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The Boundaries of Mythology. An Introduction to the Research

ABSTRACT

This article aims to present the most important aspects of mythology occurring in popular culture taken from examples drawn from fantasy literature. Defining the modern myth presents many problems, because in the ordinary sense they are naive and irrational stories, associated with unsophisticated entertainment. Meanwhile, their way of interpreting the world embedded in their very structure, recalling the assumptions of perennialism, has a profound and dynamic character. By using this strategy to explain reality, a specific cognitive map emerges in which mythological systems perform the functions of a boundary opening out towards the unknown. At the same time, the mythical hero represents model patterns of behaviour in the face of the challenges and fears of the world, although his loneliness and alienation indicate a need to change the conventional adaptive solutions in the context of contemporary cultural transformations.

KEY WORDS

mythology, popular culture, interpretation, boundary

The article deals with the statement that the concept of the border creates mythical thinking not only in reference to traditional myths, but also to their contemporary transformations. Before you can draw conclusions from or confirm such a hypothesis, it is necessary to present some aspects of thought in the categories of mythology. I wish to illustrate the role of myths in contemporary

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culture that form the core of ‘secondary world fantasy’. Greek culture will be the starting point for these considerations since it provided the foundation for most of the toposes in literature that are important components of modern mythologies. By referring to the ideas of Alfred Korzybski, I aim to demonstrate the origins of thinking in mythical categories. In his concept of map and territory, Korzybski proved that reality always presents itself as a map, never as the territory. According to traditional mythology, such maps usually take the form of heroic monomyth as in Joseph Campbell’s interpretation. In popular culture, despite its manifestation in naïve forms and the relegated dimension of the sacrum, the issue of boundary and its myth-creating function remains relevant.

According to the models of the sources from which the meanings of myths are derived, as prescribed by Mircea Eliade¹ and Joseph Campbell,² a story may refer to the very beginning of things or portray the fate of the hero. In both cases, it carries the message of a restoration of the equilibrium created at the beginning of time, or acquired as a result of heroic struggles. In the first variant it lies at its core in the power of the founding impact of the sacrum, hence the importance of the ritual return *in illo tempore*, while in the monomyth the order in the world is restored via the action of a hero. Even if the characteristic feature of all these models is too simplistic, the assumptions of these concepts seem to accurately identify the main idea of these narratives in their traditional contexts.

Such an approach, however, loses its application in relation to contemporary myths. Moreover, an analysis of the significant collection of contemporary definitions relating to this phenomenon easily leads to the conclusion that in today’s culture almost everything can belong to it.³ This observation seems to coincide with the postmodern tendency to blur meanings and limit research to a systematic review of concepts that in the end inevitably turn out to be

¹ Among the many publications by this author devoted to the issue of myth I would like to recall here M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. W. R. Trask, New York 1963; idem, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, trans. W. R. Trask, Princeton 1971.

² J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton 1949.

³ The problem of defining myth drew the attention of many scholars, at least since the 1970s, when systematic studies on this subject began including not only myth in its traditional or even archaic sense, but also in relation to the present. One example might be the study by L. Honko, *The Problem of Defining Myth*, [in] *The Myth of the State*, ed. H. Bizenais, “Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis”, 1972, No. 6, pp. 7–19. In Polish literature, it is worth mentioning the considerations of A. Szyjewski’s, *Przekleństwo mitu*, “Rocznik Mitoznawczy” 2008, Vol. 2, pp. 9–15.

empty. In relation to myth, this methodology only leads to its recognising as the representative of the patterns of ancient traditions, as permanent as they are brittle. This belief is even familiar from the work of Roland Barthes, observing in mythical thinking a kind of cultural museum, whose role is to maintain a certain social status quo and which should be overcome along the path of cultural development.⁴ At the same time, for example, Leszek Kołakowski emphasised that even philosophical or scientific reflection may require a myth to help look for explanations in an unconventional way where they do not obviously pertain to an empirical mode of research or rational inquiry.⁵ This is because the main function of myths is not so much the discover of the truth as the establishment of some kind of meaning.⁶ The juxtaposition of these two, selected from many different outlooks, shows how ambiguous mythical forms and content may appear to be.

