

The Postmodern Mythology of Michel Tournier

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INTRODUCTION

To speak of myth in a world dominated by virtual narcissism, dizzying technological advances and mass media may seem outdated, yet in Michel Tournier's writings, myth continues its evolution and adapts itself to our 21st century, postmodern existence. To say that Michel Tournier is a writer for whom myth plays an integral role has been duly noted by many of the foremost critics of Tournier including Arlette Bouloumié, David Platten, David Gascoigne and William Cloonan. Yet this perspective needs to be widened in order to accommodate and account for the radical social changes that have transformed our society into one which not only follows modernity, but breaks from it, leading us into the postmodern. In the works of Michel Tournier, myth is re-structured in accordance with our postmodern world. The study that follows will examine the influence exerted by postmodernity on the mythical components of his novels and short stories.

In the most general sense, to speak of the postmodern evokes the contemporary era overrun with technological advancements and simulation. Our contemporary society is dominated by consumption. The tremendous influence exerted on life by television and the internet collectively contributes to a critical dormancy of the individual. That is to say, in the postmodern era, man's critical faculties are repressed, favored for a more complacent attitude of consuming rather than producing. Here enters Tournier who uses myth as a medium to not only represent this existence, but to stimulate our psyche through the literary process.

Indeed, Tournier realizes the highest aspirations of the literary process: the representation of a reality. As such, through the examination of the mythical restructuring performed by Tournier, one may understand his works to constitute a discourse. That is to say that his works create a unique depiction of reality. After all, myth and discourse are indissociable as confirmed by Barthes who states: "Puisque le mythe est une parole, tout peut être mythe, qui est justiciable d'un discours."¹ It is through this perspective which emphasizes the narrative traits of this discourse, that we may ascertain the differences between the postmodern and the modern. Accordingly, we may then confer upon a text the characterization of

¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1957), 181.

modern or postmodern.

The distinction between the modern and the postmodern is highly contested amongst many social and literary critics today. It is possible to emphasize the postmodern traits of Tournier's transformation of myth due to his tendency to deconstruct and then semantically reconstruct the key components of the mythical model. Indeed, Tournier's consistent unraveling and pursuant reconstruction of myth may be qualified as postmodern due to the fact that he achieves a playful undermining of established modern ideological predecessors.

As a result of these mythological alterations, we, the reader, emerge from the literary process profoundly altered. We no longer view reality or society in the same way. Tournier's works inspire and call to us to be creatively engaged with ourselves and with the changing world around us. Instead of consuming the image of the individual as represented through the various technological mediums of our era, we instead turn inward and then project our own uniquely individual conception of reality.

Therefore, throughout the course of this study I will emphasize the postmodern characteristics of Tournier's treatment of myth, the playful and deconstructionist propensities of his texts. I do not intend to blankly brand his narrative structural re-workings as postmodern, implying that Tournier's works correspond to a distinct set of criteria which allow for them to be labeled as postmodern. Such a formulaic classification would imply that there exists a certain technique inherent to the postmodern. Such an approach would ironically be a modern all-encompassing and utilitarian trait, which is fiercely resisted by the postmodern. Rather, through the close textual studies of his radical mythological transformations, I attempt to reveal the attributes of his works which reflect the enormous societal transformations which mark the passage from the modern to the postmodern.

If we accept the postmodern as beginning at the moment when the ultimate meta-narrative of man's reason collapses as exemplified by the atrocities of the Second World War, then we may emphasize the elements of Tournier's works which express the deconstruction of the modernist ideals. Robinson Crusoe's failure to master the island in his *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*, Veronica's inability to offer an image of man's salvation in the short story *les Suaires de Véronique*, Abel Tiffauge's complicity in the atrocities of the Second World War in the novel *le Roi des Aulnes*, cumulatively attest to the failure of the totalizing, linear meta-narratives rooted in the Enlightenment. As such, we may aptly speak of the postmodern traits of Tournier's reworking of myth.

His works attest to the postmodern discourse which espouses the impossibility of creating such a universal meta-narrative. Rather, his narratives emphasize the relativity, the individuality of existence and of the capacity of discourse to stimulate the critique of itself through the use of mini-narratives which are inextricably linked to the individual experiences of collective life.

