of progress: mere survival of the fittest and consequent biological improvements in the strain do not, for Nietzsche, constitute any sort of enhancement of the value and dignity of man.’ J. P. Stern, A Study of Nietzsche (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 111.
logic of collective biological imitation. Like Nietzsche, Kafka honours above the higher men who dwell in pure knowledge the autonomy of the self-determining creative individual, and likens his nature to the instincts of the animal. For the human-animal is a perfect cynic. Kafka is not striving for the ideal of a painless existence, or senseless vegetative contentment, within the ‘blissful blindness’ of the herd; rather he is drawing a sense of humanity from an unhealthy inhuman type.

By textually deconstructing the twin myths of science and the metaphysics of myths, Kafka developed a mythic quality, like the Greek notion of a pantheon of Olympian gods that puts the divine principle at a sufficient distance from mortals, to transcend the limits of possible knowledge. Cutting through discursive abstractions, Kafka transformed the use of a metaphoric language to obscure the relationship between the physical being and the abstract cause. All of Kafka’s work can be classified as an attempt to personalise his own struggle into a language that is supra-rational, that intentionally widens the distance between an intrinsic text and extraneous explanatory sources. Kafka’s personal experience of alienation was compounded particularly by a culture of authoritative dogma that transcribed and belittled the frustrations of the entrapped individual. The forces of rationalism encouraged systematic thinkers to become more speculative in their analysis, to proliferate the use of anthropological and psychological metaphor, and with it the individual felt increasingly encroached upon by an overbearing, predetermining, form of knowledge. Brought under the microscopic light of psychoanalysis, the integrity of the self was relegated to an inadequate state. The individual was dispossessed of a personal language to describe how a singular world was intimately perceived. For Kafka, psychology was too prescriptive in unravelling the hidden preserves of the human condition. Sigmund Freud, in The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), interprets vermin as a dream-symbol representing ‘small children – for instance, undesired brothers and sisters.’80 He goes on to state that:

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Many of the beasts which are used as genital symbols in mythology and folklore play the same part in dreams.\(^1\)

Freud assigns fixed symbolic meaning to dream states, and in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) chance signs become over-determined symptoms:

I reached the conclusion that this particular instance [...] in which psychical function — the memory — refuses to operate, admits of an explanation much more far-reaching than that which the phenomenon is ordinarily made to yield.\(^2\)

For Freud, every neurotic act is unmistakably a psychological symbol predetermined by a biological 'prehistory':

What is common to all of these cases, irrespective of the material, is the fact that the forgotten or distorted matter is brought by some associative path into connection with an unconscious thought-content — a thought-content which is the source of the effect manifested in the form of forgetting.\(^3\)

Freud claimed he could transpose human behaviour into a metaphorical key - the dream world, the secret imagination, or the hidden substratum of human thoughts substantiated into scientific terms. Freud's psychoanalytical process is a hermeneutic method for turning mysterious acts of human behaviour into readable signs. We are encouraged to over-read chance happenings, to look out for evidence of determination, and in the rush to ascribe meaning, neurotic symptoms become cryptic configurations to be decoded, or manifest symbols which psychoanalysis can unlock to describe a hidden reality. Kafka remained suspicious of any theory claiming to explain or observe the complexity of the inner world in rational or universal terms:

Psychology is impatience.

\(^{1}\) Ibid.


\(^{3}\) Ibid., p. 59.
All human errors are impatience, the premature breaking off of what is methodical, an apparent fencing in of the thing.\(^5\)

The ontological malaise of the modern world was, in part, a direct result of psychological formulations that profaned the mysteries of the human self. Hermeneutically ascribing fixed terms to the hidden nature of the individual represented, for Kafka, a threat to the integrity or sanctity of each person’s inner nature. The curative power of scientific knowledge was a form of naturalism, and an irreligious humanism, that replaced the spiritual or existential anguish of individual struggle with the discourse of the neurotic. But, even though psychoanalysis posed a threat as an extraneous explanatory source, Kafka absorbed the logic of its metaphors into his work. As Walter Sokel writes, ‘Kafka presented in fictional terms the image of man as conceived by Freud’.\(^5\) And, as Vladimir Nabokov states, he regularly teases the reader with the impression of having incorporated the trite, and imbecile, symbols of sexual mythologists:

You will find a number of such inept symbols in the psychoanalytic and mythological approach to Kafka’s work, in the fashionable mixture of sex and myth that is so appealing to mediocre minds. In other words, symbols may be original and symbols may be stupid and trite.\(^6\)

For Kafka, a figurative language describing human nature entailed a slower, and more apposite, unravelling of its deep mysteries:

All science is methodology with regard to the Absolute. Therefore, there need be no fear of the unequivocally methodological. It is a husk, but not more than everything except the One.\(^7\)

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Individual human nature preserves the absolute, and so only the actual individual can be at one with its true nature:

From outside one will always triumphantly impress theories upon the world and then fall straight into the ditch one has dug, but only from the inside will one keep oneself and the world quiet and true.88

Kafka insisted instead on a form of ‘descriptive psychology’ where the individual is never a stranger to himself if he still preserves ‘a separateness’ from extraneous interpolations.

Whilst transcending rational knowledge of the individual’s experience, Kafka’s anti-naturalistic texts do shadow Freudian notions as vivid metaphoric visualisations, or dream symbols - crystallizations of a psychical reality. His texts are abundantly rich in psychological insights that resemble dream states, seemingly self-evident illustrations of a relationship between externalised psychic signs and repressive reasons. But whilst Kafka echoes discursive elaborations, he reverses the logical sequence of psychological analogies. He constructs a symbolic reality, picturing the human individual as an abstract entity, but nonetheless his animated metaphors do not unfold out as transparent psychological allegories, or carry their meaning over to an allegorical literalization.89 Kafka’s interpenetration of naturalism and the fantastic radicalizes a mimetic perception obscuring determinant statements. He provokes psychological readings, but, by leaving the unexplained as symbolic, Kafka always creates a blind spot for knowledge.

For example, *The Trial* seemingly presents a powerful allegory of man’s spiritual exile from the reality of twentieth-century Europe, with Joseph K. symbolizing the lonely struggle of one man’s futile fight for freedom against the faceless institution of bureaucratic injustice.

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88 Ibid., p. 16.

89 As Walter Sokel points out, Theodor Adorno turned against the religious allegorizing of Kafka initiated by Max Brod through which acts of interpretation transpose the unknown content of his stories to the known ‘Each sentence says ‘interpret me’, and none will permit it [...] Kafka’s authority is textual [...] In an art that is constantly obscuring and revoking itself, very determinate statement counterbalances the general proviso of indeterminateness.’ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Notes on Kafka’, *Prisms: Cultural Criticism and Society*, trans. Samuel & Shierry Weber (London: Spearman, 1967), pp. 246-7.
Like Gregor Samsa, K. represents the incognito fate of a predetermined being played out in front of the reader's prying eyes. Existing through the lives of others, Joseph too is suspended within a gainsaying panoptical hell. Human dignity is no longer the preserve of the solitary individual, and under the monotonous drive of his persecutors Joseph K. is forced down to a rudimentary level of being, dying like an animal in a slaughterhouse:

With failing eyes K. could still see the two of them, cheek leaning against cheek, immediately before his face, watching the final act. 'Like a dog!' He said: it was as if he meant the shame of it to outlive him.90

Piotr Parlej argues that Kafka's simile of the dog is to free language from metaphysical parameters by eroding the logic of properties, and by arresting the movement of substitution. Kafka's symbolism destabilizes the nature of the metaphor as a bridge, or transfer, to assert relative comparisons.91 Kafka's animals aim to achieve the same effect of defamiliarization. Kafka's fears of a gossiping afterlife are projected onto Joseph K. The novel ultimately undercuts any allegorical pretensions, denying any consistent totality, whilst at the same time dramatizing a horrific vision of a pre-determining totality.

For Kafka, the totalizing discourses of modern enlightenment created a Greek tragedy of modern proportions, where the individual is ever transparent, naked and espied, with the observer remaining unseen and omnipresent behind the looking-glass.92 Joseph K.'s final resignation to a predetermining fate is doubly tragic, as K. never proves what the cause of his guilt and punishment really was, or if it ever really existed at all in the first place:

I always wanted to snatch at the world with twenty hands, and not for a very laudable motive, either. That was wrong, and am I to show now that not even a whole year's struggling with my case has taught me anything? Am I to leave this world as a man

90 Franz Kafka, The Trial, p. 251.
92 Jason Holt has noted that The Trial is 'a terribly inefficient means of conveying the idea that life is bureaucratically oppressive, implacably irrational, and irremediably bleak.' Quoted from Andrew Bennett, The Author (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 80. The tone of the novel imitates the monotonous forces outside that persecute K. to offset the totalitarian efficiency of intended meaning.
who shies away from all conclusions? Are people to say of me after I am gone that at the beginning of my case I wanted it to finish, and at the end of it wanted it to begin again? I don’t want that to be said.93

Paul Oppenheimer argues that the causeless guilt of Georg and Joseph, without any reference made to an outside universe, is typically modern as a new type of guilt:

In no recognizable sense [is] the guilt either of a traditionally religious or criminal situation […] Their self-torture must be daily quashed and suppressed in order to stanch the natural animal pain that accompanies their self-neglect […] The theme of [Kafka’s] brief writing career in fact is that the Fall never ended.94

In a way, God provided an absolute in his judgement even when man was suffering. The modern dilemma is that the disillusionment is caused by a lack of ethical certainty. Doomed to eternal recurrence, the anxiety that gripped K. in his persecuted life continues on as post-mortem speculative enquiries. K.’s life is inscribed into a never-ending cycle of rationalising investigations. For Kafka, the modern tragedy reflects a deeper sense of tragic alienation.95 In Pagan-Greek culture, the gods were held at a divinely mysterious distance from human existence. In the hall of mirrors there is nowhere to hide - one is watched always wherever one moves, and so the challenge to life is diminished.

Despite treating the extraordinary as natural and the symbolically incomprehensible as plausible to counter empirical abstractions, Kafka’s metamorphoses of human-animals are ambivalent in echoing the deconstructive effect that posits human identity at a fixed point. Kafka frequently dramatizes the process of scholarly rationalization that reduces the


94 Paul Oppenheimer, An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Modern Guilt (London: Duckworth, 1997), pp. 21-2. For Ionesco sees Kafka as expressing the fallout with God as of our own doing: ‘This theme of man lost in a labyrinth, without a guiding thread, is basic […] in Kafka’s work. Yet if man no longer has a guiding thread it is because he no longer wants to have one. Hence his feeling of guilt, anxiety, of the absurdity of history.’ Quoted from Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 345. Man’s existential pathos is that he does not ‘leap’ like Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith” that does not shrink from the absurd – Abraham. See Walter Kaufmann, From Shakespeare to Existentialism, Studies in Poetry, Religion, and Philosophy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), p. 163.

95 Raymond Williams argues, in Modern Tragedy (London: Hogarth Press, 1992), p. 44, that death and suffering without any sense of absolute meaning defines a modern idea of tragedy: ‘Evolution and the dying god came together, ironically, in many post-Christian minds.’.
‘inexplicable’ into a distinct frame of reference. In ‘The Giant Mole’, the discovery of ‘[a] mole, larger in size than any ever seen before’, an unnatural and incredible phenomenon, is reduced to a fading rumour, or a ‘silent presence’, after pithy squabbling between two interested parties who try to investigate its origins and make public the findings. Kafka is making a connection between the communicating of unnatural occurrences to the public at large, and the effect over time of its dwindling significance:

Every new discovery is assumed at once into the sum-total of knowledge, and with that ceases in a sense to be a discovery; it dissolves into the whole and disappears, and one must have a trained scientific eye even to recognize it after that. For it is related to fundamental axioms of whose existence we don’t even know, and in the debates of science it is raised on these axioms into the very clouds.

Despite its original fame, with authorities debating over its significance as a discovery, the mole’s attraction depreciates, dissipating to a few discreet references. The mole’s ontological difference fades under the weight of a prosaic history. Walter Sokel argues that Kafka is distinguished from traditional authors of the fantastic genre in reversing the movement between natural and supernatural. The supernatural is reduced to the absurd degree of banality, from the unknown to the known and then to the position of disproven obscurity.

In ‘Josephine, the Singer, or the Mouse Folk’, the symbolic power of the singing mouse that initially captivates her audience too eventually shrinks from the community. The narrator, another mouse, tries to disprove her alleged vocal skill but is unable to combat her enormous influence. Josephine and her enchanting artistry are seen to live above the general lot of a mere biological existence, with the society of mice existing only as reproductive organisms that are unable to experience the intermediary stage of self-development:

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97 Ibid., p. 214.


99 ‘Everything is completely mundane and utilitarian. God lies outside our existence. And therefore all of us suffer a universal paralysis of conscience [...] We are immobilized.’ Gustav Janouch, *Conversations With Kafka*, p. 51.
[The] dangers lying everywhere in wait for us too incalculable – we cannot shelter our children from the struggle for existence [...] A kind of unexpended, ineradicable childishness pervades our people [...] Childhood and old age come upon us not as upon others. We have no youth, we are all at once grown-up.\textsuperscript{100}

By extending human-animal analogies to their extreme, Kafka dramatizes the absurdity of delimiting human potential to values of utilitarian and biological terms. Josephine’s disappearance happens when her powers seem to desert her, and yet her symbolic presence remains:

It is only her supporters who are looking for her, many are devoting themselves to the search, but all in vain; Josephine has vanished, she will not sing.\textsuperscript{101}

This fable mocks the modern denial of a higher culture’s ability to enchant, whilst mirroring the ever-decreasing influence of Christ’s life in the modern world:

Josephine’s road, however, must go downhill. The time will soon come when her last notes sound and die into silence. She is a small episode in the eternal history for our people, and the people will get over the loss of her. Not that it will be easy for us; how can our gatherings take place in utter silence?\textsuperscript{102}

An indistinguishable silence replaces her symbolic presence, and Josephine merges into the undifferentiated mass of the folk:

Narrative depends on the ability to sustain differences, and as Josefine’s experience illustrates – it is impossible to maintain difference among the mouse folk [...] Josefine’s story becomes negatively inscribed in the failure of the narration.\textsuperscript{103}

Because they are individualistic, distinct from the collective intelligence or materiality of a herd mentality of the modern world, Kafka’s zoomorphic creations represent a


\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., p. 250.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.

transcendental alterity. In ‘Investigations of a Dog’, the narrating dog admits to first living in the midst of the dog community, a dog among dogs, but distances itself from ‘the poor inferior speechless beings whose utterance is restricted to a few cries’. Discovering a creative musical gift leads to the discovery that freedom ‘is a poor stunted growth’. The dog appears to voice Kafka’s philosophical concerns:

People extol the universal progress made by the dog race throughout the ages, and one presumes that what they have chiefly in mind is the progress of science. Certainly science progresses, its advance is irresistible, it even progresses at an accelerating speed, ever faster, but what is praiseworthy about that?

Marian Scholtmeijer argues that the barriers separating humans from animals have collapsed in the modern context, and so the only remaining province left for human difference is the metaphysic. By detaching human ontology from an essentialist belief, Kafka’s estrangement from the modern human condition found expression in identification with animals. Kafka does not uphold the absolute of myth or ‘the total myth’ born as an all-embracing and self-sufficient theory, but rather the symbolic elusive nature or enchanting simulacra of myth - what lies beyond, and cannot ever be fully comprehended. The belief that humans are marked off from all other animals by having free will is a Christian inheritance. Kafka instead invests his animals with the free will of the human individual to set them apart. Yet,

104 ‘The belief that animals are like us in some essential way is the source of the enduring and widespread myth of a magic time or place or person that erases the boundary between humans and animals.’ Wendy Doniger, quoted from J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 100. The fact that Kafka was a vegetarian may suggest that he held genuine compassion for his fellow creatures. Joseph K.’s and Gregor Samsa’s deaths are associated with animals as sacrificial victims. As Wendy Doniger states, most mythologies assume that animals, rather than men, are the image of god. Kafka’s transformations are quintessentially natural like the rituals of animal transformations in various magic-societies. They do not return to the human world. This underscores the mythic status of their metamorphosis.


106 Ibid., p. 177.


ironically, his humanization of lowly animals is also an expression of a human existence denied true freedom.

Kafka’s mythic use of animals represents a special need, one that the individual is starved of in modern culture. Erich Heller argues that Kafka depicts man as suffering from spiritual starvation. Even though the fasting-artist, a circus freak, is like a self-confessed parody of Kafka’s artistic exploits, he embodies the denial of a spiritual hunger in the contemporary world. The fanatical fasting man is reduced to the state of an animal shaking the bars of his cage. The paradox is that the sacrifice of his life-denying art is satisfied through the attention of an audience, and eventually his appeal dwindles as his body becomes more and more emaciated, so his cage is moved from the middle of the ring to the rear along with the animal cages. There is a dual process of negation with his physical wasting, and his shrinkage from the public eye, in the battle against indifference and a misunderstanding of the cause of his fasting:

And if once in a while some kindly soul came along who felt sorry for him, and tried to explain to him that his sadness was probably the result of his fasting, then it would happen, especially if the fast was well advanced, that the fasting-artist responded with an explosion of rage, and to universal alarm began to rattle like a wild beast at the bars of his cage.

The fasting-artist feels this explanation of his cause is a perversion of the truth, and like Joseph K. and Gregor Samsa struggles to find acceptance of his personal integrity. The impresario tends to interpret his own behaviour and motives. Nevertheless, he tries to reach out for approval. After his burial, a young panther replaces the hunger artist, a wild creature that leapt about in the cage, full of joy, and eating the food brought to him by his keepers. Like Rilke’s panther, Kafka’s panther represents the renewed vigour in the physical lust for a

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freer life. The crowd's admiring acceptance of its presence behind the bars of the cage suggests that it is not the ascetic ideals that bring the artist to a state of animality that Kafka mocks, but rather the crowd that taunts such artistic exploits. Unlike the massing onlookers, the hunger artist starves himself of a natural sustenance to achieve something beyond what is so readily available:

'[Because] I could never find the nourishment I liked. Had I found it, believe me, I would never have caused any stir, and would have eaten my fill just like you and everyone else.'

