



Access To The Inaccessible: Reflections of Mythical Allusions in Contemporary Poetry

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ABSTRACT *Myth forms the basis of literature through which morality and social justice are being explained. Myths are older than any language or religion in the world and its themes are universal. Eco-poets like W. S. Merwin, Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry revere mythology by celebrating the primitive cultures of man. Merwin creates new myths and adapts established myths to his own purposes and this provides his sense of experience directly to the readers. Gary Snyder evokes ancient civilization blessed by self-awareness and prehistoric Biblical rituals in his poetry. To Wendell Berry, myths in his writings express the fundamental truths of man's part in the natural order. He emphasizes that man is the creator of both good and evil in this world and maintaining a good relationship with natural elements is indispensable. Admiration for primitive cultures stands as a common factor among the three poets.*

Myth forms the basis of literature through which morality and social justice are being explained to common people. Myth is "a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives" [1]. Major part of myth revolves around creation or evolution of the world, heaven and earth, great flood, first man and woman, responsibility of individuals, and fantasies of heroes and heroines through which the moral values are delivered. Gods and goddesses are portrayed as main characters in mythology to make people follow them as their role models. This inclination exists starting from Greek, Roman and German mythologies to almost every other culture in the world. It is not that all myths are real incidents. They are stories that infuse the culture and tradition of a particular locality. The customs of a specific region also gets highlighted in mythology. Myths are older than any language or religion in the world and religious stories are almost retellings of universal mythic themes. For instance, the stories dealing with resurrection are common in almost all the religions. As a whole, the psyche of every individual in the society is based on its culture's mythology, which becomes the culture's shared unconscious values. In literature, myths and mythic symbols serve as the elementary particles of imagination and creativity.

Myth plays a major role in all genres of literature. In poetry too, it seeks an eminent position. It started with classical poetry and continues unabated even in the current scenario. Even though readers may not know the ancient Greek or Roman myth, modern poets use new forms with familiar themes and make sure that everyone gets to the meaning of the poem. Mythological references enhance the effectiveness of the poem and bring in a second layer of meaning to the poem which makes it even more interesting—"If it is a well-written contemporary poem a lack of knowledge of the specific myth should not stop appreciation or enjoyment. However, a reader who is prepared to do the work and find out what the poet means by his or her references, will gain further insight" [6].

Many contemporary poets like W. S. Merwin, Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry revere mythology by celebrating the primitive cultures of man that was in tune with the natural world, and with it they enhance the efficacy of their ecological poems. W.S.Merwin, former poet laureate of US and Pulitzer Prize winner, with his concern for nature, has written a number of poems which are abundant with mythological allusions. "In some poems he creates new myths, and in others he adapts established myths to his own purposes" [5]. Merwin garners sources from myth very often to enrich his poetic experience. Merwin believes that nothing can merely exist without myth and it is an intrinsic part of a language: "I think that any real use of language is mythic in some sense. Language is myth. Language is the articulation of myth" [3]. Critics too have singled out Merwin's habit of resorting to myth: "Myth is prominent enough in Merwin's poetry that other readers since Auden have made even stronger claims for its centrality to his poetics, claiming that Merwin's poetry 'assimilates both the purpose and the method of mythic thought,' that in Merwin's mature poetry 'the poet assumes the role of myth-maker,' and that 'his conception of the poet as mythmaker' is 'his aesthetic premise for poetry itself'" [5]. Merwin also deems that the usage of myth would provide his sense of experience directly to the reader. He states: "I now think that myth is something like the intuition of a kind of coherent sense of experience, which we can't live without. But it is our own projection. It is real in the sense that it's necessary. To us" [3]. Merwin chose to use myth right from the very beginning of his poetic career. The title of his first volume of poetry, *A Mask for Janus*, stands evident for the fact. Janus, the god of doors and gates in Roman mythology adorns his title. The door image found in his poems constantly evokes the presence of Janus. In "December: Of Aphrodite," Aphrodite, the goddess of winter or death or despair is alluded to. "If in a poem like 'White Goat, White Ram' myth 'places' us by showing that we are no better and no more powerful than what is bestial, in 'The Annunciation' myth teaches us that we are powerless in the presence of the spiritual" [5]. In "The Annunciation," the myth from the Gospel of Luke, the narrative of the angel Gabriel's declaration to Mary that she will bear God's son is given. When Merwin weaves these ancient myths in

his modern perceptions of the world, it creates a startling effect.