Myth's capacity to represent the historical roots of a society fulfills several functions, the most important of which is its ability to enlighten our understanding of our own contemporary reality. The universal nature of myth grounded in its profoundly archetypal characteristics, allows for its appeal to the psychic makeup of man. Above all, we must understand myth to be a discourse, a system which functions according to very specific traits as elaborated by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. This structural understanding of myth, indeed its semiological makeup, is the starting point of this study which emphasizes that there exist very specific correlations between the structural makeup of his texts and the reality they convey: the postmodern.

The deconstruction, playfulness and semiotic unraveling characteristic of the postmodern which attest to the demise of all-encompassing modern ideologies, take place on a newly supplemented level of signification by Tournier. Tournier takes established mythical models rooted in Christianity, fables and legends of Western Civilization and re-contextualizes them. This restructuring takes places on a highly semiological level, that is to say that Tournier plays with established meanings of myth. He contributes new meanings which radically alter the universal truth of the myth and in fact allow for a more individualized interpretation. As such, his works demarcate the passage into the postmodern which emphasizes mini-narratives, the discourse of the individual rather than the universal truths of the modern era.

The first chapter of this study, "Into the Shadows: the Third Order of Myth," explores in depth not only the dangers of this level of representation as proclaimed by Plato, but the specificity of the narratives. Through the close examination of Tournier's inversion of several core binary pairs, or opposing relationships, such as good/evil which are at the heart of any myth, we will ascertain the distinct semantic traits which attest to and account for the transformation of established myth. We will follow Tournier's structural re-workings from the denotative or first order level, to the second order connotative level and then onwards into the third order level plagued by so many mimetic problems as feared by Plato. It is in this third order that Tournier plays with and deconstructs established mythical meanings through a process of transgression and simulation. The

works of *le Roi des Aulnes* and *Gilles et Jean* will be examined in such a way as to peel back the narrative layers and reveal the realization of Tournier's supreme mission which is to create new mythologies authored by the readers of his works.

The second chapter, "The Transgressive Self of the Shadows," constitutes a case study of one particularly powerful myth: Robinson Crusoe. This chapter emphasizes the transgressive nature, that is to say the novel's capacity to break the boundaries imposed by the modern version of Robinson Crusoe, and to emphasize its highly postmodern nature. Tournier's ability to re-contextualize the eternal myth of Robinson Crusoe in such a way as to eliminate its capacity to refer to a concrete historical referent is suggestive of the postmodern as well. Whereas Defoe's Robinson Crusoe espouses the enlightened ideals of modernity, Tournier's deconstructed Crusoe attests to the failure of reason indicative of the postmodern. This textualization of the myth of Crusoe, its inability to refer to a concrete historical referent, results from playfulness on behalf of Tournier with regards to the narrative elements of the novel. The perverted sexuality, the heterogeneous nature of Robinson Crusoe are accentuated in such a way as to give voice to the inner dynamism of each individual of which the sacred, as understood by Bataille, speaks.

This notion of the sacred, key to Tournier's transgression of established boundaries will be studied within and outside the margins of established Christianity in Chapter 3 entitled: "The Demise of the Sacred." Above all, this chapter explores Tournier's faith as represented, intentionally and unintentionally, in several of his works including *Gaspard*, *Melchior et Balthazar* and *les Suaires de Véronique*. Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead" announces postmodern tendencies towards the dissolution of the ideological narrative of Christianity and this deconstruction will be explored in great detail in hopes to reveal the transformation of religion in the postmodern era. George Bataille's theories of the sacred prove to be essential for it is Bataille who expresses the essence of man's need for God, which is ironically suppressed and stifled by Orthodox Christianity. The narratives of Christological discourses are radically perverted, that is to say redefined outside the established norms, in Tournier's works and offer a new vision of religion that is creationist in that it affirms the individual's capacity to create.

Through a dialectical process in the spirit of the hermeneutic and phenomenological theories of Gadamer and Schleiermacher, the imagination of the reader is engaged which proves to be a remedy to the dangers of the postmodern era. Tournier's emphasis on the immanence, the daily experience of our life, rather than the transcendence falsely

promised by modern ideologies, is postmodern in that it attests to an individualization of the meta-narrative of Christianity. The very act of scripting our own discourse in the face of these altered, third order level mythical models, constitutes the quest for the sacred and the rebirth of the individual's critical and imaginative faculties which is above all, Tournier's greatest use and accomplishment of myth.