The human-animal disorientation that delineates the fate of the human self, ontologically suspended between the natural and the extraordinary, reflects the ontological despair of a post-mythic age. In many respects, Franz Kafka emphasises the nihilism and self-sufficiency of Nietzsche's philosophy, by, as Erich Heller writes, expressing the nothingness of a godless world, the renunciation of life through 'creations [that are] symbolic, for they are infused with (and not merely allegorical of) negative transcendence'. Kafka knew, like Nietzsche, that mythical assumptions about the world were built into the structure of language, and that we mythologize by using a naturally adopted aesthetic of redemption, giving rise to absolute abstractions on truth, innocence and salvation. We fabricate, through language, our sources of consolation. Kafka's 'The Vulture' echoes Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* with the creature gnawing incessantly at an individual's feet:

It is worth contrasting the Czech German-language poet Rainer Maria Rilke's 'The Panther' (1902/3) with Kafka's metaphoric use of animals: 'The bars which pass and strike across his gaze / have stunned his sight: the eyes have lost their hold. / To him it seems there are a thousand bars, / a thousand bars and nothing else. No World [...] The silent shutter of his eyes sometimes / slides open to admit some thing outside; / an image runs through each expectant limb / and penetrates his heart, and dies.' *Neue Gedichte*, trans. Stephen Cohn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), p. 61. This is Rilke's attempt to feel like a panther trapped in a cage, and he manages to give the creature a sense of self-awareness of its suppressing unnatural habitation without investing a human voice or consciousness into its condition. Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* [1877] (London: Puffin Books, 1994), p. 26, invests human values as well as a narrational voice into the eponymous animal-character in an attempt to change readers' attitude towards animal rights: 'What more could I want? Why, liberty!'.

Ibid., p. 219.

A vulture was hacking at my feet. It had already torn my boots and stockings to shreds, now it was hacking at the feet themselves.\textsuperscript{115}

But, Kafka’s narrative offers no event of redemption through the act of self-sacrifice, for the individual is greatly relieved to finally die, unburdened from physical torment:

Falling back, I was relieved to feel him drowning irretrievably in my blood, which was filling every depth, flooding every shore.\textsuperscript{116}

This is a reversal of Shelley’s mythic teleological symbolism, with death alone providing real consolation, relieving the human individual from a painful suspension of the human spirit in life. The body is the prison house of the soul, and no compensation of redemption is gained in reward for an ascetic or self-sacrificing ordeal. Kafka’s narratives frequently project the flight from the true self to an illusory world by mocking the fallen man.

At the imagined point of salvation the void in our God-relationship is experienced.\textsuperscript{117} In ‘The Angel’, an individual believes briefly that the destruction caused to his room is due to a descending angel. He thinks it is a vision intended for his own liberation, but he is cruelly deluded by his own projections, and soon realises this is no angel that has come to save him, but only a painted wooden figure off the prow of some ship, one of the kind that hangs from the ceiling in sailors’ taverns. In ‘The Bridge’, the transmogrified self is suspended above his fate, literally above the sharp rock to which it eventually plunges to meet its death. The bridge longs for recognition by some traveller who finds its location. Echoing the apple-pelting scene of Gregor’s father, human contact brings about its death:

\textsuperscript{115} Franz Kafka, ‘The Vulture’, \textit{The Great Wall of China and Other Short Works}, p. 132.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.

[The traveller] plunged his spike into my bushy hair, and for a good while let it rest there, no doubt as he gazed far round him into the distance [...] And I turned over to look at him. A bridge turns over!  

In ‘A Little Fable’ a mouse is caught between two alternatives with neither offering the possibility of a ‘way out’. A cat has the mouse trapped, and whichever way he goes he meets his end. The struggle for existence is perceived to be futile, so, the mouse chooses the least prolonged:

‘ALAS,’ said the mouse, ‘the world is growing smaller every day [...]’ ‘You only have to change direction,’ said the cat, and ate it up.

Our world grows smaller every day when the logic of existence and human inclinations are valued according to the propensities of an animal nature.

Echoing Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, Hunter Gracchus tells his tale of how death was cruelly denied to him when his death ship lost its way, and so is doomed forever to wander the earth in a secular state of purgatory. Gracchus, a legend in his own time, is existentially suspended forever on the great stair that leads up to the other world. Like Joseph K., he committed no sin, nor crime. Kafka dramatizes a severance between this temporal world and the metaphysical other. What is expressed is similar to ‘The Burial of the Dead’ of T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’: an existential phenomenological nightmare brought about when the rite of passage, marking the symbolic transition of the dead, is cruelly denied. Gracchus’ presence on earth, his living-death or eternal-recurrence, is a curse to others. The metaphysical heavens have, like the tower of Babel, fallen to the level of man’s temporal spectrum:

When the prerequisites of ascending life, when everything strong, brave, masterful, proud is eliminated from the concept of God, when he declines step by step to the

118 Franz Kafka, 'The Bridge', The Great Wall of China and Other Short Works, p. 46.

119 Franz Kafka, 'A Little Fable', The Great Wall of China and Other Short Works, p. 135.

symbol of a staff for the weary, a sheet-anchor for all who are drowning; when he becomes the poor people’s God, the sinner’s God, the God of the sick par excellence [...] of what does such a transformation speak? Such a reduction of the divine?\textsuperscript{121}

Because God has been murdered by man’s ideas, the metaphysical has been drawn down to the common level of humanity. The divine is reduced to our state of sickness. ‘The City Coat of Arms’ also parodies man’s failed attempts to collectively construct an edifice that can bridge the gap between humanity’s temporal limits and the endless dream of the heavens. The Tower of Babel proves to be a futile enterprise perpetrated over many generations:

The essence of the whole enterprise is the idea of building a tower that will reach to heaven. Beside that idea everything is secondary. The idea, once grasped in its full magnitude, can never vanish again; so long as there are men on earth there will also be the strong desire to finish building the tower.\textsuperscript{122}

Whilst human resources develop towards an impossible mission, the Tower of Babel symbolizes a rational superstructure that generates its own mythological drive overshadowing the human imaginative potential of the individual.

In ‘A Message from the Emperor’, Kafka taunts the reader as the prospective recipient with the expectation that a message given from an emperor’s deathbed - the transcendental signified - can be received:

To every instant there is a correspondence in something outside time. This world here and now cannot be followed by a Beyond, for the Beyond is eternal, hence it cannot be in temporal contact with this world here and now.\textsuperscript{123}

The message never reaches its final destination, because the messenger gets lost in the multitudes of the world suggesting that a non-interpenetrative relationship exists between the ‘beyond’ and the temporal. With the multitudes symbolizing the phenomenal gulf that divides

\textsuperscript{121} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Anti-Christ}, p. 139.


\textsuperscript{123} Franz Kafka, \textit{The Blue Octavo Notebooks}, p. 31.
the ‘beyond’ and the ‘here and now’, Kafka satirizes the over-consumption of parables that offer metaphors of consolation:

No one can force his way through here, least of all with a message from a dead man. — But you sit at your window and dream up that message when evening falls.124

As in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, the individual is suspended in the limbo of endlessly deferred meaning. The immediate inference implied in the raising of the reader’s expectations is frustrated to imply that ‘Heaven is dumb, echoing only to the dumb.’125 Again, Kafka replaces the implied metaphysical direction with a nihilistic empty space.

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Whilst in accord with a nihilistic perspective that devalues the transcendental visions of myths, Kafka often reveals a base reality underpinning the myth where human potential exists at a more elemental level. In ‘Poseidon’ the mythic god is demoted to the role of an administrative position, assigned to accounts, a perfunctory utilitarian post that is in stark contrast to his historically perceived status:

Poseidon sat at his desk, going over the accounts. The administration of all the waters gave him endless work [...] [What] annoyed him most – and this is the chief cause of discontent with his job – was to learn of the rumours that were circulating about him; for instance, that he was constantly cruising through the waves with his trident.126

Kafka’s absurd humour is often aimed at deconstructive trends. With the philosophy of myths no longer detached from our daily cares, the mythic telos of human perfectibility is overthrown. However, Kafka’s short stories also signal an attempt to counter the rage for a

flattening order in the deconstruction of myths. His narratives reflect Nietzsche’s distinction between a reactive nihilism that sees the nullity of the world in a pessimistic light, and an active nihilism that embraces the nullity to reinvent itself artistically. Kafka achieves a reactive and active nihilism by returning to the mythic use of the animal as a metatrope that pessimistically expresses the concerns of individual alienation and oppression, and the reduced status of human being-ness. As biological automaton, the animal is typically considered to be unable to ‘interiorize the world through reflection: unreflected, the world remains exterior to its being.’ Certain philosophers exclude animals from the philosophical community of beings, and distant animals from the openness of being. Because they participate in transcendental independent acts that reflect the priority of mankind’s presence, or its cogito, Kafka’s human-animals represent the invisible and sacred world of inner experience:

The strange ontology of being disrupts mankind’s notions of consciousness, being, and the world: in the “presence” of animals, mankind is thrust from the traditional loci of subjectivity. By investing reflective subjectivity into the ‘non-being’ of the animal to give ‘being’, and to express the ‘reduced-being’ of humanity, Kafka ascribes to his human-animals a measure of individuality, existential fear, and an apperceptive faculty. This re-affirms the innate poetic disposition of a mythic language that modern discourses deny in the human individual. The narrator’s literal identification with an animal does indicate an unwillingness to dramatize the self as a form of human exposition. Instead, through the literal metamorphoses of human-animals, Kafka re-humanizes the human subject above the reductionism of dehumanizing

127 Adorno argues that Gregor is not like a bug, but is turned into one, because Kafka is aware that men have become aware that men are not themselves – that they themselves are things like psychological ego-aliens. *Prisms*, p. 255.


129 Ibid., p. 819.
strategies of scientific thinking, allowing for a more discrete and sensitive unravelling of self-expression.
In *Language and Myth*, Cassirer argues that myth, like art and language, carries a particular way of seeing, and mythical thinking, in its most elementary forms, is captivated and enthralled by the intuition which suddenly confronts it. In other words, the mythico-religious attitude within nature mythology is closely bound to the romantic spirit of a poet under the spell of intuitive experience. 'The ego is spending all its energy on this single object, lives in it, loses itself in it.' Cassirer goes on to argue that there is a common root of linguistic and mythic conception:

Language and myth stand in an original and indissoluble correlation with one another [...] They are two diverse shoots from the same parent stem, the same impulse of symbolic formulation, springing from the same basic mental activity, a concentration and heightening of simple sensory experience.

The mythico-religious veneration of natural phenomena is rooted in language and the use of symbols. And more importantly, the first mythical impulse from the mythmaking consciousness is distinguished from our abstract analytic attitude:

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3 Ibid., p. 88.
Their religions [of the Indo-Germanic races] show many traces of the fact that the worship of light as an undifferentiated, total experience preceded that of the individual heavenly bodies, which figure only as its media, its particular manifestations. In the Avesta, for instance, Mithra is not a sun-god, as he is for later ages; he is the spirit of heavenly light [....] Here we see in a concrete instance how mythic conception originally grasps only the great, fundamental, qualitative contrast of light and darkness, and how it treats them as one essence, one complex whole, out of which definite characters only gradually emerge. Like the spirit of language, the mythmaking genius “has” separate and individualized forms only in so far as it “posits” them, as it carves them out of the undifferentiated whole of its pristine vision.4

In certain ancient societies, the nocturnal heavens were special symbolic forms, not imitations but organs of reality. The genesis of primitive mythology tended to be as a result of peculiar intensifications of sense experience:

The mythical form of conception is not something super-added to certain definite elements of empirical science; instead the primary “experience” itself is steeped in the imagery of myth and saturated with its atmosphere. Man lives with objects only in so far as he lives with these forms; he reveals reality to himself, and himself to reality, in that he lets himself and the environment enter into this plastic medium, in which the two do not merely make contact, but fuse with each other.5

In other words, primitive mythic figurations are aroused by objects present in the external world. The familiar landscape, in a primitive period of our race, activated means of metaphoric expression. Unlike Frazer, Cassirer does not conceive of the magical view as an erroneous logic produced from the motives of utility, to save the crops from a wintry blight, but as serving an aesthetic function:

But there is one intellectual realm in which the word not only preserves its original creative power, but is ever renewing it; in which it undergoes a sort of constant palingenesis, at once sensuous and a spiritual reincarnation. This regeneration is achieved as language becomes an avenue of artistic expression. Here it recovers the fullness of life; but it is no longer a life mythically bound and fettered, but an aesthetically liberated life.6

5 Ibid., p. 10.
6 Ibid., p. 98.
Cassirer also sees lyric poetry as rooted in mythic/primary motives, where the spirit lives in the word of language and in the mythical image without falling under the control of either:

What poetry expresses is neither the mythic word-picture of gods and daemons, nor the logical truth of abstract determinations and relations [...] This liberation is achieved not because the mind throws aside the sensuous forms of word and image, but in that it uses them both as organs of its own, and thereby recognizes them for what they really are: forms of its own self-revelation.\(^7\)

For Wallace Stevens, the poet too lives in the throes of excitation, when describing the objects of the outside world. The power of the metaphor, or the verbal structure, is interwoven with mythical projections. Both spring from a common root, for speech is natural to the creature of sense, and through that act man animates nature into conceptions, or formulations, of a mythic pantheon.\(^8\)

This focusing of all forces on a single point is the prerequisite for all mythical thinking and mythical formulation.\(^9\)

External objects of a natural world excite the primary imagination of the poet as well as that of the mythic mind.

\(^7\) Ibid. Cassirer uses John Keats as an example of this ‘negative capability’ in terms of having a mythic attitude. This is true to a certain extent. Sir Maurice Bowra states: ‘In rejecting Locke’s and Newton’s explanation of the visible world, the Romantics obeyed an inner call to explore more fully the world of spirit. In different ways each of them believed in an order of things which is not that which we see and know, this was the goal of their passionate search.’ The Romantic Imagination (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 9. Mario Praz also states: ‘The essence of Romanticism consequently comes to consist in that which cannot be described [...] The essential is the thought and the poetic image, and these are rendered possible only in a passive state [...] It is romantic to consider concrete expression as a decadence, a contamination. How many times has the magic of the ineffable been celebrated, from Keats’. The Romantic Agony, trans. Angus Davidson (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 14-5. M.H. Abrams also compares Stevens to the Romantics in terms of a sceptical naturalism: ‘Stevens’ “supreme fiction” nonetheless incorporates the Romantic’s freshness of sensation which makes the world new [...] the poet as-if-reborn looks out upon a world as-if-renewed.’ Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 423.

\(^8\) Similarly, Martin Heidegger refers to myth as part of the creative processes, or poetics, like metaphor, dream, narrative and fiction, ‘“Poetry, as the authentic gauging of the dimension of dwelling, is the primal form of building. Poetry first of all admits man’s dwelling into its very nature, its presencing being”’. Quoted from Richard Kearney, Poetics of Modernity, Philosophy and Literary Theory (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995), pp. xii-xiii.

\(^9\) Cassirer, Language and Myth, p. 33.
Much of Wallace Stevens’ poetry conveys this sensory experience of an elemental contact within an environment of physical objects. And this is in spite of the fact that Stevens lived in an age when the relationship between the symbol and the abstraction was no longer conceived as holding, in a concrete or primary manner, an organic correlation. For example, from Ferdinand de Saussure we have gained a concept of symbolic systems as governed by a set of rules that the individual has assimilated. Saussure is an anti-organicist because for him the concept of language as a naming-process is naïve when it assumes ready-made ideas exist before words. There is no organic and concrete relation between the image of the thing and a primary concept:

[It] lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation [...] the linguistic unit is a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms.10

For the Modernists, language was still a medium for conveying the world, but was in crisis because its simple relationship to the world, of naming and describing, no longer appeared to apply transparently. The ineffable seemed commonplace, and there was no God to underwrite the Word.11 A modern attitude towards the raw forces of nature tends to detach us from a primary or elemental connection. Because words are ‘unmotivated signs’ there is no inherent connection between a word and what it designates. This relational disconnection is contrary to the mythico-religious conception. Even the Romantic tropes expressing the wonder of nature are regarded as passively inherited to form poetic conventions. A modern perspective tended to treat the fusion between subject and object as a supernatural illusion, and the mythic attitude is often disparaged in general terms as being the manifestation of mental defects, or the erroneous slippage between language and the objects of nature.