Apart from intertextual echoes, biblical allusions and references to other historical figures regularly figure in the poetry of Merwin. In his early poetry, allusions to ancient, medieval, Renaissance, metaphysical and modern poetry are found. Allusion differs from myth in that "Allusion is a passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary or historical person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage" [1]. Merwin's allusions are only echoes of allusions since Merwin strongly believes in the tantalizing elusiveness of the past. Many of his poems have allusions to Christian faith—especially references to Noah and his ark. In "Dictum: For a Masque of Deluge," the birth of Jesus is indicated. The crucifixion of Christ is reflected in "Passion." Here the lovers feel the pain of the nails, feel the earth shake, experience darkness and death:

They led us away To this place we were to harrow
And rise from, the third day, And howso scripture by truthful,
Yet this pain we pass through, Though shared, consumes us by
Dividing infinitely, Is at all times eternal. (1-8)

In "Colloquy at Peniel," Peniel, the unidentified place east of Jordan in Gilead where Jacob wrestled with the Angel, becomes the site of struggle between the narrator of the poem and the angel. Merwin also uses biblical stories in his poems like "The Prodigal Son" and "The Annunciation." "Odysseus" gives the journey of Odysseus as he progresses from Calypso's island to the island of the sorceress-goddess Circe past the island of the Sirens. "Hermione on Simulacra" is composed based on the final scene of *The Winter's Tale*. It is evident even in its epigraph: "Paulina draws back a curtain and discovers Hermione as a statue." "The Frozen Sea" alludes to *Moby Dick*. Harvey Gross in his critical review observes thus: "I read 'The Frozen Sea' as a nearly classic parable of the American moral experience: Captain Ahab's furious impulse to avenge injury and confront the inscrutable whiteness of the whale. Thus the overwhelming desire to extirpate evil from the world, the radical innocence of Billy Budd, the Calvinist insistence on unmixed moral absolutes—all turn against the very principles they assert and become agents of evil" [4]. Merwin's allusions stand testimony to the fund of knowledge that he wishes to share with the readers.

Admiration for primitive cultures stands as a common factor among W. S. Merwin, Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry. Highly motivated by the so-called "primitive" cultures, Snyder admires mythology and rituals as critical display of the interrelatedness between man and nature. Many of Snyder's poems are mythical in nature. The poem "Mountains and Rivers without End" gives out the functions of myth in literature. The poem is a conscious effort to re-create the social function of ancient epics—"to tell a good story, while offering instruction in life by way of myth and history." In this poem, he evokes an ancient civilization blessed by self-awareness, thriving in an unpolluted world. In his book *Myths and Texts*, Snyder discusses in great detail about the prehistoric rituals that were rampant among the tribes and those in the Bible. He combines the mythological tales with his own verses to a great effect. As the title indicates, myths and symbols are intertwined juxtaposing the mythical stories and historical sources with natural images. He alludes Chinese mythology in this verse as follows:

Han Shan could have lived here, & no scissorbill stooge of

the Emperor would have come trying to steal his last poor shred of sense. [9]

Here "scissorbill stooge" refers to an official of Tang Dynasty. Snyder has also used Han Shan's story as a preface to his *Cold Mountain Poems*. Snyder seems to have been fascinated by Han Shan's mythical disappearance into a mountain cave and the line "Han Shan could have lived . . ." makes him an eternal, immortal sage. Snyder thus blends together the ancient Chinese history with basic teachings of Chan in his poems which become a key point of reference. This book-length poem can be termed mythopoeia, which creates modern myth based on modern culture and history. Snyder's previous works and environmental concerns form the background of this mythic poem.

Wendell Berry too falls in line with Merwin and Snyder. For instance, Wendell Berry's "Remembering" alludes with the myth of fall of man and directly makes one to remember John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. To Berry, these myths in his writings express the fundamental truths of man's part in the natural world. It also emphasizes that man is the creator of both good and evil in this world and he proceeds further insisting on maintaining a good relationship with all the natural elements of the world. Berry also suggests not to empower human mind, since it is the root cause for separating human beings from the natural order. This is evident with his verse in "The Way of Ignorance" where he remarks that "We have to act on the basis of what we know, and what we know is incomplete" [10]. Every culture and religion in this world is directly related to the well-being of its natural surroundings and myth plays a vital role in making people realize their role in the natural world. Contemporary poetry plays its part in using mythology as a tool to emphasize the significance of a lifestyle that falls in tune with the natural surroundings.

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