The simulation, the *massification* at work around us represent a great danger to our critical faculties yet Tournier's works attest to the power of the literary process which engenders an active participation on the part of the reader. As transformative, inciting, stimulating and transgressive, Tournier's use of myth gains an even greater relevance and force in our postmodern society.



Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington

CHAPTER ONE

INTO THE SHADOWS: THE THIRD ORDER OF MYTH

“for, to write well, a good poet, so they say, must know his subject; otherwise he could not write about it. We must ask whether these people have not been deluded by meeting with artists who can represent appearances, and in contemplating the poets' work have failed to see that it is at the third remove from reality, nothing more than semblances, easy to produce with no knowledge of the truth. Or is there something in what they say? Have the good poets a real mastery of the matters on which the public thinks they discourse so well?”¹

—Plato

Myth and Man

In his *Le Vent Paraclet*, Michel Tournier defines the “mission suprême d'un romancier”² as creating in his writings a mythology that allows for interaction with his readers, who seem to be losing their critical faculties in our contemporary, postmodern world. Tournier views mythology as the means through which he can re-awaken the dormant individual and ultimately allow his readers to participate in the creation of their own myth: “Il devrait y avoir une mythologie, une autre mythologie, féconde et profonde, qui me permette à la fois de trouver le contact du public parce qu'elle l'enrichirait en le faisant rire, trembler et pleurer, en changeant sa façon de sentir, de voir et de penser, au lieu de l'exploiter en lui vendant de la lessive et du shampoing.”³ Tournier's literary aspirations rely on myth as a medium through which social consciousness can be aroused.

Due to the unique composition of myth which is grounded in the collective existence of man, Tournier's re-writings of myth voice the

¹ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), 327.

² Michel Tournier, *Le Vent Paraclet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 83.

³ *Ibid.*, 178.

profound changes that have transpired in our contemporary settings. The structural makeup of myth is described by Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss, for whom myth has a unique capacity to transform established meanings according to the dominant cultural code. As such, Barthes' semiological study of myth reveals levels of representation through which myth creates meaning. To summarize his ideas, myth acts on already established signs, or first order denotative systems. The connotative mythical level takes this denotative signifier and uses it as the initial signified of a second order level of representation that widens the plane of expression according to the particularities of the culture within which it functions. Yet myth does not solely exist on this second order level. Through supplementing a new context, Tournier attributes to this structure a third order level of representation. Just as the second order level re-contextualizes the first-order level, this third order level continues the signifying process into a second connotative order. Through this signifying process, myth emerges profoundly altered and its mimetic capacity, that is to say its ability to represent the societal movements at its core, is transformed as well. There results a problematic of representation which may best be addressed through the lens of Plato's theories of the third order contained in Chapter XXXV of Part V of Book X entitled: "How representation in art is related to truth" where he warns against the dangers of imitation at three times removed from the original form. I clearly do not intend to classify Plato as a writer of the postmodern, rather to extract from his philosophies the highly relevant discussion of the writer's ability to convey a reality which is a core tension of the postmodern era.

In the chapter that follows, the notion of myth will be explored in depth in its many facets: myth as a societal and psychological phenomenon, myth as a discourse similar to language which functions as a meta-language through self-analysis and myth as a semiotic signifying series of three levels as developed by Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Plato. Finally, the distinctive trait of this third order level, which is the importance of the context provided by the reader, will be developed and continued in the second chapter. Indeed, this supplemental level of representation is not only provided by Tournier, but by the psyche of the reader within which the modified myth takes root and is transformed on an individual basis. As a result, we may speak of a decentering which challenges the modern concept of author and allows for a postmodern interpretation of the myth through the creation of individual mythical discourses created by the readers of the narratives of Tournier.

Tournier in his writing grapples with this link between man and myth. His narratives verbalize this dialectic, this exchange between the reader and the text, by introducing previously established mythical characters in new, contemporary contexts such as Abel Tiffauges, the Ogre in the Second World War. The relevance of Tournier's fictions lies in his ability to create a singular narrative containing mythical qualities which is the story of an individual rather than a collectivity. Living in a postmodern milieu, we, the readers, can identify with the specificity of the narrative which has been tuned to the dynamics of our society.