Nevertheless, as Cassirer argues, poetry is wilful and intellectual, an individual act, whilst nature remains a vitalising and generative force.\textsuperscript{12} In \textit{Poetries and Sciences}, I.A. Richards writes how poetry is a necessary justification for renewing our attitude towards nature in a world of ‘desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavour, and a thirst for a life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed’.\textsuperscript{13} Despite the countless pseudo-statements concerning God that have undermined our well-being, the words of the poet can provide sensory stimuli above the logic of science, giving ‘order and coherence [...] to a body of experience.’\textsuperscript{14} The collapse of pure knowledge and metaphysical truth has caused the neutralisation of nature, but ‘[because] we still hunger after a basis in belief’ poetry can still be used as a corrective.\textsuperscript{15} For Richards, ‘Poetic Truth’ is not a remedy and cannot figuratively replace the metaphysics of religion, or compete with the rational materialism of science, but ‘the imaginative life is its own justification.’\textsuperscript{16} Poetry can, though, be revised to re-orientate the civilised individual towards a wonder at nature’s objects, reinvesting a new sense of being and value into phenomenological forms. Nature’s objects have been freed of metaphysical signification, so poets can find ‘relief by a reversion to primitive mentality [...] chiefly to relics of the Magical View.’\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{12} George Santayana argues a similar case: ‘The word nature is poetical enough: it suggests sufficiently the generative and controlling function, the endless vitality and changeful order of the world in which I live. Faith in nature restores in a comprehensive way that sense of the permanent which is dear to animal life. The world then becomes a home, and I can be a philosopher in it.’ \textit{Scepticism and Animal Faith: Introduction to a System of Philosophy} – 1923 (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), pp. 237-8.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., pp. 63-66.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 66.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 65. Matthew Arnold, in ‘The Study of Poetry’, expressed a similar view of poetry as able to replace the ‘world of illusion’ captured in religion: ‘Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry.’ \textit{The Portable Matthew Arnold}, ed. Lionel Trilling (London: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 299.
For George Santayana, religion like myth is dependent on a poetic function underlying its symbolic transformations. However, he was also convinced that the moral—ethical and spiritual—effectiveness of religion depends on the acceptance of the literal truth of its poetry, myth, and allegory. The fundamental metaphysical aspect is vital to the credibility of conventional religion to give a literal basis. ‘Another world to live—whether we expect ever to pass wholly into it or no—is what is meant by having religion.’18 The ‘afterlife’ promised by Christ is a real place that sustains the orthodox believer. In his essay, ‘Modernism and Christianity’, Santayana felt that the inspiration of the age was science, higher criticism, and symbolism, thus rendering it impossible for many to believe that the virgin birth, the resurrection, and the miracles were actual historical events. The modernists were inclined to perceive the symbolic significance in Christianity as unreal. Wallace Stevens was very familiar with the philosophy of Santayana, and The Necessary Angel also conceives of religion as generated by the relation of a specific human psyche to its environment. In a way, Stevens’ rhetoric of the poetical ‘sublime’ is reliant on old religious notions, even though he claims to be unwilling to submit himself to old myths. This is what Nietzsche refers to as the halfway-house of religious-humanism.19 Santayana anticipates Wittgenstein, when he writes that the values of religion do not disappear when their scientific falsity is made evident:

The liberal school that attempts to fortify religion by minimizing its expression, both theoretic and devotional, seems to be merely impoverishing religious symbols and vulgarizing religious aims; it subtracts from faith that imagination by which faith becomes an interpretation and idealization of human life, and retains only a stark and superfluous principle of superstition.20


19 Walter Benjamin refers to the new optic of modernism as the ‘angelus novus’. Benjamin’s visual image is that the angel is propelled forwards into the future whilst continually facing backwards towards the past. ‘This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the debris before him grows skyward.’ [IX], ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 249. This is because Benjamin was struck by an incontestable, empirical fact: consistently, when modern innovations appeared in history, they took the form of historical restitutions. New forms “cited” the old ones out of context. Also see Susan Buck-Morse, The Dialectics of Seeing, Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999).

20 L.P. Smith, Little Essays Drawn From the Writings of George Santayana (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), p. 52.
Similar to Shelley's romantic ideas on the 'moral imagination', Santayana is saying that religion, through the power of the symbolic metaphor, enhances the values of living.\textsuperscript{21} The poetic character of religion defines the ideals (piety, spirituality, charity, peace etc.) towards which the individual soul aspires. The act of poetic-religious expression is the essential spiritual fulfilment.\textsuperscript{22}

Both Santayana and Stevens regard poetry as important for understanding the value of things, but they differ crucially on the role of poetic function in imagining the mythic other. This is because Santayana accepts that religion must claim literal validity in order for it to be a significant ethical and spiritual force to enable the average man to transcend the world in his labours and lives. Stevens, on the other hand, cites Cassirer to argue a difference between the imagination as metaphysics and as a power of the mind over external objects. The value of imagination is intrinsic to identifying with a realm of intuitional values:

Poetic imagination is the only clue to reality [...] The true poem is not the work of the individual artist, it is the universe itself, the one work of art which is forever perfecting itself.\textsuperscript{23}

For Stevens, imagination leads us in the direction of metaphysics. He then cites from Professor A. J. Ayer's \textit{Language, Truth and Logic} to acknowledge that from the point of view of the logical positivist the imagination has to be cleansed of the romantic.\textsuperscript{24} It is here that the idea of God is continually tested in metaphysical terms, transcending the world of sense-experience, though intimated within the apparent external reality. Stevens wants poetry to be

\textsuperscript{21} 'The word \textit{symbol} enters the English language in the fifteenth century in the sense of a dogma, or articulated doctrine of religion [...] Since then, the meanings of symbolism and faith have widely diverged: symbolism now means to us something that may or may not suggest a belief, but bypasses belief, and does not commit us to acceptance of any specific body of values.' Northrop Frye, 'The Symbol as Medium of Exchange', \textit{Myth and Metaphor, Selected Essays 1974-1988}, ed. Robert D. Denham (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), p. 40.

\textsuperscript{22} See Santayana's \textit{Realms of Being}, and \textit{The Idea of Christ in the Gospels}.


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 727.
justified from the basis of the metaphor, an intuitive understanding implicit to the poetic character of religion, unlike Santayana, who used symbol and myth in the traditional sense of religious thinking. In _The Necessary Angel_, Stevens writes that the imagination and reality are interdependent. The image is a product of the image-maker, and our sense of the phenomenal world is vitalised by how we imagine the world. Therefore, the subjective view of the poet, in his creation of metaphors, will unavoidably distort, or project onto, nature and its objects. The negative capability, the suspension of the willing ego, espoused by John Keats, cannot overcome the notion of pathetic fallacy. Metaphorical imaginings will alter, make fictive, the 'plain sense of things', the 'bare and unimagined world'. So, in the very act of perceiving, and describing the perception, we imagine beyond the mere materiality of the outside world. The act of imagination opens the mind eye to the possibility of the other as being. Wallace Stevens shows throughout his poetry that the poet makes any object, things-as-they-are, a space occupied with being.

Despite living in a post-romantic age, Stevens remained inspired by the finely graded shades of life's seasonal changes. In 'The Motive for Metaphor', the seasons of autumn and spring offer to the poet a liminal state of sensory experience:

You like it under the trees in autumn,  
Because everything is half dead [...]

In the same way, you were happy in spring,  
With the half colors of quarter-things

As Helen Vendler states, the desire for change is the motive for metaphor. Through the half-dead autumnal sensations, Stevens expresses Dionysian impulses of change that the poet experiences. The desire for harmony is part of a search for an abstract synthesis that the old Platonist desired through a paralleling between the imperfect temporal and an apposite


metaphysical sphere of order. From the subtleties and complex moods invoked in nature, the poet's imagination cannot help but produce images and symbols and to be excited by what is perceived. In 'Dance of the Macabre Mice', the mice symbolize too this everyday dynamism of half-conscious exhilaration, railing against the statue of 'monsieur on horse-back' that in turn symbolizes the dead traditional invective, unmoved by the thrust of modern remaking. Metaphysical values in his descriptions are actively evoked because Stevens often poeticizes the causal moment that happens between aesthetic projections and spiritual contact, suggesting that religious inclination is brought about through a human desire to be intimate with our environment:

The deer and dachshund are one.
Well, the gods grow out of the weather.
The people grow out of the weather;
The gods grow out of the people.

The figure of a god is an emanation of an imaginative interaction between natural forces and man's habitat. Stevens associates the immanence of god with the sensory experience of nature. Light, colour, and shape - the formal features of an aesthetic perception of object - emphasise that the spiritual dimension of projection is directed only one way. God is created in our image, and remains passive, a voiceless object subjected to our imaginative intimations:

If there must be a god in the house, must be,
Saying things in the rooms and on the stair,
Let him move as the sunlight moves on the floor,
Or moonlight, silently, as Plato's ghost
Or Aristotle's skeleton. Let him hang out

29 'From about 1940, Stevens' primary means for figuring these acts of imagination rhetorically is to make the act of metaphorical thinking itself the subject of the poem.' David Walker, The Transparent Lyric: Reading and Meaning in the Poetry of Stevens and Williams (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 64.
His stars on the wall. He must dwell quietly.

He must be incapable of speaking, closed,
As those are: as light, for all its motion is;
As color, even the closest to us, is;
As shapes, though they portend us, are.30

Stevens' imagination repeats a pattern of logic that tests the physical fact, or the extraneous object, for a principle of imagination to define an image. Reality is more than a sum of physical parts. His poetry is constantly equating a universal subjectivity that is found in the poet's sensibility with the source of the savage's magical view. 'Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit' defines a kind of poetic transubstantiation, when the reader becomes the book and the summer night like the conscious being of the book. The 'house' represents the peace gained in the 'House of God', the truth, perfection and the purity achieved in a meditative oneness with the unconscious order of the world. Stevens seeks the immanence of a god that answers to the logic of his imagination. The frequent use of sensory imagery is evidence that Stevens's idea of God is sought in a visual and tactile god, a passive object or plaything of the imagination.

From a tradition of poets that rationalizes the aesthetics of God's transcendence, Stevens looks for a proof of God through imaginative explanations. The Metaphysical poet George Herbert conjectures on the distance of an infinite God from the finite imagination, but concludes that the wonder of mystery is beyond our understanding:

Lord, how can man preach thy eternall word?
He is a brittle crazie glass:
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
This glorious and transcendent place,
To be a window, through thy grace.31


By an act of imagination, Herbert responds to a theological issue in terms of how we receive and pass on an understanding of God’s will by transforming his questions into the image of a stained-glass window. For Herbert, language and speech, the tools of human articulation, are - like the crazy mosaic design of a church window - fragile, fragmented and refractive conduits for the voice of God. But the light of God overcomes this slippage because doctrine and life combine and mingle. Herbert’s act of imagination underlines the leap of faith. The real light of God lies not in relative words. We are seized with awe, so preach the Word. We are unable to explain, yet the light still penetrates through the cracked panes of glass. Herbert’s understanding of his relationship with God is explained through two distinctive modes of thought that John Donne’s poetry also exemplifies - conceptual computation and the imagistic.32 Despite the focus on a potentially dis-ordering image, Herbert preaches and affirms the doctrine of grace through poetic transformation. Herbert finds analogies in apposite physical objects to set up questions which he in turn answers by expanding on the concept within the image. The concept of God remains as an absolute principle to overcome his image of a relative language. While Stevens’ poems address the conceptual relationship between poetical visions and the motives behind transcendental metaphors, they never reach an explicit point of demonstrating or validating the fulfilment of faith. This is because Stevens’ search for God is not dependent on a tradition of doctrinal teachings but a romantic tradition that is searching to find something in the nothing of a godless world.

Our desire for religious metaphors is coeval with our self-interest because we desire more than a mere sense of being – ‘one desires / So much more than that.’33 So, the human imagination naturally dwells on visual metaphors to capture our place in the universe. When desiring more than the ordinary or mere reality, physical objects become a focal point through which visual projections express or define a more spiritual sense of reality. Even though

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32 See James Boyd White, "This Book of Starres": Learning to Read George Herbert (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 41. ‘In this case the life of the poem lies in a series of transformations, enacted in imitation and definition of the central transformation it describes, that of the preacher.’

Stevens lived in a world that had destroyed its gods, he persisted in testing the imagination towards a metaphysical possibility:

It appears [...] that the imagination as metaphysics, from the point of view of the logical positivist, has at least seeming values [...] We feel [...] that the imagination as metaphysics will survive logical positivism unscathed [...] The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty.34

Like John Henry Newman, Stevens seems to be always looking for proof within the natural surroundings to gain an image of God:

Can I attain to any more vivid assent to the Being of God, than that which is given merely to notions of the intellect? Can I enter with a personal knowledge into the circle of truths which make up that great thought? Can I rise to what I have called an imaginative apprehension of it? Can I believe as if I saw?35

Newman's purpose, though, is to give real assent to the proposition that God exists, and so argues that, with an absence of visual proof, in the end devotion has to fall back on dogma. Stevens, on the other hand, tests the parameters of belief in terms of the imagination when positivism fails to provide visible answers. For Stevens, when the poet projects beyond its mere-being, the primacy of the imagination carries on naturally creating a science of illusions, or 'minor wish-fulfilments'. For Stevens, which ever way we turn in philosophy, art, or science, the mind is seen to be always projecting its subjectivity:

If we escape destruction at the hands of the logical positivists and if we cleanse the imagination of the taint of the romantic, we still face Freud.36

In a new context, where symbol and discourse are no longer in harmony, the poet works within a new semantic range. The dissolution of the gods means the poet has to radicalise his


36 Stevens, ‘Imagination as Value’, p. 139.
use of the metaphor, and avoid submitting his poetic imaginations to an inherited use of symbols or to project onto natural objects without intimating towards the transcendental. However, Stevens continues to express a subjectivity that forms the basis for spiritual intuition:

I am not competent to discuss reality as a philosopher. All of us understand what is meant by the transposition of an objective reality to a subjective reality. The transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet is precisely that.  

Throughout history, various poets have often arrived at a ‘Platonic sense’ of the world from a perception of nature’s wonder:

One writes poetry, then, in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. Or, simply, one writes poetry out of a delight in the harmonious and orderly.  

Stevens denies himself the role of the mystic poet who sees through the wondrous plenitude of life’s panorama a divine design of spiritual via negativa. Stevens’ poetry is ‘anti-poetic’ in the sense that it is ‘elemental’. Nevertheless, Stevens often equates the role of the poet in its transposition of an objective reality to a subjective reality as though taking on a spiritual undertaking:

The poet cannot profess the irrational as the priest professes the unknown. The poet’s role is broader, because he must be possessed, along with everything else, by the earth and by men in their earthly implications. For the poet, the irrational is elemental; but neither poetry nor life is commonly at its dynamic utmost.  

Without a metaphysical order, modern man is left only with an objective/material reality from which to create a sense of aesthetic redemption. Stevens equally shared his age’s

37 Stevens, ‘The Irrational Element in Poetry’ (Lecture delivered at Harvard University, December 8, 1936), Collected Poetry & Prose, p. 781.

35 Ibid., p. 786.

39 Ibid., p. 792.
scepticism towards illusions deriving from our sensory experiences. Nonetheless, Stevens never overcame a romantic attitude towards nature, acknowledging that mythological conceptions develop from the primal imaginations, or intuitive refractions, of our environment:

A mythology reflects its region. Here
In Connecticut, we never lived in a time
When mythology was possible — But if we had —
That raises the questions of the image's truth.
The image must be of the nature of its creator.
It is the nature of its creator increased,
Heightened. It is he, anew, in a freshened youth
And it is he in the substance of his region
Wood of his forests and stone out of his fields
Or from under his mountains. 40

A mythology reflects its environment because an image of nature is integral to a productive imagination engaged with the phenomenal world. The world of mythology may have vanished from Connecticut, but the vitalizing force of nature remains. The world of things still exists as an unfinished composition that the 'never-resting mind' wishes to complete. In 'The Idea of Order at Key West', the productive imagination actively transcribes the natural world:

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. 41

Stevens regularly poeticizes the logic of hypostatization. Human imagination is an active force underwriting the physical materiality of the outside world, reinforcing an aesthetic yearning to make from an imperfect world a paradise. We often mistake the subject for the object, or, when the beauty of the song echoes the beauty of the sea, allow the self of the song

to be identified as the self of the sea. This is how the poet transposes being onto the fluidity of the sea or a dynamic nature.

So for Stevens, any understanding of the spiritual naturally begins with a language of imagination that is inextricably related to its surroundings:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow

The idea of winter can only exist in the mind, if the imagination engages in a symbiotic manner with what is perceived. To truly apprehend the concept of an external being in a certain place or time one must possess its nature in the mind. For Stevens, the physicality of nature is the starting point for a kind of spiritual communion. Yet, Stevens often also views the individuation of an object in terms of its physical difference, as if to deny metaphoric description:

Opusculum paedagogum
The pears are not viols,
Nudes or bottles.
They resemble nothing else.

Although Stevens perceives of the two pears as things-in-themselves through the painter’s eye, their presence in time and place eludes the full grasp of the observer’s imagination:

The shadow of the pears
Are blobs on the green cloth.
The pears are not seen
As the observer wills.

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44 Ibid.
Objects carry no absolute identity because this is dependent on the way they are described.

In ‘The Glass of Water’, Stevens constructs a simile to define an abstraction of a metaphysical state:

That the glass would melt in heat,
That the water would freeze in cold,
Shows that this object is merely a state,
One of many, between two poles. So,
In the metaphysical, there are these poles.4 5

Despite the independent identity of an object, the power of the metaphor transforms the thing-in-itself which draws the imagination into conceiving of the non-material other. The imagination works as metaphorical activity, so objects are seen to define the polarity between the temporal and metaphysical. The human mind is tempted to perceive more than the actual-material thing because in the centre of our lives every state suggests an alternative state - like cold and hot.

In ‘The Poems of Our Climate’, objects are perceived as being no more than what they are. Yet this never seems to be enough:

A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,
Still one would want more, one would need more,
More than a world of white and snowy scents [...]  

There would still remain the never-resting mind
So that one would want to escape, come back
To what had been so long composed.
The imperfect is our paradise.4 6

Like a still life painter, Stevens draws our attention back to the pleasure of objects, the sensory experience of the objective world - the ‘clear water in a brilliant bowl’. The commonplace holds an aesthetic value, and the capacity of human imaginative activity demonstrates a will to transform the everyday into a sense of another imaginative realm. In


'Anecdotes of Men by the Thousand', categories of perception are anatomized as being either visible or invisible:

The soul, he said, is composed
Of the external world [....]