One particularly important variant of the modern myth is the incarnation of pop-culture. Its content does not have a religious dimension and in its confrontation with the scientific worldview or sometimes simply in its common sense it appears to be naive and weak as a representation of forms focused on fun and consumption as well as being often deprived of greater artistic ambition. Despite this, today it constitutes one of the essential components of the construction of personal identity as well as a communal vision of the world. Neither could this seemingly archaic mechanism function without a kind of support – i.e. mythological systems, to which the individual stories belong and find within them their justification. One of the most interesting varieties of this type of myth can be found in the so-called “secondary world fantasy.”⁷ The structure of fantasy universes includes in particular many references to mythical systems, both those familiar from tradition and those reinvented. One may, of course, argue whether the use of mythical patterns is actually an extension

⁴ According to this author, the mythical narrative is a refuge of middle-class, conservative lifestyle for which it remains the only, though ultimately irrational explanation, sometimes effectively blocking efforts for social progress, see: R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris 1957.

⁵ L. Kołakowski, *Obecność mitu (The Presence of Myth)*, London 1972 (English edition: Chicago 1989).

⁶ The issue concerning the establishment of meaning in the mythical context was presented by Ł. Trzeciński, *W poszukiwaniu uniwersalnego sensu. Szkic kulturoznawczy*, Kraków 2014.

⁷ See: M. Tymn, K. J. Zahorski, R. H. Boyer, *Fantasy. A Core Collection and Reference Guide*, New York & London 1979, pp. 3–5. See also: G. Trębicki, *Fantasy. Ewolucja gatunku*, Kraków 2007.

of mythology as such. It is worth noting that in both fantasy literature and film, there is often a reflection on the nature of mythical tales, which is like a myth within a myth.⁸ This is so relevant that it sheds light on today's understanding of its specific message and power. In this short article I would like to draw attention to certain specific characteristics of these contemporary imaginary mythological systems and their possible cultural functions.

Undoubtedly, one of the most important factors in the survival of the myth is that it never appears in isolation. Its meanings and interpretations are determined by how a given message is entered into the structure of similar narrations appropriate to a particular culture, or into mythology, which has been dominated in the West by the Hellenic formula. The Greeks observed, in their colourful and poetic tales of the gods, the existence of certain models of attitudes, functions and mutual relationships, which were similar in various religious systems and attest to the fact that all mythical systems speak of a hidden, though deeply rational structure of the Absolute. It is worth noting that this principle of coherence was not always regarded as final and did indeed meet with some criticism in ancient times.⁹

The established coherence was expressed in all interrelated levels of interpreting the narrative – cosmological, social and individual. In the first case, it was about synchronising levels of the micro- and macrocosmos in a common concept of the laws governing the universe. Somehow, confirming the existence of a second level became the research work of Georges Dumézil, who pinpointed within mythology the reflection of three basic social functions – priestly, juridical and military, as enshrined in the triadic structure of the deities.¹⁰ Although this scholar's immediate object of research was not Greek culture, its findings have confirmed the specificity of a rational assessment of the mythical order in the ancient world. The third aspect stems from the fact that mythology speaks in fact the language of the human soul and so to this

⁸ Old messages, sometimes called fairy tales, explain the many changes and phenomena occurring in fantastic universes and, as such, are important clues for the heroes. These stories serve important functions in the narrative of many books belonging to this genre, such as *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien, many books by U. Le Guin or *A Song of Ice and Fire* by Martin, as well as in movies, for example in J. Cameron's *Avatar* (2009).

⁹ For example, Cicero in *De natura deorum* tried to make his readers aware that the ancient mythologies were neither ordered nor internally consistent, as argued by the Greeks. Cicero, *De natura deorum Academica*, trans. H. Rackham, Cambridge–Massachusetts–London 1967.

¹⁰ See G. Dumézil, *L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens*, Paris 1968; idem, *Types épiques indo-européen: un héros, un sorcier, un roi*, Paris 1971.

day psychology uses concepts drawn from this vivid semantic tradition. Moreover, in the context of contemporary culture, only this final aspect seems to retain its topicality, especially since the concepts of Carl Gustav Jung became a significant inspiration for a new spirituality – referring to religious, including mythological, traditions. The modern roles of mythological systems are, however, not limited to this single function.

Constructing mythology is not about recounting its story from start to finish. It consists of stories that are gradually added to the source message, based on it and related to it, not always explicitly and often only by default. The benchmark in this case may be the works of Homer, which do not present a complete knowledge of the gods, but only the information required to show the actions of the chosen human heroes. To understand a given myth some initial information is necessary as a guide through the complexities of the mutual animosities and alliances of deities, spirits and humans. The fact that they are not actually fully explained to the end thereby allows the mythological systems to be retold and embellished, so as to give the impression of an ideal “open work” in the meaning of Umberto Eco.¹¹ In other words, we can say that mythology, in which a given myth participates, defines the framework for its interpretation and constitutes its identity, finally building a narrative coherence, whereby a single tale begins to participate in the “never-ending story.” So if, as Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote, everything is a myth, and each new version builds its syncretic structure,¹² a change in one of the components of the story influences the perception of the whole and so mythological universes are extremely dynamic, not to say capricious in nature.