The Universal Nature of Myth

The universality of myth has long been recognized. Lévi-Strauss argues that: "Certains prétendent que chaque société exprime, dans ses mythes, des sentiments fondamentaux tels que l'amour, la haine ou la vengeance, qui sont communs à l'humanité tout entière."⁴ Thus, according to Strauss, myth is a fictitious narrative composed of archetypes. The concept of the archetype is developed on by Carl Jung who defines them as "preexistent instinctual models or patterns of behavior."⁵ Myth, according to Strauss, reconciles the irreconcilable, explains the inexplicable and offers to humanity validation of its existence and comfort in its plight. The function of myth in this sense is very similar to that of a dream, be it an unconscious dream or a conscious dream for its very makeup grapples with the unknown and in turn offers an explanation. Both are symbolic messages which need to be deciphered in order to understand their meaning.

The mentioning of the unconscious brings us right to the question at hand, for is it the unconscious of an individual or the unconscious of all people that is represented in myth? Many theories have been developed, notably by Carl Jung, Lévi-Strauss, Freud and Nietzsche, which emphasize the inextricable link between the unconscious of the individual and the existence of a larger more "collective unconscious" which is shared by all individuals. Carl Jung argues for the existence of a collective unconscious shared by all people which has its roots in the primitive psyche of Man which has been suppressed through years of evolution. Myth, according to Jung, is a "mass dream of the people."⁶ For it is his theory that Man in his

⁴ Claude Levi-strauss, *Anthropologie Structurale* (Paris: Pocket, 1985), 207.

⁵ Carl Jung, *Collected Works of Carl Jung*, Vol. 4 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 302.

⁶ Carl Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious: A Study of the Transformations and Symbolisms of the Libido* (New York: Yard and Company, 1916), 29.

primitive state was ruled by basic instincts belonging to the unconscious. Through evolution and the creation of a modern civilization, Man's psyche was molded by the new social constructs which led to the suppression of these more primitive instincts or archetypes. As a result, this psychic, pre-historic material became the makeup of the unconscious, and resurfaces during dreams. Through dream, Man can revisit the past. Nietzsche was more than aware of this as he states:

In our sleep and in our dreams, we pass through the whole of earlier humanity...The dream carries us back into earlier states of human culture, and affords us a means of understanding it better... To a certain extent the dream is a restorative for the brain, which during the day is called upon to meet the severe demands for trained thought, made by the conditions of a higher civilization.⁷

The parallel between myth and dream relates the makeup of myth and the psychology of Man to each other. Dream and myth function as a cathartic medium that allows Man to grapple with the unknown or the inexpressible by creating a symbolic narrative whose meaning lies masked.

Myth as Fable

This perspective places myth in the realm of the fable, or a fictitious narrative which narrates a series of events providing cause and explanation for the inexplicable. Many of the images found in fables and common folklore belong to the realm of dream or the unconscious, for they are symbols which need to be deciphered as well. Dreams result from the persistent voice of the unconscious, from the fragment of his psyche which is rooted in Man's genesis. Jung in his *Complete Works* develops the theories relating this function of dream to myth. He credits Abraham and his work *Dreams and Myths* as insisting on the dream component of myth as he states: "the myth is a sustained, still remaining fragment from the infantile soul-life of the people, and the dream of the myth is the myth of the individual."⁸ This citation perfectly summarizes this dialectic between the simultaneously collective and individual nature of myth.

For Abraham, the key to understanding this rapport is through fable and the fantastic for according to his theory, myth is a fable for an adult. Myth is a meta-narrative which offers to the adult an all-encompassing story with the symbolic makeup of the unconscious. Just as the child

⁷ Carl Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious: a Study of the Transformations and Symbolisms of the Libido*, 28.

⁸ Ibid., 29.

embraces folklore as truth, adult Man embraces myth as truth. One only need refer to the phenomenon of religion, to the meta-narrative of Jesus Christ who offers mankind salvation from evil, the adult form of a child's folk story. As confirmed by Carl Jung:

One might raise the objection that the mythological inclinations of children are implanted by education. The objection is futile. Has humanity at all ever broken loose from the myths? ...Thus one can indeed withhold from a child the substance of earlier myths but not take from him the need for mythology.⁹

Those familiar with Tournier's writings will quickly observe that Tournier is not only a prolific writer of adult fiction but of children's fairytales as well. Tournier himself realizes the intrinsic link between the adult need for myth and children's need for fairytale. His publications for children include many of the same characteristics of his adult works for they too are reworkings of established myth and folklore: *Pierrot ou les Secrets de la Nuit*, *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage*, are versions of narratives that Tournier has re-written for adults namely: *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* and the several short stories in *Le Coq de Bruyère*.