There are men whose words
Are as natural sounds
Of their places
As the cackle of toucans
In the place of toucans.47

In linking soul mythology to nature mythology, Stevens expresses a primary experience between word-image and natural phenomena, one that presents the logic of the magic view put forward by Cassirer:

So perhaps the ability to see the image as a symbol, as a unit to be completed by an understander or by a context, may be, as Cassirer among others suggests, the distinctively human element in consciousness.48

Stevens is continually looking for what lies beyond the physical, looking within the visible to find the possible presence of an invisible element. Stevens is continually testing the grammar of the physical world to see how it can intimate towards the invisible element of life. In ‘The World as Meditation’, Penelope, waiting for her absent and much longed for husband, Ulysses, believes she can apprehend his homecoming:

Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east,
The interminable adventurer? The trees are mended.
That winter is washed away. Someone is moving
On the horizon and lifting himself up above it.
A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope,
Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which
She dwells.49

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Though Ulysses has not returned, it is her ‘composed’ sensations that have heightened the mirage:

But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
The two kept beating together. It was only day [...] 

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.50

His physical reappearance is not guaranteed; nonetheless the illusion of Ulysses is material enough to satisfy the yearning for a lost one. As if to acknowledge that encounters of the spiritual are multiple in experiences, Stevens seems sympathetic to the physical causal effect of meditation, whilst at the same time not assenting to the spiritual.

At times, Stevens appears not to be saddened by the loss of a tradition of order. But, like Nietzsche, for Stevens the death of God means a mixture of liberation and loss:

To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing [...] It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling that in a measure we, too, had been annihilated.51

Stevens appears at times frightened by the full logic of a material scepticism that his poetry tests. Even though his motive for metaphors is not inspired by a nostalgia for a bygone era of unified sensibility, in ‘The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract’ Stevens expresses the desire to discover a unified whole to encapsulate the essential being that holds together every part of the world:

50 Ibid., p. 442.
It would be enough
If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
In This Beautiful World of Ours and not as now,

Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy.52

To reach beyond the here and now, the ‘ultimate’ poem can compensate for the loss of religious faith through the power of symbolic expression. Yet, its value remains aesthetic:

If the day writhes, it is not with revelations.
One goes on asking questions. That, then, is one
Of the categories. So said, this placid space
Is changed. It is not so blue as we thought. To be blue,
There must be no questions.53

The primacy of intelligence is ever-curious, testing and inquisitive, trying to qualify the essence of things. Stevens is puzzled by the relativity of physical order where absolutes are not given. An object does not appear alone; it is not defined by itself constituting a self-contained whole. A post-Cartesian world produces a restless mind unnerved by its never-ending enquiries into the ‘Heraclitean’ fluidity of matter.

Stevens asks how can the individual return to a mythological time that sustains belief. In ‘Of the Surface of Things’, the poet is conscious that our apperception is limited in accordance to the scope of our horizon:

In my room, the world is beyond my understanding;
But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four
Hills and a cloud.54

53 Ibid.
Stevens is expressing, as Heidegger did, that being-in-the-world is inherently dualistic, both
temporal and metaphysical. The individual’s developing perspective will always entail
stepping out into a new space we have not yet occupied:

> From my balcony, I survey the yellow air,
> Reading where I have written,
> “The spring is like a belle undressing.”

What we survey tends to be prescribed as given. But, Stevens is opening up this kind of
reductive empiricism that sees only the surface, or material density of things, or observes only
from the ‘balcony’. If the internal world represents a closed system of understanding, then the
external world promises more. Stevens recognises that given the absence of absolutes the
modern mind has to radicalise its subjective view of the surrounding world:

> It has not always had
> To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
> Was in the script.
> Then the theatre was changed
> To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

The modern world picture calls for a modern orb. The use of the word ‘theatre’ suggests that
the new language or ‘script’ has also to be fictive to attract participation. ‘It has to construct a
new stage.’ The world is a stage requiring illusory exploits to keep the audience enchanted.
But left unsure as to the substance of the illusory effect produced, the poet remains a
‘metaphysician in the dark’.

In ‘Burghers of Petty Death’, the metaphysical void left over from the dissolution of
the gods is seen as total:

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55 Ibid.
57 Ibid. Stevens is echoing Jacques’ ‘Seven Ages of Man’ speech in As You Like It.
58 Ibid.
But there is total death,
A devastation, a death of great height
And depth, covering all surfaces,
Filling the mind.\(^5\)

Stevens senses a metaphysical division between the object and the perfecting subject, knowing too well that one can be ultimately left bereft:

That's what misery is,
Nothing to have at heart.
It is to have nothing.

It is a thing to have,
A lion, an ox, in his breast,
To feel it breathing there.\(^6\)

The very thing that can invoke the metaphysical can also confirm its absence. Poetry becomes a destructive force when denied its transfigurative means to convert the plain sense of things into the possibility of something more than a dead materiality. A new language can aid the recovery of the self through the loss of an old language. If you cling to an old language, you die with it alongside the dead gods. In the creation of new metaphors, old metaphors have to be abandoned. A new language, though, inevitably reveals vestiges, traces of the old. Straitjacketed by an old language, poetry will appeal to an alien environment. Stevens instead calls for the eye to be reopened, and with this we can rediscover the impenetrable illumination offered beyond the 'physical fix of things':

Infant, it is not enough in life
To speak of what you can see. But wait
Until sight awakens the sleepy eye
And pierces the physical fix of things.\(^6\)


'Infant' suggests a Blakean sense of innocence prior to a worldly view, and Stevens' language is often couched in active verbs suggesting a religiosity of revelation, or epiphany. Often Stevens remains ambivalently caught between viewing whether physicality is no more than a penetrable solidity, a unit of Newtonian physics, or if the observer awakens or 'pierces' through to the other side of the thing itself. There is a positivist/transcendent duality running through all his poetry. We arrive at an 'idea' of God for we do not see the world immediately - it is as the result of a process of seeing.

Yet, when object and subject are described as indivisible to express a mythico-religious attitude towards nature, Stevens relies on pejorative or sinister terms:

The savage transparence. They go crying
The world is myself, life is myself,
Breathing as if they breathed themselves,

Full of their ugly lord,
Speaking the phrases that follow the sight
Of this essential ornament

In the woods, in this full-blown May,
The month of understanding. The pediment
Lifts up its heavy scowl before them.62

Here the seasonal ceremonies of vegetation mythology suggest an objection to the symbiotic unity between the self and a 'savage transparence'. Stevens generally refers to the images of gods as 'playthings of cosmic make-believe' in an era of human belief.63 At other times, as in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', Stevens attempts to discover a primitive sense of being in myth and poetry:

The poem refreshes life so that we share,
For a moment, the first idea [...] It satisfies Belief in an immaculate beginning.64

Stevens tends to see the pantheon of gods in an anthropological sense of human aesthetic projection. The first idea is a magical view of God:

They were in fact, as we see them now, the clear giants of a vivid time, who in the style of their beings made the style of the gods and the gods themselves one.65

And in an age of disbelief, Stevens believes it is for the poet to supply the satisfaction of belief, in his measure and in his style. Yet Stevens' recreation of the spiritual role of the poet is only transitory, individualistic, and humanistic, lacking the certainty of doctrinal controls that can bring stability to beliefs found in the traditional faiths:

The people, not the priests, made the gods. The personages of immortality were something more than the conceptions of priests, although they may have picked up many of the conceits of the priests.66

Stevens models his poetic perception on a view of the world that struggles to accept the literal signification of Christianity. Instead, like Cassirer, Stevens senses a world of mythic impulse that projects venerable gods onto the sky:

But the first idea was not to shape the clouds In imitation. The clouds preceded us. There was a muddy centre before we breathed. There was a myth before the myth began, Venerable and articulate and complete.67

65 Stevens, 'Two or Three Ideas', Collected Poetry & Prose, p. 841.
66 Ibid., p. 843.
Stevens' poetry often articulates Cassier's theory that the poetic impulse is similar to the mythic impulse:

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

We are the mimics. Clouds are pedagogues.
The air is not a mirror but bare board\(^{68}\)

The sky was the first medium from which we intimated towards a Platonic view of the world.

Stevens' wonder of the world is reawakened only through anthropological ideas on a mythico-religious conception:

The poem refreshes life so that we share,
For a moment, the first idea ... It satisfies
Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
To an immediate end [....]

An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.
The poem, through candor, brings back a power again
That gives a candid kind to everything.\(^{69}\)

Stevens' poetry continues from a tradition of Transcendentalism. His lines often have the pulse of Walt Whitman, revelling in the democratic fluidity of an individualistic nature, and the joy of the temporal landscape that Ralph Emerson shared - the democratic indulgence of the spiritual earth at play. However, Santayana describes the philosophical movement of Transcendentalism as a method only:

Transcendental principles are accordingly only principles of local perspective, the grammar of fancy in this or that natural being quickened to imagination, and striving to understand what it endures and to utter what it deeply wills [....] But why divine, and why always identical? [....] phenomena cannot be produced by agency prior to

\(^{68}\) Ibid., p. 332.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., pp. 330-1.
them, for his first principle is that all existence is phenomenal and exists only in
being posited and discovered [...] But transcendentalism is a legitimate attitude for
the poet in his dramatic reflections and romantic soliloquies; it is the perspective in
thought, the scenic art of the mental theatre.70

Stevens also sees the divine and the phenomenal world as identical. But, for Stevens the
'grammar of assent' has been replaced by a 'grammar of fancy'. For Santayana, a
transcendental attitude towards nature and god is only an imaginative perspective that seeks in
a local environment to find the agency of things.

In his later poetry, Stevens expresses more the failing of language to achieve a union
between words and the thing itself, and a world stripped of this projected symbolism
consequently implies a barren equation between mind and the phenomenal world:

    Today the mind is not part of the weather.
    Today the air is clear of everything.
    It has no knowledge except of nothingness
    And it flows over us without meanings,
    As if none of us had ever been here before
    And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,
    This invisible activity, this sense.71

Again, faith derives from a personal sense of invisible forces. Stevens' earlier poetry
established an imaginative trajectory existing between the active imagination and the human
desire to create visual order in a landscape of natural chaos. To be part of the weather, one
must subjectively engage with the natural element. But in a truly post-romantic context, the
actual of reality remains only that - untouched by the inner world of vision. If we do not
aesthetically project our imaginative sensibility, language and nature become unrelated.
Nearing the winter of his death, the powerful influence of human imagination defeats human
interest, and Stevens resorts to expressing the existential nothingness of 'mere being'.

70 Santayana, Scepticism and Animal Faith, pp. 301-3.
‘Eventually an imaginary world is entirely without interest.’\textsuperscript{72} Death is absolute, and unadorned, cut off from its symbolic potential:

\begin{quote}
The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,  
Not the smoke-drift of a puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.  
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,

In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more  
Than they are in the final finding of the air, in the thing  
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

Stevens equates absolute materiality with the death of belief and aesthetic choice.

Even though certain poems celebrate the apperception of human desires, others explore the logical outcome of symbolic annihilation. The ‘zero degree’ of representation is associated with both the first stage of human life, and the stage of adulthood that requires more to help overcome the absolute, immemorial death. When Stevens does make explicit reference to Christianity, he mocks the theological accretions of St Paul:

\begin{quote}
Who killed him, sticking feathers in his flesh  
To mock him. They placed with him in his grave  
Sour wine to warm him, an empty book to read,  
And over it they set a jagged sign,

Epitaphium to his death, which read,  
The Good Man Has No Shape, as if they knew.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

Like Nietzsche, Stevens visualises Jesus as the last evangel, rejecting the attributions of supernatural symbolism. This is a pre-Christian figure of Jesus, a reluctant human-god born from poverty with a private cause betrayed by a collective mythic need. This recalls Nietzsche’s psychological analysis in \textit{The Anti-Christ}, with Stevens implying that Jesus was not a messianic figure, the Son of God, offering hope of an after-life through his resurrection,

\textsuperscript{72} Stevens, \textit{Opus Posthumous}, p. 175.


\textsuperscript{74} Stevens, ‘The Good Man Has No Shape’, \textit{Transport To Summer (1947), Collected Poetry}, p. 316.
but just someone with an optimistic outlook. The sign of the cross is stripped of its mythological pretence, and replaced with a poststructuralist epitaph. For Stevens, Jesus is betrayed by a human desire for a central symbol. When Stevens speaks of an essential world it is equated with a primary experience:

The central poem is the poem of the whole,  
The poem of the composition of the whole,  
The composition of blue sea and of green,  
Of blue light and of green, as lesser poems,  
And the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems,  
Not merely into a whole, but a poem of  
The whole, the essential compact of the part

Poetry has replaced the need for a religion of a God that defines all living parts.  
Wallace Stevens’s emphasis on a ‘pagan’ or ‘savage’ perspective towards the ‘transcendental’ is famously expressed in ‘Sunday Morning’ to justify a humanist outlook on the hidden divinity of nature. The poem is a dialectic between the poet and a woman who feels twinges of conscience for staying home from church and enjoying the physical beauty ‘late / Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair, / And the green freedom of a cockatoo / Upon a rug.’ Later, she speculates further as to whether the cyclical pleasures of nature’s life are enough to satisfy human desires:

She says, “But in contentment I still feel  
The need of some imperishable bliss.”  
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,  
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams  
And desires.

Again, Stevens appears frustrated by a realist view of life. Yet Stevens agrees with a secular notion of spirituality based on anthropological conclusions, that the history of religion was the

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Ibid.
effect of a magical connection with the unknown, or familiar, elements of our natural landscape:

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men  
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn  
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,  
Not as a god, but as a god might be,  
Naked among them, like a savage source.78

Stevens again expresses a search for the perfection of beauty, but aligns this universal human drive with a sense of divinity that is rooted in a savage source. For T.S. Eliot, by treating nature as a textual opening to personal pleasure or spiritual fulfilment, Stevens’ poetic substitutions of the salvific symbolism of Christ underline more the legacy of the mythic vacuum in the modern world. A personal sense of reality informs the spiritual.

Stevens is following on from the likes of Ralph Emerson and Walt Whitman, and at the same time moving towards a kind of aesthetic perspective that for William Carlos Williams was to reject the religious, and to ‘naturalize’ the ‘sacred’:

“I am lonely, lonely.  
I was born to be lonely,  
I am best so!”  
If I admire my arms, my face,  
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks  
against the yellow drawn shades, -  

Who shall say I am not  
the happy genius of my household?79

Man is a solitary figure that gives meaning and quality to his world. Williams’ starting-point is empirical, and science provides a metaphoric source for justifying the processes of poetic thought:

78 Ibid., pp. 55-6.
The imagination uses the phraseology of science. It attacks, stirs, animates, is radioactive in all that can be touched by action. Words occur in liberation by virtue of its processes.  

Like Stevens, Williams sees that imagination is an immaterial active force that can liberate and transpose the material. But for Williams, imagination should not avoid reality - it affirms reality without tampering the world it moves. Poetry, though dynamizing the fixities and facts of reality, struggles to find a redemptive sign above the materialistic, for there is no 'mystical theology'. Sometimes nature is described as capturing the harmony of another world, as in 'The Quality of Heaven'. But the illusion of religion is a fixed truth, and the horrible facts of a life on earth cannot be transformed by poetry:

Somebody dies every four minutes
in New York State –

To hell with you and your poetry –
you will rot and be blown
through the next solar system
with the rest of the gases –

What the hell do you know about it?

Like Williams, Stevens deals with the particulars of reality, dwelling on how ideas are projected into the thing-itself. But, Stevens' position is not limited by the pure scepticism of a modern nihilism. Stevens begins as an aesthete, looking for the value of beauty in the everyday object, and then later on tries to search out order and value in fictive imaginings, to ponder on the transcendent-al-possible where there may be none. He tries to 'concretize' the

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81 'The fixed categories into which life is divided must always hold. These things are normal – essential to every activity. But they exist – but not as dead dissections [...] The same thing exists, but in a different condition when energized by the imagination.' Ibid., p. 138.


83 Ibid., p. 146.
magical speculations of the savage into a godless contemporary society. But, in doing so, Stevens further deconstructs religious belief to a universal experience of aesthetic projections – extensions of reality, reinforcing the secular notion that ‘belief’ is the result of ‘magical’ animism. T.S. Eliot’s visionary poetry is a reflection of a Christian faith battling against such secular influences. Stevens, instead, embraces a modern self-consciousness of his place in a phenomenological world.

Stevens’ poetic struggles, like the speculations of the woman in ‘Sunday Morning’, reaffirm a base, unadorned, reality that yields only respective aesthetic pleasures in life:

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind.\(^ {84}\)

Here Stevens at first refers to the mythic dimension of Jove as a Platonic metaphysical creature, born independent of human perceptions, or imaginative constructions, but then the phrase, ‘mythy mind’ sounds pejorative in its colloquial use. Stevens sides with the ‘dreaming’ lady who queries the presence of divinity, ‘if it can come/ Only in silent shadows and in dreams?\(^ {85}\) For the unnamed female represents a humanist perspective on the transcendental, willing to only test her idea of God within the private domains of sensory experience:

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does the ripe fruit never fail? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
That never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang\(^ {86}\)

\(^{84}\) Stevens, ‘Sunday Morning’, *Harmonium* (1923), *Collected Poetry*, p. 54.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 53.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., p. 55.
Some critics see this, despite its implied annulment of the spiritual other, as hinting towards something beyond the void:

This spiritual state is the necessary starting point, not the end point of Stevens' search for God.87

The state of 'negative capability' implies a purgation of the heightened consciousness to reach a Zen–like spiritual experience, or the ‘via negativa’ of mysticism. By inheriting romantic themes or interests, Stevens' poetry intimates towards a new way of seeing God, suggesting a way to re-inhabit the mythic void, or to repossess the spiritual through a rekindled view of the anatomized world. It is a modern form of mysticism. In seventeenth-century religious writings, the concept of the sublime was generally expressed as a sense of awe experienced, when witnessing the immanence of the divine in the various and smallest items of nature:

For in each Atom of the matter wide
The totall Deitie doth entirely won,
His infinite presence doth therein reside,
And in this presence infinite powers do ever abide.88

In this context of scientific discovery, the presence of God was still felt, or perceived, in the visible matter. 'The view of any single part suggests the whole, and enables fancy to extend and enlarge it to infinity, that it may fill the capacity of the mind.'89 In the minutiae of formations, something of the Wisdom of God was discernible, revealing the Works of Creation for everyone to observe. Stevens does not stamp every object with God's immanence, but similarly he evokes a kind of pantheistic transcendentalism. Stevens


concentrates on a Newtonian concept of the world in which the nature of things is atomised into respective composite component parts, and where the metaphysical other is a projected extension of the metaphoric construct.