This specific aspect of the functioning of the mythical system manifested itself in the Greek world very early on, when elements associated so far with religion were moved into the realm of artistic creativity, not necessarily of a sacral nature. As a result, the myth stood between the sacrum (which it did not entirely represent, but the symbolism to which it appealed) and the profanum (which shed its mundanity in its mythical form and as such became an outlet from the ordinary). In comparison with the distinct anthropocentrism of this mythology, and at the same time with the unusual freedom of morals shown by the characters involved in it, the secular form of a myth could sometimes seem unacceptable. Plato’s critique was particularly harsh and in his

¹¹ See U. Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. A. Cancogni, Cambridge 1989. I think that one might risk saying that one of the major inspiration of this concept was the analysis of hermetic myths, creating the perfect example of such work.

¹² C. Lévy-Strauss, *Antropologia strukturalna*, tłum. K. Pomian, Warszawa 1970, p. 300.

Dialogues, especially in the *Republic*, he sometimes expressed disapproval of this state of affairs.¹³ This protest resulted from the belief that because of their great popularity, myths could be very harmful since they were full of immoral content that might effectively, though unconsciously, shape the next generations of Hellenes. Plato did not entirely give up on mythical allusions and in his dialogues he often appealed to them. He suggested, however, replacing the old myths with a collection of stories created in accordance with the principles of ethics, or even decency, or at least reinterpreted in that spirit.¹⁴ A way out of this stalemate was to adopt allegories, which established new meanings detached from the source text, and it was this discovery that would lead to the essence of things.¹⁵ Regardless of the fact that this method was sanctioned by the philosophers, it seems somehow inscribed in the Greek way of thinking about myths, which in its poetic form transcend the scope of art's influence, as stressed by Eric Havelock.¹⁶

The principle message of allegories, and the reason behind their remarkable cultural persistence, was the belief that they are a reflection of the hierarchical structure of the universe. Thus, the method of interpreting a text involved the procedure of depicting reality in all its manifestations. This manner of reading content also became extremely important in the Christian universe, where it was first used for biblical exegesis and then too in the reading of classical myths.¹⁷ As a result, a myth ceased to be a story of gods or humans overwhelmed by passion and instead evolved into a model of existence while

¹³ See for example: L. Brisson, *Plato, the Myth Maker*, Chicago 2000.

¹⁴ A very good example of such a philosophical interpretation is the myth of the kingdom of Saturn, in which Plato was silent about the atrocities attributable to Titan and focused on the presentation of the remarkable features of this legendary period.

¹⁵ On the special nature of this philosophical interpretation of myth in antiquity see: L. Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved the Myths. Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology*, Chicago–London 2004.

¹⁶ For example, he wrote: „Poetry represented not something we call by that name, but an indoctrination which today would be comprised in a shelf of text books and works of reference”, E. A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, Cambridge–London 1963, p. 27.

¹⁷ At this point we should also mention the classical studies of this problem by J. Pépin, *Mythe et Allégorie. Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes*, Paris in 1981 and *La Tradition de l'allégorie de Philon d'Alexandrie à Dante*, Paris 1987. These insightful studies show that the allegorical way of thinking became an immanent element of imagining the world in the culture of the Christian West. The renaissance fascination with ancient myths was discussed by J. Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods. The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, Bollingen Series XXXVIII Princeton in 1981.

confirming the image of a living cosmos immersed in transcendence.¹⁸ From now on, the mythological representation of the gods became the benchmark in a game of imagination, the source of an alternative spirituality, and at the same time the claim that the only fundamental and accessible diagnosis is that which results from human experience and life.

At the end of the Renaissance, it seemed that this picture that has been irrevocably abandoned.¹⁹ We can, however, find it in later literature and art, while its modern variants do not relate to the real world, but to fantasy universes. The basic model in this respect is the literature of J. R. R. Tolkien, which proved to be an invaluable inspiration for any conception of imaginary worlds. Although Tolkien admitted primarily to links with Scandinavian mythology, and also the message of the Bible, pushing the Greek legacy to the background, in the comprehensive “mythology for England” he took that rational mode of explaining reality in the context of the metaphysical order manifesting itself within. The aim of Tolkien’s *Mythopoeia* was the possibility to present a full and multidimensional vision of a fantasy world where the elements of the sacred remain integrally linked with the development of events.²⁰ Therefore, individual adventures would be woven into a broad and – from the point of view of this universe – eternal perspective of the confrontation between good and evil, light and darkness. In this approach, all the pieces of the puzzle are internally consistent: the existence of a whole hierarchy of spiritual and physical beings, the convoluted and complicated history of the various calendars used in Middle-Earth, the adventures of individual heroes and the operation of a universal law. However, the price of this coherence was a distinct dualism in Tolkien’s world, which is more reminiscent of the Gnostic systems²¹ than, for