Myth: the Voice of the Collective Unconscious

Having drawn a parallel between the unconscious of Man and the myths in which he believes, I now turn to the notion of the collective unconscious which proves to be the link between myth and Man. What better product of the collective voice than that of literature? Tournier's genius lies in his ability to use literature to express the mythic components shared by his readers and the members of society. According to Tournier, Man is innately mythological in nature as he states in *Le Vent Paraquet*;

L'homme ne s'arrache à l'animalité que grâce à la mythologie. L'homme n'est qu'un animal mythologique. L'homme ne devient homme, n'acquiert un sexe, un cœur et une imagination que grâce aux bruissements d'histoires, au kaleidoscope d'images qui entourent le petit enfant dès le berceau et l'accompagnent jusqu'au tombeau.¹⁰

Thus Tournier attributes to myth a diachronic aspect in that the myth he creates or re-creates, relates directly to his contemporary readers.

⁹ Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious: a Study of the Transformations and Symbolisms of the Libido*, 30.

¹⁰ Tournier, *Vent Paraquet*, 179.

A story which offered an explanation to the inexplicable, myth “fournit des modèles pour la conduite humaine”¹¹ according to Mircea Eliade. Ironically, the meaning of the term “myth” is currently in direct opposition to the meaning held so dear by primitive people. In today’s world the word myth implies something that is not true, a story that albeit entertaining has no validity or historical certitude. Yet to those who structure their lives around myth, these stories offer the opportunity of re-birth and express the voices of the Gods and super-beings that create their very existence. Myth, recounted orally, allows Man to communicate with these powerful Gods who forged their very body and soul from the nature that surrounds us. It is an infallible and absolute Truth worshiped by the members of society.

This communicative aspect of myth is primordial, for myth: “raconte une histoire sacrée, il relate un événement qui a eu lieu dans le temps primordial, le temps fabuleux des “commencements”¹². Myth allows mortal Man to communicate with the Gods who created his very existence. In recounting the myth, Man is transported to the genesis of his world and in doing so he alters the present by allowing the sacred to again influence his present environment. Therefore, the validity of myth was indisputable for it is “considéré comme une histoire sacrée, et donc une “histoire vraie”, parce qu’il se réfère toujours à des réalités”¹³.

The representation of the reality expressed by myth is achieved through a distinct structural makeup unique to myth. The section that follows will unravel these layers of representation and unveil the mechanisms through which they alter the established mythical meanings as seen in several of Tournier’s works including *Gilles et Jean* and *le Roi des Aulnes*. The semiotic approach to the signifying systems of myth as developed by Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss will be essential to the understanding of the supplemental level of signification by Tournier. The problematic of representation that results from this transformation of myth, that is to say the capacity of myth to represent a collectivity, will be grounded in Plato’s Republic. Plato’s warning of the dangers of this third order level plagued by questions of mimetic truth, highlight the plight of these mythical meta-narratives in the postmodern era in which their established meanings are deconstructed. In this light, Jacques Derrida’s theories of deconstruction will enlighten our study. Through the various theories on third-order representation we can better understand the signifying systems which transform myth into its ultimately postmodern

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 12.

¹² Ibid., 16.

¹³ Ibid., 17

form whose lack of an established meaning allows the reader to play the privileged role of author himself. The reference to the lack of an author emphasizes the enormous influence the cultural code plays in this connotative process which no longer restricts the established meanings of modern mythical discourse.

The Third-Order of Representation: Plato

Let us begin this discussion of third-order representation at the dawn of Western philosophy with the great Plato who already demonstrates a profound understanding of the mimetic problematic inherent to all forms of artistic representation, including painting, poetry and literature. It is from Plato's extensive dialectical discussion of the levels of representation and of the problems each contains, that we may attempt to understand the effect Tournier's semantic re-structuring exerts upon myth. Myth as a form of representation expressed, in this case, in literature, is evident by its capacity to convey a reality. Above all, as we have seen, myth voices a story which is believed to be true. However, the historical evolution which has brought us into the postmodern era, has exerted an enormous influence on not only the structural make-up of myth, but on the contents and on the believers of myth as well. In order to fully grasp and understand the unique nature of representation of this third order of myth, it is Plato who, many centuries ago, offers a profoundly astute synopsis of the dangers of representation in artistic mediums, of which myth as a literary form, is included.