Harold Bloom writes that Wallace Stevens' obsession with the natural, the particular and the elemental, disguises his subconscious inclinations towards the platonic transcendental; his late conversion to Catholicism, and the spiritual epiphanies of his later poetry do more than indicate a psychological volte-face. His humanism presents a confused state of being and belief, where the fixity and fluidity of physical things slips tangibly into a spiritual inkling for a creational centre that underlines the phenomenal world of natural order. Dogged by theoretical questions and surmises of the rational order, his poetry continually tests the non-rational element of a supernatural life as subjective transportations, reminding him to forget of his natural solipsism. The modern world forces Stevens to retreat to a nominal particularism of the local that often gives way to intimations of the transcendental other. The title of his longer poem, 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction', suggests a restless striving for what the laws of rationality cannot fully account for:

These external regions, what do we fill them with
Except reflections, the escapades of death,
Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?

Stevens' poetry continually hints at a cloud of unknowing. His conversion to Catholicism can be deemed the end-result of a failed realist.

Work hard and with all speed in this nothing and this nowhere, and put on one side your outward physical ways of knowing [...] But God and spiritual things have none of these varied attributes. Therefore leave all outer knowledge gained through the senses [...] For if those who mean to become contemplatives, spiritual and inward looking, reckon they ought to hear, smell, see, taste, or feel spiritual things in external

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91 Stevens, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', Transport To Summer (1947), Collected Poetry, p. 350.
visions or in the depth of their being, they are seriously misled, and are working against the natural order of things.\[92\]

The wilful, heightened consciousness of the poet naturally reaches towards a finite summation – the centre of perfection, the ultimate formless abstract that defies rationality.\[93\] For man cannot bear too much reality - the fixity of the physical world.\[94\] But, as Santayana would say, this is a self-defeating cause, testing the logic of a natural world to dismiss in the end the literal truth of a 'supreme fiction'.

Charles M. Murphy argues that Stevens' poems probe tentatively the 'will to believe' as a basic instinct of the human heart.\[95\] 'Stevens attempts to name the object of our will to believe.'\[96\] With Stevens, fiction is used positively as a calculated risk to find order or meaning beyond human reason. 'Poetry is the supreme fiction trying to create something as valid as the idea of God has been.' But, Stevens frequently couches myth and religion in terms of fiction, or aesthetic value, to validate the use of poetry in the modern world. And despite Stevens being able to create a sense of aesthetic space within material objects that we can re-inhabit, his poetical investigations present a further rationalization of spirituality formed from a rhetorical world order. Such a way back to religious belief through imaginative productions only reinforces the secularisation of the sacred element in mythic symbolism. Stevens' poetic probing into the immanence of God never truly reaches the logical conclusion of Pascal's wager – 'the leap of faith' into divinity.


\[93\] 'It is not in the premise that reality / Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade.' Stevens, 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', The Auroras Of Autumn (1950), Collected Poetry, p. 417.

\[94\] 'After the leaves have fallen, we return / To a plain sense of things. It is as if / We had come to an end of the imagination, / Inanimate in an inert savoir. / It is difficult even to choose the adjective / For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.' Stevens, 'The Plain Sense of Things', The Rock (1954), Collected Poetry, p. 428.

\[95\] William James argues in The Varieties of Religious Experience, A Study In Human Nature (1902), ed. Martin E. Marty (London: Penguin Books, 1985), that the fundamental orientation of life is to search for divinity even when there is nothing credible to believe in. 'The beautiful joyousness of their [the early Greeks] polytheism is only a poetic fiction.' p. 143.

\[96\] Murphy, A Spiritual Poet in a Secular Age, p. 56.
The external must be joined to the internal to obtain anything from God, that is to say, we must kneel, pray with the lips, etc.  

Whereas Pascal brings to the question of God a rationale of science, Stevens’ search for God is a reaction to the limitations of science in explaining what lies beyond the material. Stevens’ contemplations into the nature of things in relation to God amount to a kind of Hellenistic joy of polytheistic naturalism – the escapades of a poetic fiction:

Other religions, as the pagan, are more popular, for they consist in externals. But they are not for the educated people.

As a source to enlarge the range and content of revelation in a poetical medium, his poems demonstrate a subjective search for mystical states, yet remains always tentative in capturing the anthropological logic of a primal urge, the magic of a savage source.

Generally, Wallace Stevens’ poetry reverts to a ‘savage source’ of imagination to investigate the subjective contention in the search for a vaguely felt presence of Providence, or the ‘idea’ of God. Nonetheless, Stevens only investigates the possibility of faith as idea, founded not on an absolute Christian fact, but rather as subjectively feasible via sensory experiences:

There is no such thing as a metaphor of a metaphor. One does not progress through metaphors. Thus reality is the indispensable element of each metaphor. When I say that man is god it is very easy to see that if I say that a god is something else, god has become reality.

Here Stevens accepts the metaphorical projection as having a concrete source in the process of intimating the divine, that human subjection is indispensable to reality, yet that reality is

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98 ‘And although Pascal brings to his work the same powers which he exerted in science, it is not as a scientist that he presents himself.’ Ibid., quoted from T.S. Eliot’s ‘Introduction’, pp. xvii-viii.

99 Ibid., p. 73

100 Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, p. 179.
never named as another reality – ‘an eternal sphere’. Instead, Stevens presents a rationalisation of the logical outcome, the limits and possibilities, within human projection, in a world where faith, worship, or belief, are thrown into relief by the determinism of logical positivism.

Stevens’s mysticism is more the confluence of an inherited romanticism and modern science. A.J. Ayer, in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), the classic text that founded Logical Positivism, posits the limitations of sensory experience:

> The metaphysician [...] does not intend to write nonsense. He lapses into it through being deceived by grammar, or through committing errors of reasoning, such as that which leads to the view that the sensible world is unreal. But it is not the mark of a poet simply to make mistakes of this sort. There are some, indeed, who would see in the fact that the metaphysician’s utterances are senseless a reason against the view that they have aesthetic value. [...] It is true, however, that although the greater part of metaphysics is merely the embodiment of humdrum errors, there remain a number of metaphysical passages which are the work of genuine mystical feeling and they may more plausibly be held to have moral or aesthetic value.

For Ayer, a ‘reality’ transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can not have any literal significance. In metaphysical terms, Stevens never makes any statements of a literal significance: his poetry tests the boundaries between physical logic and emotive wonder. In *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), Bertrand Russell discusses how the intrinsic nature of physical objects can defy human knowledge:

> [Even] if physical objects do have an independent existence, they must differ very widely from sense-data, and can only have a correspondence with sense-data, in the same sort of way in which a catalogue has a correspondence with the things catalogued. Hence common sense leaves us completely in the dark as to the true intrinsic nature of physical objects.

For Russell, even though they have an independent existence, beyond the mere product of mental activity, physical objects, like tables, chairs, the sun, and the moon, are known to us by

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description, and so exist in the mind. The tree’s being consists in being perceived. For Bishop Berkeley, the tree still exists when we shut our eyes, because God continues to perceive it. But in a world where the idea of God is a fallacy, Stevens is asking the crucial question that if the phenomenal world as a visible entity in its entirety contains invisible parts, then spirituality could also be qualified as an unknown quantity.

But Stevens’s probing towards the idea of God is largely grounded on a subjective understanding of how the human, to devise elaborate myths of divinity, projects onto the canvas of an empty and meaningless universe. God is therefore invented and projected, a product of creativity, a being of man’s invention. Stevens’ understanding of how orthodox Christianity operates is largely based on a post-Freudian, and quasi-anthropological, rationalisation of man’s innate need to search out the essence of divinity in the origins of religious history. The primitive man is a stranger in an alien world, ignorant alike of his origins and his destiny. The reality of his surroundings is mainly impersonal, and so he invents through magical speculation semi-human creatures, gods and goddesses, demons and spirits, and projects them into this impersonal world. This is the condensed notion of the ‘magical view’ that postulates an erroneous ‘grammar’ of metaphysical reasoning.

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In response to a collapse in the ‘supreme fiction’ of Christianity, Stevens eschews the futility of existentialism, the nadir, or disillusionment, of an epistemological world, or the acceptance of a prevailing darkness of disbelief. Whilst following on from a legacy of enlightenment that atomised religious faith to a common anthropological origin, Stevens emerges from this paralysis of absolute despair to achieve an active search for meaning, to create what culture could no longer produce: symbol and meaning brought in through the agency of art. Nevertheless, his poetry reinforces the naturalisation of anthropological ideas concerning religious thinking, revealing correspondences with a comparative study of religion
in his understanding of mythic inner-visions as the origin and orientation of religious doctrinal, or mythological, thinking. In wrestling with the death of its own religious tradition by transfiguring the familiar world around us, Wallace Stevens places his poetry in the liberal humanist tradition. Such poetic expressions can reduce 'the essence of a religious sensibility to a common vague and harmless numinosity - with which even the unbeliever, if he feels inclined, can enhance or decorate his own outlook.'

In testing out the logic of the magical view to rework the philosophical premises of Platonic origins, Wallace Stevens' poetry reaffirms the rational limits of disbelief. Essentially, because Stevens is so centred on the issue of the inter-dependence between imagination and the objects of nature, he is too preoccupied with aesthetic faith (the grammar of fancy) where its meaning and value is generally confined to a humanist discourse.

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103 Professor Ronald Hepburn, 'A Critique of Humanist Theology', Objections to Humanism, ed. H.J. Blackburn (London: Constable, 1963), p. 53. 'In Christianity the chief of these [clear-cut or doctrinal controls] are attitudes to God and his purposes, and can therefore be (like these purposes) unfluctuating. This stability and wholeheartedness are religiously important.', p. 49.
Despite the lack of belief in religion, myth, in a post-mythic age, is conditioned by a poetic sensibility that appeals to writers because it evokes a sense of transcendence. The Jewish-born Bob Dylan, long before he converted to Christianity, reworked tropes into lyrics that in a folk tradition symbolized religious themes that helped to inform his spiritual destiny. Three mythic tropes can be identified as particularly important: the gospel train, the open road, and the hard travelling hobo. Dylan’s romance for various American iconic outcasts: the street bum, the boxcar tramp, or the highway drifter - also appeal to the mythic figure of the ‘holy fool’. Together these folk tropes accreted to form the mythic persona of the lone pilgrim that like Bunyan’s Christian abandons his old companions and sinful ways to reach the place of God.

In 1974, in a Rolling Stone interview, before his conversion, Dylan expresses a vague sense about the religious imagery that surfaces regularly in his music:
"Religion to me is a fleeting thing. Can't nail it down. It's in me and out of me. It does give me, on the surface, some images, but I don't know to what degree."¹

But then in Chronicles in 2004, Dylan was to acknowledge that the fleeting presence of contemporary 60s culture held no special meaning to him, and that folk songs informed him more deeply:

With folk songs embedded in my mind like a religion, it wouldn't matter. Folk songs transcended the immediate culture.²

Dylan's faith also belonged to an aesthetic tradition, because the 1960s' folk-revival inspired Dylan to listen more and more to the lyrical voices of a tradition steeped in religious imagery that was popularised via 'hand me down' folk songs.

In The Twilight of Atheism, Alister McGrath sees an unexpected resurgence in spirituality because of the fading appeal of atheism; and so 'now finds itself in something of a twilight zone'.³ It seems that Nietzsche was right: declaring God to be dead is one thing, for humanity to strike out alone is another. Gianni Vattimo, in Belief, argues that a return of religion in culture is bound up with a number of pressing problems confronting late-modern humanity, particularly the sense of defeat with which reason faces many dramatic and insoluble problems. And so God has again become a central point of reference for our culture.⁴ In The Tradition of Return, Jeffrey M. Perl argues that in the twentieth century we are post-Christians because

[we] no longer assume Christianity. In general, the modernists attempt to deconstruct Christianity and its cosmology at the same time that they attempt to construct a post-Christian cosmology based on Christian ones.⁵

³ McGrath, The Twilight of Atheism, p. 279.
⁴ Vattimo, Belief, pp. 25-7.
⁵ Jeffrey M. Perl, The Tradition of Return, p. 12.
In reaction to apocalyptic fears, and massive deconstructive tendencies, the voices of return look again towards a conscious tradition to find a principle of guidance. Perl refers to this as historical-return ideologies that emerge when there is a major disjunction in the history of our culture:

The dynamic between progress and return – between social or technological change and the simultaneous devotion to authenticity and original sources – has conditioned much of modern history.

In ‘The Waste Land’, T. S. Eliot expresses the nihilistic despair of a world uprooted from a traditional cultural memory predicated on the inherited symbols of its mythological past. Cultural memory is seen as vital to orientating the individual in its contemporary native setting. The poem is a critique of cultural fragmentation that replaces an orthodox tradition of religious practice for a random assemblage of mythic fragments. This is embodied in the false prophecies of the modern clairvoyant, Madame Sosostris. The return to God during the 1970s was conditioned by a relation between bricolage and myth; so in a way, ‘The Waste Land’ anticipates how the nihilistic tendencies were to later influence the reduced faith of liberal or evangelical Christianity in a post-war culture.

Alister McGrath argues that since the 1970s the Pentecostal form of Christianity was popular because it used a language and form of communication that bore an ‘indigenous character’. The need for a more personal, or experiential faith has coincided with the need for a sense of belonging to a shared past. It is therefore not surprising that traditional music became a primary factor in the spiritual revival. There is carried within an American tradition of gospel singing a ‘folk memory’ that as a whole serves as a long narrative, recalling how the first immigrants to the shores of a new land shared a common destiny of hope and renewal. The folk-revival of the 1960s in America and England spawned historical-return ideologies that focussed mainly on the need for authenticity and originality. Through disconnected forms

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6 Ibid., p. 282.
7 McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism*, p. 195.
of popular culture, a type of religiosity was inspired that bore traces of the nineteenth-century Protestant forms that once dominated Great Britain and North America. Folk memory is the oral version of classical myths that can equally be exploited to create a vicarious sense of nation's mythological past. When Germany was in a state of national crisis, Hitler's Third Reich incited a 'volk' culture as part of its inculcation into the ideology of Nazism. In America, prior to the Second World War, in intellectual circles, proletarian culture was also exalted. The Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) perceived folk songs as a 'cry for justice' and part of a non-conformist movement:

Nativism, coupled with Marxism and Leninism, was the credo of the "folk" renaissance.8

The folk consciousness of the CPUSA motivated its adherents to present rural music as the genre of the urban proletariat. There was equivalent movement in Britain's folk revival that emerged out of the CPGB. Similar to their American counterparts, the CPGB concluded in 1951 that

people would have to be 'educated into their own culture' and this process of 'education' was to be carried out by re-invigorating the native Folk tradition, and preserving it from 'contamination' by American influences.9

Because a folk music originally reflected the environment of the people who created it, folk culture bears its own associated myth of natural authenticity, a common ordinary reality that can link us to the remembered past. And because a folk background is a constantly varying one it is natural that certain images should mirror the movement of their travels, including sometimes the rejected, homeless migrant. In the modern urban context, in which

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communities have formed into vast sprawling conurbations, folk music will always be a
discrete or alien presence in its environment, and is therefore often promoted as a ‘revival’.

Greil Marcus, in *Invisible Republic*, argues that a modern urban America was
enthralled by the sounds of an old Southern religion captured in Harry Smith’s *Anthology of
American Folk Music*:

> [It] is a mistake to underestimate the strangeness of the cultures that spoke through
folk-lyric fragments.¹⁰

Folk songs belong to a folk culture that reflected the daily realities of displaced, or oppressed
native people, but during the ‘Folk-Song Revival’ of the 1960s, they formed part of a counter-
cultural movement that was opposed to the homogenising, commercial culture of Western,
post-war society. The vernacular idiom, the archaic other-worldly sounds that transported
people back to a bygone era gave people a personal experience of a type they felt was denied
to them elsewhere.¹¹ It represented a nostalgic return to tradition for past roots in organic,
agrarian, localised and distinct working communities. Before Bob Dylan’s musical career
even got started, Harry Smith’s *Anthology*, released in 1952, was making inroads into the
lyricist’s imagination.¹² Earlier folk song anthologies, like Carl Sandburg’s *The American
Songbag*, first published in 1927, included hobo songs, railroad and work songs, as well as
road to heaven songs.¹³ Like other semi-urban white youngsters, Dylan was assimilated into
the cult of the American folk past of old gospel and mountain music through artists like


p. 36.