¹⁸ This procedure was adopted, among others, by Marsilio Ficino who, interpreting ancient myths, primarily searched in their contents for a general pattern which would enable him to understand the ideas contained in them, referring to nature. A prime example of this approach was his commentary on *Phaedrus*, in which he tried to present the symbolic structure of ancient mythology purported to be the original philosophy of nature. The rules for this interpretation of myths were presented by M. J. Allen, *Synoptic Art. Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation*, Firenze 1998. This concept became very popular during the Renaissance, and has been repeatedly referred to by, for example, Giordano Bruno.

¹⁹ See C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image. An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, Cambridge 1964.

²⁰ On the topic of *Mythopoeia* see: J. Chance, *Tolkien’s Art: A Mythology for England*, Lexington 2001.

²¹ The Gnostic character of Tolkien mythology was noted, among others, by Andrzej Szyjewski, *Od Valinoru do Mordoru. Świat mitu a religia w dziele Tolkiena*, Kraków 2004,

example, the Arthurian legends or the *Chanson de Geste* full of hidden digressions, dark passions and ambiguous choices. At the same time, Tolkien creates an ideal world, not because it is a paradise where all are saved, but because it is a balance between good and evil, just as the *eucatastrophe* balances the need for suffering and the requirement for a happy end. In the real world such transparency would not be possible, just as the presence of the sacrum becomes merely a question of intuition and an object of faith, and the feeling of historical meaning is only an ideological assumption. At the same time these principles helped Tolkien to build a universe which gives the impression that it is one of the masks of the modern world, ordering the chaos present within it resulting even in the absence of clear moral rules.

According to the concept of Alfred Korzybski, man does not directly attain reality, which by nature is transcendental.²² During contact with it, a kind of mental map is used, created at the interface between cultural traditions and the personal experiences of each individual. Importantly, the map is not the territory, and because it undergoes a process of continuous change, so arises the necessity for the continuous reconstruction of maps, which should be mutually coherent, while at the same time reflecting the modifications which occur. It can therefore be assumed that an important part of each map is its boundary. The ability to transgress it and process the data which constructs it, so that consequently it may become possible to expand it or change perspectives thereby defines the human adaptive capacity. For this reason too, the elements of the map which constitute the expression of this border zone seem to be more prone to irrational content which over time may be subject to rationalisation or be revoked. Paradoxically, in the border zone the most persistent turns out to be the outlook on the world based on mythological strands – if not directly, then metaphorically – and feeling is connected with rejected patterns. This form on the one hand helps to tame existential fears, while on the other it remains a casual concept that most know is only metaphorical in meaning, and may at any moment be revoked or suspended.

p. 88. There is no doubt that Tolkien's clearly defined duality of good and evil helped to justify the brutality of the war in which his characters are involved.

²² A. Korzybski, *Science and Sanity. An Introduction to non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, New York 1994, pp. 750–751. For more on the relationship of the cultural image of the world and the concept of the map and the territory, see Korzybski. I Trzcińska, *Obraz, mapa i hybryda. Kulturowe aspekty przedstawienia świata (An Image, an Map and a Hybrid. Cultural Aspects of World Representations)*, "The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture" 8 (5/2013), pp. 217–233.

In this context, a particular role is played by the heroic myth. It suggests no easy solutions, nor does it describe obvious paths. Its *raison d'être* is to confront the recipient with questions which have no answers. The journey of the hero explains them in so much as he can find that which is universal in his life. Identification with the hero is therefore an example of a kind of initiation, because it takes place in the imagination. Since it transports the recipient, it gains the conviction that it touches upon archetypal truths – profound and unchanging. As a result, mythical stories create a tradition close to the intuition of perennialism.²³ This means that in each of them can be hidden the nucleus of an older edition, sometimes supplemented or embellished, sometimes seemingly changed beyond recognition, but never enough so that the reference source could not be completely revealed. This specific structure is not an ordinary palimpsest. The recipient of a myth enjoys the impression that he is guided deep into the heart of the labyrinth of content familiar to him and at the same time ambiguous, which still has no solution or final form and searches for its actualisation in the life of every human being. Today, this belief largely seems to stem from Jungian idea that myth belongs to the eternal language of the self who, as a divine archetype, knows everything. As a result, the heroic myth becomes a specific scenario – a simulation of marginal situations that anyone can come across in life, finding even in its weak form a trace of hidden immanence.