¹² Folk collectors often inspire folk revivals. Cecil Sharp collected tunes in England until his death in 1924.
During the 60s, folk guitarists like Bert Jarchs, singing groups like The Watersons, folk groups like Fairport
Convention, and folk singers like Martin Carthy, used his collections to produce albums. Cecil Sharp also visited
the United States between 1916 and 1918, from which he published his *English Folk Songs from the Southern
Appalachians*.

include: ‘The Dying Hogger’, ‘We are Four Bums’, ‘The Railroad Cars are Coming’, and ‘I got a Letter from
Jesus’.
Woody Guthrie, Sleepy John Estes, Furry Lewis, and Leadbelly. Marcus argues that for middle-class America much of the material represented a form of cultural strangeness from isolated rural communities, or a type of traditional nostalgia, even though certain numbers were dispossessed of their specific cultural context:

Like many of the numbers on the third volume of [Harry Smith’s] *Anthology*, “The Coo Coo Bird” was a “folk-lyric” song. That meant it was made up of verbal fragments that had no direct or logical relationship to each other, but were drawn from a floating pool of thousands of disconnected verses, couplets, one-liners, pieces of eight. Harry Smith guessed the folk-lyric form came together some time between 1850 and 1875. Whenever it happened, it wasn’t until enough fragments were abroad in the land to reach a kind of critical mass – until there were enough fragments, passing back and forth between blacks and whites as common coin, to generate more fragments, to sustain within the matrix of a single musical language an almost infinite repertory of performances, to sustain the sense that out of the anonymity of the tradition a singer was presenting a distinct and separate account of a unique life.14

Because Dylan borrowed so much from anthologies of American folk music, his songs present a mythic bricolage of loose fragments from a vast pool of folk materials. Dylan often acknowledged his debt to the musical melodies and lyrics of folk music, and his artistic persona shifted accordingly. But what is more significant is to what extent these folk fragments informed his lyrical voice. Because Dylan’s spiritual destiny is really measured through his lyrics. This is not surprising, given that Dylan’s lyrical development is more than a rhetorical journey of artifice. The musical influences in Dylan’s music did more than shape his tastes and style of playing - they were also lyrical voices that induced Dylan to reach further and further into the past roots of American folk music. Dylan’s conversion can be mapped out as a gradual development that assimilated the songwriter into the mythic folk memory of American folk music. Thus his lyrical development depicts a mythical return to the ‘native’ roots of his country.

With his 1979 album, *Slow Train Coming*, resonating with the voice of a vengeful Old Testament God castigating the songwriter’s heathen comrades, Bob Dylan’s conversion to

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evangelical Christianity generally shocked his liberal fans. Dylan himself refers to having undergone a ‘born-again’ conversion in 1978:

Jesus put his hand on me. It was a physical thing. I felt it over me, my whole body trembled. The glory of the Lord knocked me down and picked me up.

What Dylan is not fully acknowledging here is that his lyrical development since 1962 indicates a self-journeying towards a spiritual goal. The choice of his album title to signal his conversion is an archetypal gospel trope, implying how much his experience of the Christian faith was bound up with the lyrical legacy of American folk music. The image of the train had often figured in his earlier lyrics, and Dylan was now declaring his faith through the trope of the gospel train:

Sometimes I feel so low-down and disgusted
Can't help but wonder what's happenin' to my companions
Are they lost or are they found
Have they counted the cost it'll take to bring them down
All their earthly principles they're gonna have to abandon?
There's a slow, slow train comin' up around the bend.

The image of the 'slow train' alludes to the general pace required in the gospel trope of a train taking the righteous to heaven. And as Paul Oliver points out, a hobo may take advantage of the slowing of the train to make boarding possible as a long freight train took a curve. There is also an allusion in the song to ‘Amazing Grace’ to highlight the change from individual alienation to a spiritual sense of self-assurance and stability:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I am found',
Was blind, But now I see.

Dylan appraises his own conversion from earthly blindness in contrast to the ‘fools glorifying themselves’, the ‘non-believers’, and other examples of ‘ego-inflated’ individuality. In Negro Spirituals, the train often represents the coming of death, and the last chance to change your ways, and to demonstrate your allegiance to God:

God tole Hezykiyah
In a message from on high:
Go set yo’ house in ordah,
For thou shalt sholy die.
He turned to the wall an’ a weepin’,
Oh! See the King in tears;
He got his bus’ness fixed all right,
God spared him fifteen years.

Little black train is a comin’,
Get all yo’ bus’ness right;
Go set yo’ house in ordah,
For the train may be here tonight.18

To a large extent, the country blues singer is more in touch with the myth of the vanishing open road, because the road was as good as their home address. In blues music, the open road or the railroad expressed the hope of change brought on by nomadic adventures, and was a clue to the reality of the ‘negro’ who had to go from town to town looking for work:

By 1910 one and three-quarter million Negroes had left their native states, severed from the plantation and its enforced stability. They, the dislodged, scavenged for work anywhere, in the turpentine camps, in mines and sawmills, on the railroad and levee construction and in city factories, but there was seldom continuity or security.19

Earlier travel blues songs were an expression of the singer’s desire to go north and escape the horror of discrimination in the South. It represents a form of escape, and this is why certain travel songs bear a sense of political emancipation. But, it also expresses the desire to leave home, to depart on an adventure away from the repressive or constraining conditions of home.

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Departure also implies returning – for what is sought can be what is left behind. The railroad began to represent dreams of departure, the ticket out of town, and the collective discontent of destitute ‘negroes’:

I have walked a lonesome road till my feet is too sore to walk
I beg scraps from the people, oh, well, till my tongue is too stiff to talk.

In both White and Negro country church music, the railroad was transformed into a religious emblem, becoming a track in the sky that ran in two opposite directions: there was one legitimate ride into the Promised Land on the Gospel Train, or a fast black train to perdition with no return ticket:

“This train is known as the Black Diamond Express train to hell. Sin is the engineer, pleasure is the headlight, and the devil is the conductor. I see Black Diamond as she starts off for hell. Her bell is ringing ‘Hell-bound, hell-bound.’ First station is Drunkardville. Stop there and let all the drunkards get aboard [...] Next station is Liar’s Avenue [...] Oooooooh, gambler! Git off the Black Diamond train. Oooooooh, midnight rambler! [...] Backslider!”

The railroad and the train represent a social reality, but provided poetic material also for Christian conversion. In Dylan, travel also symbolizes flight from alienation, present predicaments, problems of the past, or the constrictions of a hometown. Bob Dylan wrote or arranged numerous songs, like ‘Poor Boy Blues’, and ‘Ballad for a Friend’, that capture familiar themes in traditional train songs:

There’s an iron train a-travelin’ that’s been a-rollin’ through the years,
With a firebox of hatred and furnace full of fears.
If you ever heard its sound of or seen it’s blood-red broken frame,
Then you heard my voice a-singin’ and you know my name.

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20. 'To the homeless man the highway was as good an address as any other', Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 55. Also see Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (London: Eddison Press Ltd., 1975).


They echo familiar refrains, and "Train A-Travelin" captures the poetic immediacy of the train’s initial impact on the imaginations of ‘native’ Americans:

The sound of the steamboat and railroad whistles, drifting across the green fields of the Delta, wrought transformations as swift and magical as the charms of Mister Greensnake. Farm boys and plowmen left home to become professional boatmen, muleskinners, and railroaders, learning the pains and pleasures of the lonesome road.

The striking presence of the train cutting through the wide landscape fired the popular imagination, and helped to establish a set of lyrical tropes within folk music.

Dylan was always keen to escape the provincialism of his hometown to discover the wider world, and music became his horizon. In 1960, Dylan was captivated by the ‘hard-driving’ autobiography of America’s poet-folk singer, Woody Guthrie’s Bound for Glory (1943), in which the father of American folk music tells of his life on the open road during the Great Depression, and the hell-raising and brawling in boxcars. He begins by capturing such a scene:

Our car was a rough rider, called by hoboes a “flat wheeler.” I was riding in the tail end where I got more dust, but less heat. About all I could hear above the raving and cussing and the roar of the car was the jingle and clink on the under side every time the wheels went over a rail joint. I guess ten or fifteen of us was singing:

"This train don’t carry no gamblers,
Liars, thieves and big-shot ramblers,
This train is bound for glory,
This train!"

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25 Dylan was the son of Beatrice Stone (born in 1915, and Abram Zimmerman (born in 1911), from Hibbing, northern Minnesota. Dylan’s maternal forebears left Lithuania and Latvia, and his paternal grandparents fled from Odessa in the Ukraine. In a way, Dylan’s self-images identify more with the family’s refugee past, than with the middle-class, small-town propriety.

The gospel song the hoboes are singing belongs to a tradition of American folk songs that employ the image of the train as theological trope. The train they are singing about is no ordinary train – it is bound for the glory of God. Another popular train song is:

As you roll up the grades of trial, you will cross the bridge of strife,
See that Christ is your conductor on the lightning train of life;
Always mindful of obstruction, do your duty, never fail,
Keep you hand upon the throttle and your eye upon the rail. ²⁷

This song started out as poem in 1886, entitled ‘The Faithful Engineer’ by William S. Hays, and was adapted to a song in 1890. Other songs like ‘The Hell-Bound Train’ envisage an alternative theological journey. Since the first tracks were laid, the railroad has always been a part of American folklore. It captured the imagination with its trans-continental linking of two oceans seeming to symbolise naturally the ‘manifest destiny’ of the American land odyssey. And with the arrival and departure of a train symbolizing both death, and the need to pledge your faith in Jesus Christ as Our Saviour, the train became a redemptive sign of repentance, calling for sinners and lonely wanderers to join with other believers:

The Engineer is Jesus, the road in good repair;
We hope you will go with us-
His blood has paid the fare.
Come in at any station! – The first is always best;
The car of Free Salvation is better than the rest. ²⁸

With the emergence of a railroad, numerous folk songs appeared identifying the train with the theme of journeying. But the scene of a whistling train cutting a long straight route through a sweeping landscape also lent itself to spiritual allegories:

For them [southern Blacks] the train that appeared from the horizon and roared towards the plantation to roll on into unknown regions beyond was a symbol of power, of freedom, and of escape […] This symbolic importance of the railroad was


imprinted on black religion and the spirituals of the “Glorious Gospel Train”; even today the trains that take the Damned to Hell and the Righteous to Glory are still favored themes of sermons. As the blues developed in the post-bellum years the railroad figured prominently in the songs; the symbolic had become reality and now the trains bore northwards innumerable black males who were leaving the South.

For southern Black churchgoers the train symbolized a spiritual journey that began as life’s adventures ended. Secular train songs narrate a journey that is completed on earth, giving a temporal end to the traveller’s passage through life, whereas in religious travel songs the metaphor of self-journeying is exploited further to evoke the same theological message as when Christ promised afterlife to the faithful. In ‘Sown There by the Train’, off Cash: American Recordings, Johnny Cash sings a song that expresses clearly the theological message inherent to the gospel trope of the slow train that Dylan exploited:

There’s a place I know where the train goes slow  
Where the sinner can be washed in the blood of the lamb [...]  
You can hear the whistle, you can hear the bell  
From the halls of heaven to the gates of hell  
And there’s room for the forsaken if you’re there on time  
You’ll be washed of all your sins and all of your crimes  
If you’re down there by the train […] where the train goes slow.

The train’s sensory presence on the virginal American landscape naturally inspired lyrical or poetic projections that were turned into religious symbols. Hoboes would identify with the train song because it resonates with their own real life experiences. The train carried with it a redemptive meaning because it offered a way out of one’s troubles, a chance to move on, to find a new location, or during the Great Depression, as Guthrie recounts, a job that would improve your survival stakes.

In American music, the greatest number of train songs is about hoboes - the hobo being the hero of American folk music, representing a type of lifestyle that is conventional to


the folk artist. Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, *The Celestial Rail-Road* (1843), as a satirical sketch reworking the plot of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), testifies to the folklore of the gospel train in popular imagination. In the narrative, Hawthorne mocks the common presumptions of the pilgrim traveller:

A large number of passengers were already at the station House, awaiting the departure of the cars. By the aspect and demeanor of these persons, it was easy to judge that the feelings of the community had undergone a very favourable change, in reference to the Celestial pilgrimage. It would have done Bunyan's heart good to see it. Instead of a lonely and ragged man, with a huge burthen on his back, plodding along sorrowfully on foot, while the whole city hooted after him, here were parties of the first gentry and most respectable people in the neighborhood, setting forth towards the Celestial City, as cheerfully as if the pilgrimage were merely a summer tour.31

Hawthorne is aware that Christian's arduous protestant calling had become gentrified to such an extent in American folklore that the lonely and ragged man is ostracised from the journeying crowds. Because of his own experience of conversion, Bunyan associated faith with the symbols of poverty. In *Grace Abounding*, Bunyan perceives faith as being often tried, which is contrasted with the vast riches of God's promises:

> Heaven and Hell were no mere abstractions for him but concrete realities [...] It was Bunyan's first conviction that there was only one road open to all persons, viz. Jesus Christ.32

This runs counter to the mythic tale of the hobo on the hard open road hitching a ride on a boxcar when the opportunity arises. But, the fact that Hawthorne is parodying the mixing together of Bunyan's spiritual allegory with the train narrative demonstrated how far by 1843 folksongs were popularising this figurative alignment. The figurative device of the 'slow train' seemed to lend itself naturally to the notion of a Bunyan style of Christian conversion,

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with its mirroring of Christian's journey from his family and home, and with the strangers, or uphill struggles, he had to encounter. The fast train, with gamblers and liars on board, was naturally bound for hell.

Throughout American literature the romance of the open road within an expansive landscape was linked to a democratic ideal. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* (1823) focuses primarily on the natural codes of the hunter and woodsman Natty Bumppo and his Indian friend John Mohegan. The heroic frontiersman evokes an 'authentic' picture of the American pioneering experience exploring the wonder of a vibrant landscape:

"It must have been worth the toil, to meet with such a glorious view! If being the best part of a mile in the air, and having men's farms and house at your feet, with rivers looking like ribands, and mountains bigger than the 'Vision', seeming to be haystacks of green grass under you, gives any satisfaction to a man, I can recommend the spot. When I first came into the woods to live, I used to have weak spells, when I first felt lonesome; and then I would go into Cattskills and spend a few days on the that hill, to look at the ways of man; but it's now many a year since I felt any such longings, and I'm getting too old for rugged rocks. But there's a place, a short two miles back of that very hill, that in late times I relished better than the mountains; for it was kivered with the trees, and natural."33

Here the romance of travelling is linked to a philosophical pursuit; the flesh may get weak but the spirit of discovery lives on. This contrasts with the social forces generated by the rigid structure of law needed in the complex society built up in the settlement of New York's Lake Otsego. In *The Prairie* (1827), Cooper again depicts the thrilling adventure of the wilderness, as the old trapper, approaching death, looks back over the whole of his long life, reflecting beyond the geographical setting of the Mississippi to take in the Westward movement in general. Cooper acknowledges that the Westward Movement of the agricultural frontier brings the axes of the choppers, laying low the magnificent trees of the forest, but he also perceives its unceasing march as bringing in its train the social progress of refinement:

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Perhaps there was little in this train, or in the appearance of its proprietors, that is not daily to be encountered on the highways of this changeable and moving country. But the solitary and peculiar scenery, in which it was so unexpectedly exhibited, gave to the party a marked character of wildness and adventure.  

The open expanse of the raw rural scene evokes a sense of freedom and newness which appealed to the ideal of America as a promised land.  

Mark Ford argues that Dylan frequently evokes in his lyrics notions of transcendental self-sufficiency that are also derivative of Whitman and Emerson:

[It] was Whitman who first embodied in poetry the ideal of the archetypal American self journeying down the open road into a future where anything might happen, and it was, as he acknowledged, Emerson's writing of the 1830s and 1840s that brought his conception of the democratic hero 'to boil.' Emerson, during this period, frequently figures himself in the role of a kind of John the Baptist

The lone hobo on the open road is a democratic hero. Ford also regards the possible influence of Whitman on Dylan as mediated through Allen Ginsberg and the Beats. In Howl and Other Poems, certain poems identify with the figure of the drifter:

railroad yard in San Jose
    I wandered desolate
in front of a tank factory
    and sat on a bench
near the switchman's shack.

A flower lay on the hay on
    the asphalt highway
- the dread hay flower
I thought - It had a
brittle black stem and
corolla of yellowish dirty
spikes like Jesus' inchlong
crown  

36 Allen Ginsberg, 'In back of the real', Howl and Other Poems (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1959), p. 56.
The image of Jesus’ sacrificial headpiece seems ironic, but the association to the desolate wanderings of a lonely tramp is conventional. Dylan, in his early lyrics, clearly identifies with the romance of the open road. The song, ‘Let Me Die in My Footsteps’, from his first album, 

*Bob Dylan* (1962), expresses the desire to maintain the lonely existence of a vagabond:

I will not go down under the ground  
‘Cause somebody tells me that death’s comin’ ‘round  
An’ I will not carry myself down to die  
When I go to my grave my head will be high  
Let me die in my footsteps  
Before I go down under the ground

The tropes that Dylan is adapting to his lyrics are a part of mythopoeic language in traditional American folk songs. For the front cover to the album, *The Times They Are A-Changing* (1964), Dylan poses in the stock image of a rambling outcast. In a similar way, Dylan has personalised the mythic image of the folk hero that is to be found in Woody Guthrie. In his early lyrics, Dylan identifies with the hobo-drifter image of the self. ‘When I leave New York, I’ll be standin’ on my feet.’ Cultivating a persona of self-sufficiency, a loner disconnected from the urban cosmopolitan set, was vital to Dylan’s country troubadour image. Dylan identifies with the self-made isolation that came with wandering from town to town:

Well, I’m standin’ on the highway  
Tryin’ to bum a ride, tryin’ to bum a ride,  
Tryin’ to bum a ride.  
Nobody seem to know me,  
Everybody pass me by.

Dylan recognises the pitfalls of being a drifter: the social stigma; and the mental stamina required to remain aloof from the mainstream culture. ‘Hard travelling’ was an essential

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38 In Fargo, North Dakota, Dylan played a few gigs with a local group called the ‘Poor Boys’.  
romanticised aspect of Dylan’s fostered persona to help his promoted folk identity. Even though Dylan’s early lyrics superficially seem to imitate the style and content of old country blues songs to reinforce a folk image, he was mixing religious overtones into his protest songs to produce surreal allegories. Various songs in his long repertoire are loaded with biblical allusions, and his 1968 album, *John Wesley Harding*, in particular, marries the outlaw mythology of the Old West to Old Testament allegory. Dylan conjures up familiar imaginary characters that belong to a remembered past: ‘John Wesley Harding’; ‘Drifter’s Escape’; ‘Dear Landlord’; ‘I Am a Lonesome Hobo’; and ‘I Pity the Poor Immigrant’.41 On this album, Dylan expresses sentiments of pity for the lonely homeless wander. The wanderer is also blessed with foresight, and an earthly poetic visionary wisdom that is at odds with the laws of the land. The lonesome hobo often appears to be the personification of the ‘holy fool’. In ‘The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest’, the road represents a site of self-journeying, or even a place of spiritual destiny:

“But sometimes a man must be alone
And there is no place to hide.”
Judas pointed down the road
And said, “Eternity!”42

For Dylan, the open solitary road also symbolizes a place where one is yoked with the burden of self-judgement:

Kind ladies and gentlemen,
Soon I will be gone,
But let me just warn you all,
Before I do pass on;
Stay free from petty jealousies,
Live by no man’s code,
And hold your judgment for yourself

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41 This album has been credited as having a prime influence on country-rock in 1968, and was regarded as a corrective to the excesses of the Summer of Love, propelling The Beatles and The Rolling Stones back towards their musical roots. For The Byrds, The Grateful Dead, The Lovin’ Spoonful, and Buffalo Springfield, country music also became a mainstay of their musical exploits as they explore a common heritage. See Peter Doggett, *Are You Ready for the Country, Elvis, Dylan, Parsons, and the Roots of Country Rock* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 33-43.

Lest you wind up on this road.43

Even though the road represents the democratic ideal of the mythic 'mystery tramp', it is a cursed destiny where the hobo is a wise man, and a wandering lost soul troubled with memories of past toils or sins. The hobo can appear to be the sacrificial victim of society, but in the Bible, the 'holy fool' is a vessel of redemptive value and is blessed with spiritual insight:

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him.44

Dylan often presents himself as an artist-prophet as opposed to the 'wicked messenger', especially in his apocalyptic songs:

Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide
The chance won't come again45

Dylan often heightens the guilt of those critiqued in his songs, yet the hobo is exonerated of his sins of gambling and drifting.46

The lonesome hobo is very much associated with the mythic figure of the lone pilgrim that appears in numerous traditional songs. 'I am a Pilgrim' was sung to Johnny Cash at home when he was a child.47 On Cash American 3: Solitary Man, songs like 'Wayfaring Stranger'

45 Dylan, 'The Times They are A-Changin', Lyrics, p. 81.
47 'I am a Pilgrim', Merle Travis.
echo the spiritual journey of Christian that the hard travelling, lonesome hobo on American soil would have empathised with:

I’m a poor wayfaring stranger  
While travelling thru this world of woe  
Yet there’s no sickness, toil, or danger  
In that bright world to which I go

Via numerous traditional hymns that express the gospel calling, the growth in grace, or the victory over death, the Christian message worked its way into a tradition of American folk songs:

Sweet as home to pilgrims weary,  
Light to newly opened eyes,  
Or full springs in desert dreary,  
Is the rest the cross supplies

In the songs of The Carter Family, the hobo is transformed into a spiritual figure drifting from place to place because he unknowingly seeks repentance. In Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress, Christian travels from the City of Destruction towards the Celestial City. Before he arrives at his spiritual destination he divests himself of his ragged garb. Christian also figures as a homeless naked wanderer. The hobo, in embarking on a journey across various states of America, mirrors the allegory pattern of the Christian pilgrim.

Due to the nature of the folk memory, by 1943 the spiritual signification implied in the title of Guthrie’s autobiography becomes buried. In other words, you did not have to be a Christian convert to sing the song. During the folk revival of the 1960s, Woody Guthrie was seen as a proletariat messenger bringing the urban present closer to its traditional rural past. In his youthful mind, Dylan was fixated by all what Guthrie (born 1912, Okemah, Oklahoma) seemed to represent. In his autobiography, Chronicles, this is made apparent when he recalls meeting record company officials in New York:

"How did you get here? He asked me.
"I rode a freight train."
"You mean a passenger train?"
"No, a freight train."
"You mean, like a boxcar?"
"Yeah, like a boxcar. Like a freight train."
"Okay, a freight train"49

Dylan admits to the reader shortly after recounting this event that he hadn't come in on a freight train at all; in fact he had come across the country from the Midwest in a four-door sedan, '57 Impala. The incident cited from Dylan's Chronicles shows to what degree he had adopted the cultural persona of Guthrie when he arrived in New York in 1961, and how far he would be willing to maintain that self-styled image. By first appropriating the image of the hobo through Guthrie, Dylan was naturally then to identify with the romance of the open road. And with the hobo closely associated with the boxcar, which offered the opportunity of escape and respite from hard travelling, Dylan absorbed the narrative of the train song into his own material. The folk figure of Woody Guthrie represented in Dylan's eyes the mythic symbolism of an old America. Looking like a proletarian revolutionary from the pages of a Steinbeck novel, Woody was hailed as the personification of the proletarian renaissance (1939-42). In 1936, Guthrie signed up with the Communist Party and started reading USSR Constitution books. As representative of the left wing politics calling for revolutionary change, Guthrie turned to native forms to embrace anti-Fascist messages, whilst positing a 'red holy crusade'. In his song 'Jesus Christ', Guthrie remythologizes the figure of the Christian Saviour, turning him into a mythic character in the service of his own political cause:

Jesus Christ was a man who travelled through the land
Hard working man and brave
He said to the rich, "Give your goods to the poor."50

49 Dylan, Chronicles, p. 8.
50 In Chronicles, Dylan refers to this song as a protest song amongst few he heard in his youth. Dylan, Chronicles, p. 53.
Many protest songs in various forms of Negro music were based on religious models. In
Communist circles the spiritual was one of the first forms to be treated as a genre of protest.
Guthrie personalises the religious imagery of the Bible to re-contextualise Christ as a
working-class hero of the Oklahoma dust bowl:

This song was written in New York City
Of rich men, preachers and slaves
Yes, if Jesus was to preach like he preached in Galilee,
They would lay Jesus Christ in his grave51

This song tells of a Jesus who had travelled hard working for the poor working people,
persecuted by bankers, preachers, landlords and soldiers.

Dylan’s early lyrics imitate the ‘folk-lyric’, and the first two lines of ‘Talking New
York’ show that Dylan was doing more than to only imitate a style: ‘Ramblin’ outa the wild
West, / Leavin’ the towns I love the best’.52 Dylan was glad to have left the small town of his
home place in Hibbing, and his journey to the big city of New York reinforced a romance of
escape on the open road. Dylan is conscious of the folk persona he had adopted:

Now, a very great man once said
That some people rob you with a fountain pen
It didn’t take too long to find out
Just what he was talkin’ about53

The great man is Woody Guthrie. In his youth, Dylan was exposed to Woody Guthrie’s
album, Dustbowl Ballads, in which Woody used his songs to voice his political dissatisfaction
with the government and to tell of the hardships faced by himself and the working classes of
America, especially the Okie farming people during the ‘great dust storms’ of the 1930s.
Guthrie was seen as an authentic chronicler of the dust bowl, a man who wrote and spoke the

51 Guthrie, ‘Jesus Christ’.
52 Ibid., p. 3.
folk idiom of the Southwest. Guthrie recorded thirteen songs and ballads in the RCA studios in 1940. In the sleeve-notes to the 'migrations' album, Guthrie raked bankers, the police, and landlords. He slipped in a line sneering at “wars in Europe.” He urged “U.S. Government Camps for the Workin’ Folks, with a nice clean place to live and cook and do your washin’ and ironin’ and cookin, and good beds to rest on, and so nobody couldn’t herd you around like white-face cattle, and deputies beat you up, and run you out of town.”

Woody was encouraged by Alan Lomax to drop the overdrawn dialect, and he became more a pamphleteer than just a radio entertainer. Woody lived the life of the poor and the working class and drawing from his experiences he incorporated feelings and memories into his songs:

I aint got no home
I'm just a-roamin' round
Just a wanderin' worker
I go from town to town
And the police make it hard
Wherever I may go
And I aint got no home in this world anymore

Most of the themes that Guthrie sings Dylan later recreates in his early albums: ‘The Great Dust Storm’, ‘I Aint Got No Home’; ‘Dust Bowl Refugee’; ‘Blowin’ Down This Road (I Aint Going To Be Treated This Way)’; ‘Talking Dust Bowl Blues’. In Dylan’s songs like ‘Talking New York’; ‘Hard Times in New York’; ‘Poor Boy Blues’; ‘The Death of Emmett Till’; and ‘Long Ago, Far Away’, Dylan relates to themes of hard travelling, the lonely friendless wanderer, the rambling hillbilly, hard times, poverty, injustices of the rich (‘The Old Mister Empire’ and ‘Mister Rockefeller’), the brotherhood of peace, the homeless refugee, the wrongly accused man, taking the highway road, dying in your footsteps, and the lonely death of the impoverished. Ramblin’ Jack Elliott also popularised Guthrie and sung numerous Guthrie drifting road songs such as ‘Hard Travellin’’, which Alan Lomax included in his Folk Songs of North America:

I been a-havin’ some hard travel-in’, I thought you knowed,
I been a-havin’ some hard travel-in’, Way down the road,
I been a-havin’ some hard travel-in’, Hard ram-bl-in’, hard gam-bl-in’,
I been a-havin’ some hard travel-in’, Lord.56

Elliott sang other Guthrie songs including ‘So Long, It’s been Good to Know You’, and ‘Talking Dustbowl Blues’, and ‘Rambling Blues’. Before Dylan, the twenty-year-old college dropout, Elliott, visited Guthrie in Greystone Hospital in Morristown, New Jersey, and started playing the guitar the same way and sang in the same gravelly, rusty voice.57 With the folk idiom came a manner of singing and playing that seemed to mimic the hard ramblin’ narratives of travelling songsters.

Despite Guthrie’s atheistic leanings, much of his ‘dustbowl ballads’ echo the gospel tradition in America. Gospel can trace its roots, in part, to music sung in African-American churches, and between 1780 and 1830, during what is known as the Second Great Awakening – a national revival within churches of America – African-American church-goers were introduced to sing European hymns, especially the hymns of Charles Wesley and Dr Isaac Watts (1674-1748). One of Isaac Watts’ popular songs is ‘There is a Land of Plenty’, that Woody Guthrie reworks in his song ‘Pastures of Plenty’:

There is a land of pure delight,
Where saints immortal reign,
Infinite day excludes the night,
And pleasures banish pain.

There everlasting spring abides;
And never-with’ring flow’rs;
Death, like a narrow sea, divides
This heav’nly land from ours.

During the early period of the twentieth century, Watts’ songs or hymns lent themselves to African-American congregations because their theological emphasis on redemption through


57 See Cray, Ramblin’ Man, pp. 341-2.
the atonement appealed to a new type of hymn based on the message of brotherhood. The main emphasis was on personal experience exhorting fellow individuals to turn from a life of sin and sorrow. During the 1930s, as the collective experience of suffering through poverty in largely rural areas increased, the cultural outlet of music popularised through the radio seemed to connect with a universal sense of personal hardship and economic persecution. Woody Guthrie’s song, ‘Pastures of Plenty’, exploits the gospel message by re-contextualizing biblical themes for his own political cause:

It’s a mighty hard row that my poor hands have hoed  
My poor feet have traveled a hot dusty road  
Out of your dust bowl and westward we rolled  
And your desert was hot and your mountains was cold [...]

Well it’s always we ramble that river and I  
All along your green valley I’ll work til I die  
My land I’ll defend with my life if it be  
‘Cause my pastures of plenty must always be free

For Guthrie, the theological message of redemption in Isaac Watt’s hymns is redirected towards the poor in particular. Guthrie’s brand of idealistic optimism that reworks theological strains in American folk music is perceptible also in ‘This Land is Your Land’. In his song, ‘Jesus Christ’, the focus is on Christ as a hard workingman that travelled through the land preaching to the rich folks to give up their wealth to aid the poor. In Isaac Watts’ ‘Praise for Mercies, Spiritual and Temporal’, in Divine and Moral Songs for the Use of Children, the anonymous speaker gives thanks for his financial comforts but resolves to serve God by serving the poor:

Whene’er I take my walks abroad,  
How many poor I see!  
What shall I render to my God  
For all his gifts to me?

Not more than others I deserve,

Yet God hath given me more:
For I have food, while others starve,
Or beg from door to door.\(^{59}\)

For Bob Dylan, in the early 60s, the figure of the preacher identifying with the poor
and the outcasts of a rich society also became an identifiable part of his musical style.
Occasionally, Dylan indicates that he is aware of the Christian/gospel source, as in 'Long
Ago, Far Away':

To preach of peace and brotherhood
Oh, what might be the cost!
A man did it long ago
And they hung him on a cross
Long ago, far away
These things don't happen
No more, nowadays\(^{60}\)

Like Guthrie and Watts, Dylan associates Jesus with a political purpose. The
Calvinist/Protestant theology had played a large part in the various gospel traditions
throughout America, and folk songwriters tended to favour Bunyan's allegorical message
because the preacher's own life of incarceration and persecution, and the figure of the
wandering Christian looking for his spiritual resting place, seemed to strike a chord with the
reality of their outcast lives. Some of The Carter Family's songs, the first American folk
group, indulge in sentiments closely aligned to the persecution suffered by Christ:

I am happy in a prison
Yes, I'm happy anywhere
In my soul my savior's risen\(^{61}\)

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\(^{59}\) Isaac Watts, 'Praise for Mercies, Spiritual and Temporal', *Divine and Moral Songs for the Use of Children*
(London: John Van Voorst).

\(^{60}\) Dylan, 'Long Ago, Far Away', *Lyrics*, p. 23.

\(^{61}\) 'Happy In Prison', recorded 6/8/38 Charlotte, NC.
This is an evangelized version of traditional prison songs that frequently focuses on the sufferings of the imprisoned as emblematic of their own downtrodden lives. Numerous folk songs, from various folk traditions, voice the sufferings of the outsider as an imprisoned soul. Dylan played, along with The Band, Brendan Behan's 'The Ould Triangle' during the sessions for \textit{The Basement Tapes}:

\begin{quote}
A hungry feeling, came o'er me stealing.  
And the mice were squealing, In my prison cell.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

In his lyrics, Dylan often identifies with the lonely figure as a victim of persecution or social injustices. Sometimes the Guthrie influence is obvious, as in 'Ballad of Hollis Brown':

\begin{quote}
Hollis Brown, he lived on the outside of town  
With his wife and five children  
And his cabin fallin' down  
He looked for work and money  
And he walked a rugged mile\textsuperscript{63}
\end{quote}

Dylan turns the harsh reality of poverty in South Dakota during the dustbowl depression into a tragedy of suicide and familial murder that echoes the numerical symbolism of the book of Revelation: 'seven churches', (1:40), 'seven angels' (15:1), 'seven bowls of God's wrath' (16:1). Dylan reiterates the number seven to underscore the scale of death and tragic foreboding: 'There's seven breezes a-blowin''. Dylan alludes to both the harsh wind of the dustbowl blizzards as well as a spiritual wind of unearthly change.

To a great extent, country music was born out of the Great Depression, and various songs by country artists like Johnny Cash and Hank Williams recall memories of the hardships encountered within their own families:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{63} Dylan, 'Ballad of Hollis Brown', \textit{Lyrics}, p. 83.
\end{quote}
Ah, I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down
Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town,
I wear the black for the prisoner
Who has long paid for his crime,
But is there because he's the victim of the times

I wear the black for those who never read,
Or listened to the words that Jesus said,
About the road to happiness through love and charity64

Many poor folk looked for a redemptive symbolic narrative to console the sufferings they had to endure. Baptist hymns sung by southern black gospel singers and poor white country workers reinforced this dependence. Scores of The Carter Family's songs formed the standard country music canon. The gospel trio comprised Alvin P. Carter, and his wife, Sara and sister-in-law, Maybelle. A.P. Carter collected hundreds of British/Appalachian folk songs, 'facts of life tunes', and hundreds were found around Virginia and Tennessee homes. A.P. Carter was born and raised in the Clinch Mountains of Virginia (1891-1960) and when he became restless, moved to Indiana where he worked on the railroad, or travelled selling trees. Both he, and Sara (1898-1979), were brought up religiously by their parents. By the 1920s, they became a well-known national act, their radio performances could be heard throughout the nation, but the Great Depression hurt their income considerably. Many of their songs had been handed down for years and years before they performed them. For example, Maybelle Carter once recalled how she had heard her mother, and her mother's mother, sing 'Wildwood Flower'. In The Carter Family's 'No Depression in Heaven', Christianity is defined in terms of a kind of a metaphysical respite from the hardships of a social reality - the religious fantasy of social redemption proffered is a folk music construction of the era that Woody later reworks:

I hear the hearts of men are failing
For these are latter days I know
The Great Depression now is spreading

God's word declared it would be so
I'm going where there's no depression
To the lovely land that's free from care
I'll leave this world of toil and trouble
My home's in Heaven I'm going there
In that bright land there'll be no hunger
No orphan cryin' for bread
No shrouds no coffins and no death65

This song is archetypal in that it expresses the denied fruits of earthly hardship as postponed for an afterlife. Guthrie, on the other hand, politicizes this redemptive theme. Many of The Carter Family's songs picture heaven as non-temporal home, and draw parallels with Bunyan's Celestial City, the resurrection of Christ, his second coming, and the promise of an after life on judgement day for those who believe. The gospel calling in country music, during the Great Depression, exploited redemptive themes to galvanise people's spirits against their earthly hardships. Johnny Cash's last album, recorded just before his death, My Mother's Hymn Book (2004), recalls his favourite church and gospel songs. Cash had married June Carter, a daughter of the Carter Family, and this album pays homage to the gospel and Christian roots embedded in handed down traditional folk songs.