There is no doubt that in the conventions of pop-culture genres, this message is often shallower and leads to the transformation of important content into banality. It is merely an element of a superficial game, a kind of eternal fun, in which the modern *homo ludens* – often merely to kill boredom – goes in search of answers to the puzzle of the correct interpretation of the further convoluted wanderings of the hero, with whom at least to some extent he is willing to identify. For obvious reasons, the consequence of such an approach could be the infantilisation of the message it wishes to convey. This is such an interesting situation in the sense that pop culture brings even educated recipients to the level a child who can play as he wishes, act “silly” and not have to take any responsibility.

At the same time this game played with the world, being one of the main themes of today's fantasy fiction, although in line with mainstream

²³ The idea of *philosophia perennis* was born in the Renaissance and then transferred to various currents of esoteric theosophy from the counter-culture of the twentieth century, see for example A. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, New York 1945. Its foundation is the belief that the core of all religions is common and has developed over the centuries in a process of expanding consciousness.

entertainment is not just a trivial story.²⁴ This is shown primarily in its representation of the world, which becomes increasingly gloomy and threatening, bringing new borderline situations of a so-far unknown status. Against these dangers must stand not your common or garden type of hero armed with good intentions and blessed with good fortune, but superheroes, often occurring in the plural, deriving strength from extraordinary mutations of body and mind.²⁵ Another variant can be found in the novels of Martin, whose heroes stand alone without support, contact and understanding in the decisive moments of their lives. Therefore, the tasks set before them so often end in failure, and the irrevocability of tragic destiny changes neither their luck nor the sense of their own mission.²⁶ This pessimism, expressing a lack of faith in the hero, testifies to the fact that in today's culture the idea of fulfilment so characteristic of the spirituality of the New Age is fading in order to be replaced by fears related to a poetic post-apocalyptic vision of the end of civilisation.²⁷

We conclude that regardless of any changes, myth in Western culture has maintained a distinct singularity, expressed in a constant balancing act of contradictions. This exceptionally coherent structure of building narration is characterised by both sound roots in the tradition with which it sometimes happens to be identified, and a sensitivity to change, which allows it to adapt well in foreign cultural frameworks. Thus, the myth can be considered to be a special medium of cultural memory, on which its message is based and which it protects. This memory is not a simple reminder of historical processes. It includes primarily the message of adaptive behaviours specific to a given time and place. As such, the mythology belonging to pop-cultural narratives

²⁴ Interest in the theme of the game is reflected in the titles and themes of today's most popular works of fantasy. Suffice to mention *The Ender's Game* by O. S. Card, *The Hunger Games* by S. Collins or probably the most famous *Game of Thrones* by G. R. R. Martin. The characters of these novels are participants in a specific game, the rules of which are unpredictable and unfair. Its course appropriates the whole universe, even if, as in Martin, it may only appear to be metaphorical.

²⁵ An example of such solutions are productions connected with Marvel Comics, for example Marvel's *The Avengers* (2012) or *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). In these films, comic book superheroes meet – Iron Man, Hulk, Thor, Captain America, Loki, and others, to save the world from destruction.

²⁶ Such heroes appear not only in the aforementioned *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but they also turn up as early as the first novel by Martin – *Dying of the Light*, 1977.

²⁷ At this point special attention should be given to the universe of *Metro*, inspired by the book by D. Glukhovskiy, *Metro 2033*, which formed the basis for stories written by other authors that take place in similar post-apocalyptic communities. Post-apocalyptic and dystopian threads are also noticeable in fantasy literature for young adults.

also remains a borderline system, expressing content generally regarded as irrational which becomes, however, an important, though largely unconscious, element of the transformation of the life beliefs and attitudes of its recipients.

I think that considerations shown confirm the postulated thesis, that the reason of mythological perception of reality is existence of the border in defining the nature of the man and the world. This concept itself introduces the vision of the world separated into 'here' and 'there', 'now' and 'then' in time and space. At the same time, it has its own, hidden side. It is this side that decided about the equilibrium of life, which is the change that paradoxically searches for its own complement in something constant.

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Abstract This research involves an examination of popular ancient Irish mythology and traditional Irish law. This research examined some of the earliest known written records of the Irish epic The Táin alongside the codified early Irish laws, called Brehon laws. This research specifically examined the travel rights of each strata of early Irish society, and whether the rights recorded in the Brehon laws are reflected in the mythological record. The goal of this paper is to show how examination of traditional myths can help scholars to better understand the societies they are studying, as well as...
Introduction. Prehistoric Ireland remains one of the least researched fields in Western European History.