Many of Dylan's songs, whilst reworking folk tropes, also pay homage to a tradition of American music that mixes social concern with religious themes. In 'I am a Lonesome Hobo', from John Wesley Harding (1968), Dylan develops the implied relationship between the social figure of the hobo and the spiritual dimension of the lone pilgrim:

I am a Lonesome Hobo
Without family or friends
Where another man's life might begin
That's exactly where mine ends
I have tried my hand at bribery
Blackmail and deceit
And I've served time for ev-ry thing
'Cept beggin' on the street66

In this cautionary song, the hobo is caught on a road that leads to nowhere and to shame. The hobo also shares a belief in the democratic ideal of self-sufficiency when he states: ‘Live by no man’s code’. Again, Dylan alludes to a temporal road and a celestial road:

And hold your judgement for yourself
Lest you wind up on this road.67

The lonesome speaks as a wise prophet:

Kind ladies and kind gentlemen
Soon I will be gone
But let me just warn you all
Before I do pass on68

Even though his life on the open road has been a cursed journey, he is an insightful messenger. Dylan exploits the mythic figure of the hobo to imply a gospel calling. Dylan’s also exploits the trope of road as a spatial metaphor for a spiritual calling. The earliest is to be found in ‘Bob Dylan’s Dream’, on The Freewheelin ‘album (1963):

While riding on a train goin’ west
I fell asleep for to take my rest
I dreamed a dream that made me sad
Concerning myself and the first few friends I had [....]

With haunted hearts through the heat and cold
We never thought we could ever get old
We thought we could sit forever in fun
But our chances really was a million to one

As easy it was to tell black from white
It was all that easy to tell wrong from right
And our choices were few and the thought never hit
That the one road we traveled would ever shatter and split69

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
The allegory is even framed within the narrator’s dream to highlight further the common heritage to Bunyan’s theology. The train is transformed into a place of dreams and innocence reminding the songwriter of what he once had in life, as well as signalling a personal recognition of the journey he is to undertake. Dylan is visualizing both his movement towards Christianity and his departure from old friends. This is when he changes his way of thinking and abandons the image of restless drifting.

Even though Dylan incorporated themes from traditional blues songs, in their original idiom they tended to be secular in content. Dylan tended to always identify a style of blues called ‘holy blues’ which is more closely bound to the old-time religion of southern churches:

> For the most part the blues is strictly secular in content. The old-time religion of the southern churches did not permit the singings of “devil songs” and “jumped-up” songs as the blues was commonly termed, and it is not an expression that is natural to the church member [...]. Though “conversion” may come to blues singers, membership of such a church or cult was not for them if they continued to sing the blues [...]. In its bare realism the blues is somewhat bereft of spiritual values.  

Artists like Little Richard eventually gave up the blues to embrace the church, whilst a number of other blues singers worked as singers of spirituals, amongst them Blind Boy Fuller and Blind Reverend Gary Davis. As a fully-fledged holy blues singer, Davis accentuated the evangelical tradition of American music:

> I’m gon-na run through the streets of the city  
Where my Lord has gone on before  
I’m gon-na sit down on the banks of the river  
I won’t be back no more  

The spiritual conviction of Rev. Gary Davis was to be repeated in Dylan’s conversion albums. Before he become fundamental in his faith, Dylan was continually teasing out old gospel

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70 Oliver, *Blues Fell this Morning*, pp. 117-8.

associations embedded in traditional songs. For example, Dylan frequently employs the image of rain or 'hard rain', which blues singer's used to express a state of melancholy. But, Dylan expands on the trope to invest apocalyptic overtones that echo more the evangelical tone of holy blues singing:

I heard the sound of a thunder, it roared out a warnin',
Heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world.  

This is worth comparing to a song called 'Didn't It Rain' taken from Alan Lomax's anthology:

Now didn't it rain, chil-lun,
God's gonna 'story this world with water
Now did-n't it rain, my Lord.  

Dylan's song is an elaboration on Negro sermons dealing with the subject of Noah and the great biblical flood which had been used by itinerant religious balladists for disaster songs. Dylan's allusions to gospel music in his earlier lyrics are often fragmented in their mythopoeic effect. After his conversion, when Dylan is more assured of the religious influence that shapes his lyrical identity, he is able to make a more confident connection between his spiritual searching and the musical source:

I came to the place where the lone pilgrim lay,
And patiently stood by his tomb,
When in a low whisper I heard something say:
How sweetly I sleep here alone [.....]

Go tell my companion and children most dear
To weep not for me now I'm gone.
The same hand that led me through seas most severe
Has kindly assisted me home.  

73 'Didn't It Rain', Alan Lomax, p. 477.
It is clear that Dylan is identifying with the reassuring voice of the lone pilgrim that speaks from the grave. In his early road song lyrics, the lonesome hobo has no direction home; but after Dylan's fundamentalist period home lies in a grave that signifies a spiritual place of rest. In 'Down the Highway', the figure of a drifter is a troubled gambler, and he makes a distinction between the temporal streets that are empty and the highway to God:

Well, your streets are getting' empty,  
Lord, your highway's getting' filled [....]  
So, I'm a-walkin' down your highway  
Just as far as my poor eyes can see.75

Dylan often accentuates the sense of loneliness in his earlier lyrics that is compounded by an association with the open road. The image of an out of luck gambler and the refrain, 'Lord, I really miss my baby', indicates that the song derives from a tradition of country blues songs that bewail the absence of a loved one. Other songs, like 'Cold Irons Bound' or 'Dirt Road Blues', elaborate on the conventional tropes found in 'Drifter's Escape'.

After his conversion, Dylan was to abandon the image of the restless hobo to identify more with the object of salvation. This is an ironic role reversal because the hobo was in his earlier lyrics seen as the preaching outcast. Dylan's masterpiece, 'Like a Rolling Stone', with its preaching, and fearsome, condemnation of the hubris of a female socialite, anticipates a full-on evangelical style:

Once upon a time you dressed so fine  
Threw the bums a dime, in your prime  
Didn't you?  
People call, say beware doll, you're bound to fall, you  
Thought they were all  
A-kiddin' you  
You used to  
Laugh about  
Everybody that was  
Hangin' out

Now you don’t  
Talk so loud  
Now you don’t  
Seem so proud  
About havin’ to be scrounging  
Your next meal

Here Dylan prefigures the later image of a biblical prophet using the gospel word and the fables of the both Testaments to convey his outrage:

Aren’t the new songs in some ways the second coming of the critical social conscience his original disciples have been praying for? Hasn’t he always been arrogant and self-righteous in his jeremiads?

Certainly, Dylan’s ‘Quit Your Low Down Ways’ anticipates his religious castigations:

Oh, you can read out your Bible,  
You can fall down on your knees, pretty mama,  
And pray to the Lord  
But it ain’t gonna do no good.

In ‘Like a Rolling Stone’, Dylan is self-righteous when the Guthrie phrase, ‘Ain’t it hard’, is exploited to counterpoint the phrase, ‘You used to’, to underline the radically changed reality of Miss Lonely’s fallen state. Dylan’s hectoring rant is not ironic, and the chorus line of ‘No direction home / Like a complete unknown’ directly expresses the lyricist’s preference for the other stranger in the song – the homeless rambler or bum, or ‘the mystery tramp’. Again, this famous song elaborates on a familiar theme made popular during the folk revival of the 60s. The pioneering country rock band, The Byrds with Gram Parsons, on the album Sweet Heart of the Rodeo (1968), recorded songs like ‘I am a Pilgrim’ and ‘The Christian Life’ which as pieces of 60s’ Americana imitate the allegorical songs of The Carter Family:

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78 Dylan, ‘Quit Your Low Down Ways’, Lyrics, p. 35.
I am a pilgrim and a stranger
Travelling through this wearisome land
I've got a home in that yonder city good Lord
And it's not made by hand\(^{79}\)

The travelling stranger is often perceived as a lone pilgrim bound for a home beyond the wearisome land of the temporal world. Dylan’s Miss Lonely has no direction home because she has fallen into an outcast mode of existence, and worse still she lacks humility so cannot be saved or redeemed. And like Dylan, The Byrds also reworked Woody Guthrie outlaw songs like ‘Pretty Boy Floyd’:

Yes, it’s through this life I’ve wandered I’ve seen lots of funny men
Some will rob you with a six-gun and some with a fountain pen
And it’s through your life you travel yes it’s through your life you roam
You will never see an outlaw drive a family from their home\(^{80}\)

Guthrie romanticizes the outlaw figure of Pretty Boy Floyd who pays for the food of starving strangers, gives money to the families on relief, and saves ‘many a-starvin’ farmer’ by paying for their mortgage to save their home. Guthrie championed in his songs the cause of the destitute against the powers of the law. Because Dylan’s Miss Lonely ‘laughed about everybody that was hangin’ out’ and went to ‘the finest schools’, and ‘nobody ever taught how to live out on the street’, she is all on her own. When the phrase, ‘used to it’, is expressed, changing from the phrase ‘you used to’, Dylan punishes Miss Lonely for not appreciating the humble poverty of a bum’s life. Dylan has the last laugh.

In his conversion albums, Dylan would use his songs as personal statements, viewing the town-bum as a figure that needs to be redeemed:


\[^{80}\] Guthrie, ‘Pretty Boy Floyd’, from *Pastures of Plenty* (Prisms Leisure, 1998). During his afternoon visits at Greystone Hospital, Dylan played Guthrie songs he specifically requested. One of these was ‘Pretty Boy Floyd’. See Dylan, *Chronicles*, p. 98.
When I walk around some of the towns we go to [...] I'm totally convinced people need Jesus. Look at the junkies and the winos and the troubled people. It's all a sickness which can be healed in an instant.81

What is ironic about this statement is that as Dylan stares into 'the vacuum of [the mystery tramp’s] eyes', he now no longer sees the troubled mind of the lonesome hobo as the searching quest of the lone pilgrim, but the urban sickness of bums that Miss Lonely used to give a passing dime. In 'Gotta Serve Somebody', Dylan names a list of social types that are followers of their own causes, but Dylan identifies himself with what he sees as a greater cause.82 Dylan's change of course in life is expressed as a movement away from the identity of the hobo, which ironically was the key to getting him where he wants to go. In Slow Train Coming, Dylan throws his past into relief, revealing a dramatic transformation in his life's journey. Dylan again empathises with the poor and the lame, or the oppressed, whilst dissociating them from the drifters, the rock 'n' roll addicts, or the individually free. Now, the outsider is not a social outcast that wanders from town to town, but a believer that has changed his ways. Dylan is still using the image of the lost wanderer to express a difference of social status and spiritual insight:

And I walk out on my own
A thousand miles from home [....]

Don't let me drift too far
Keep me where you are [....]

Don't let me change my heart,
Keep me set apart
From all the plans they do pursue.
And I, I don't mind the pain
Don't mind the driving rain
I know I will sustain83


82 Dylan, 'Gotta Serve Somebody', Lyrics, p. 401.

83 Dylan, 'I Believe in You', Lyrics, p. 405.
But the voice of certainty contrasts with the voice of mixed up confusion that is identified with earlier images of a lone figure:

I got mixed up confusion
Man, it's a-killin' me
Well, there's too many people
And they're all too hard to please [...]

Babe, I'm walkin' down the line [...]

Well, my head's full of questions
My temp'rature's risin' fast
Well, I'm lookin' for some answers
But I don't know who to ask84

The endless crooked highway seemed a lonely path in his youth, but it is one that he followed until it brought him to the home of his Christian calling. For The Slow Train Coming album, he wrote a song titled 'Trouble in Mind', but Dylan's questions are now directly addressed to God. Other songs, like 'Precious Angel', reinforce the idea that Dylan was always searching for grace when he first adopted the persona of the lonesome hobo:

Precious angel, under the sun
How was I to know you'd be the one
To show me I was blinded85

Dylan overcomes his restless individuality to exchange it for the assurance that comes with a sense of spiritual belonging that is expressed in patriotic terms:

All that foreign oil controlling American soil
Look around you, it's just bound to make you embarrassed [...]
Deciding America's future from Amsterdam and to Paris86

85 Dylan, 'Precious Angel', Lyrics, p. 403.
Dylan is now divested of the ragged clothes of a lone pilgrim and preaches like a holy blues reverend. The dramatic invocations of his protest songs are channelled into evangelical songs that berate the 'nonbelievers and men stealers talkin' in the name of religion'. Whilst declaring his newly born faith, Dylan warns his liberal listeners that the clock is ticking - our time is running out - so we too have to get on board the slow train coming round the bend.

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In the recent republication of Dylan's *Lyrics*, there is a song that was omitted from the 1962-85 anthology, 'City of Gold' (1980), which reconfirms Dylan's conversion and stands as a clear reminder of how the holy blues influence in his lyrics later developed:

There is a City of Gold  
Far from the rat race that eats at your soul  
Far from the madness and the bars that hold  
There is a City of Gold

There is a City of Light  
Raised up in the heavens and the streets are bright  
Glory to God – not by deeds or by might  
There is a City of Light

Dylan, like Guthrie, re-contextualizes a theological narrative to personalize his own faith. He plays on the image of gold in his vision of the Celestial City to criticize modern mammon god of materialism. Dylan declares he is heading for the City of Gold. This is a figurative place of destination that lies at the end of the straight path that is symbolized within the gospel trope of the railroad. Dylan's conversion to Christianity was gradual and not sudden. Dylan had gotten on board the slow train a long time ago. Certain critics have argued that Dylan's conversion was the final act in his attempt to erase once and for all his Jewish identity even though he had never been comfortable with his father's religion or his father's name:

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87 Dylan, 'City of Gold', *Lyrics*, p. 434.
Before he came to New York back in 1961, Dylan calculated that the name Bob Zimmerman would not harmonise well with the ramblin' hillbilly persona he had fabricated for himself.88

Unlike musical artists like Johnny Cash and June Carter, Dylan’s upbringing does not predetermine a religious course in life that is reflective of an indigenously Christianised background. The more Dylan identified with sounds of Presley, or Hank Williams, the more he became absorbed into the myth of America that is experienced through folk tropes. Imitating the folk style of Woody Guthrie helped Dylan, of remoter immigrant roots, to shape his image as outsider to mainstream America. From here on, Dylan was really taking the first steps on the trail of assimilation into the mythic roots of a folk tradition. Whereas, Guthrie never really saw himself as singing for anything than for a political revolution to liberate the rural proletariat - Guthrie’s train was bound for political glory. Dylan preferred the slow train.

Even though the twentieth century can be defined as a post-mythic age, it still lived under the shadow of a dead god. Certain writers reflect the anxiety and a sense of continuity in coming to terms with Nietzsche’s announcement that God is dead. For with the death of God comes the death of myth. Gianni Vattimo argues that humanity has yet to fully comprehend the reality of a world dislocated from the guiding metaphysics of God:

We are all by now used to the fact that disenchantment has also produced a radical disenchantment with the idea of disenchantment itself; or, in other words, that demythification has finally turned against itself, recognizing that even the ideal of the elimination of myth is a myth.2

The demystification of dogmas has meant that God is no longer seen as the cause of the physical world’s existence, and the traditional teachings of the Church and the biblical text are thrown under an absurdist’s light. Yet, secular thought can be boorish as well as unimaginative, and the imagination naturally holds onto a sense of the metaphysical. Enlightenment and positivistic ideas concerning God do not take into account the supra-rational properties within the truth-values of myth. Certain writers with little reference to religion still held on to the poetics of myth because as a language it suggested a value of perception without claiming objective reference. Opposed to secular empiricism, nihilist writers like Nietzsche and Kafka demonstrate the ambivalence of a rational and poetic relationship with the language of myth. Modernity may for some writers like T.S. Eliot present a collapse of belief that leads to cultural anarchy, but modernity had not done away with the idea of God; for, as Wallace Steven’s poetry reveals, it is difficult to maintain a

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complete objective independence from elements of the transcendental when the mind naturally moves towards the invisible. Any way of experiencing God is bound up with a certain conception of transcendence, and to deny the individual recourse to the sacred is for some a punishment far too great to bear. Within the concept of transcendence there is the notion of an alterity. And within this there can also be the idea of recovery or return, but one that does not necessarily mean a search for our dependence on God.3 Nietzsche saw this confusion as the inevitable effects of our pulling away from such a foundational truth. A religious sensibility is inherited within a mythopoeic language; for even though Dylan’s conversion to evangelical Christianity signals a return to God it is still informed by a set of mythic tropes.

One of Nietzsche’s prophetic fears was that the collective notion of myth would shape specific historical circumstances. The notion of religion as myth has been replaced in the twentieth century with one that is almost synonymous with the idea of ideology. Political revolution or social upheaval tends to operate on the principle of group identity. Whilst the existential outsider has sought solace in the discreet poetics of an atavistic language, idealism renewed its momentum through what Nietzsche termed the womb of myth in the nation. The fundamental ambivalence of a mythic revival is that it can inspire both weak thought in terms of a common core of identifiable values as well as self-revaluation in the history of Being. The concept of myth remains a site for falsehood, and for truth-values that transcend every act of interpretation. Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus reflects on how in a violent tradition of sacrificial rituals the tendency is to repeat blindly the powerful drives dramatized within a myth rather than to focus on its mimetic subtleties. This best describes how a transfigurative myth can be a force for good and how a prescriptive monomyth be one of consoling certainty or self-repeating destruction.

3 See Vattimo, Belief, p. 22.
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