Using the example of a bed, Plato argues for the existence of three distinct levels of existence. The first and purest form is that of "a single essential nature or Form for every set of things."¹⁴ This idealistic world is abstract and non-physical in nature. The second level consists of material forms of the true Form. In following the example of the bed, Plato states "the craftsman, when he makes the beds or tables we use or whatever it may be, has before his mind the Form of one or other of these pieces of furniture. The Form itself is, of course, not the work of any craftsman."¹⁵

This second level is the realm of physical presence in which objects exist attempting to give an "appearance" of the true Form: "My notion is that a painter is a craftsman of that kind. You may say that the things he produces are not real; but there is a sense in which he too does produce a bed."¹⁶ The second level gives way to a third level in which the artist

¹⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, 327.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 326.

attempts to represent the second level of physical reality. As Plato explains:

Now shall we make use of this example to throw light on our question as to the true nature of this artist who represents things? We have here three sorts of bed: one which exists in the nature of things and which, I imagine, we could only describe as a product of divine workmanship; another made by a carpenter; and a third by the painter. So the three kinds of bed belong respectively to the domains of these three: painter, carpenter, and god.¹⁷

The Platonic dialogue emphasizes that this third level is “at the third remove from the essential nature of the thing.”¹⁸ He expands this third level of artistic representation to include tragic poets as well as painters for: “the tragic poet, too, is an artist who represents things; so this will apply to him; he and all other artists are, as it were, third in succession from the throne of truth.”¹⁹ Above all, according to Plato this third order is too far removed from its original form to attain a realistic representation, and as such he condemns it.

To better understand his placement of artists in this third level, one must remember the historical events of the time which influenced Plato’s dialectic. When Plato refers to artists and in particular poets, he is referring to the tragic poets and Homer who authored poems in which morality, human conduct, religion and human nature are discussed. Plato condemns this genre of poetry to the third order removed from reality, due to the inability of the author to truly “know his subject.” Plato argues that tragic poets are incapable of representing truth or knowledge and that their artistic representation is “at third remove from reality, nothing more than semblances, easy to produce with no knowledge of the truth.”²⁰

At the heart of the Platonic dialogue in these matters is the end to which artistic representation lead. His challenging of tragic poetry is in the innate problematic of representing things which the poet cannot possibly truly understand as he states: “If Homer had really possessed the knowledge qualifying him to educate people and make them better men, instead of merely giving us a poetical representation of such matters, would he not have attracted a host of disciples to love and revere him.”²¹ The derogatory tone so subtly evoked by Plato in this quote clearly illustrates his disdain for artistic representations and illustrates why he

¹⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, 327.

¹⁸ Ibid., 327.

¹⁹ Ibid., 327.

²⁰ Ibid., 327.

²¹ Ibid., 327.

banishes poetry from his Ideal state.

Plato emphasizes the weakness of artistic expression for its lack of knowledge of its subject matter. Be it a painter of a bridle who is ignorant of how to make it in the way of a craftsmen or the horseman who understands their use, the poet or painter is ignorant of that which he represents and therefore only represents appearances and not the true Form of the object. For Plato, the poet is a painter who uses words to represent and in so doing merely represents the semblance of the object. Plato blatantly condemns artistic representation for its lack of truth and knowledge and for: “reproducing only what pleases the taste or wins the approval of the ignorant multitude.”²²

Above all, Tournier’s re-writing of myth constitutes an artistic representation that is at three times removed from the original model, similar to the level of the poet who uses words to convey a reality. As such, the third order level he supplements, with the help of the reader, is plagued by questions of viability and of truth. His ability to represent the Form is put in question by Plato’s theories and as such announces a problematic of representation which is a central theme to the postmodern era. Justly so, for the postmodern era is above all plagued by questions of the artist’s ability to faithfully represent a reality. Tournier’s medium of choice, myth, therefore is a form of artistic representation as well and we may aptly discern these different levels of representation.

The Three Levels and Myth

We can distinguish in myth each of these three levels in the following way. The first level which is the world of intellectual and perfect forms constitutes the world of language defined by Ferdinand de Saussure as: “a system of signs that expresses ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing”²³. This is the first level denotative order as described by Roland Barthes in which the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, meaning there is no direct relation between the signifier and the signified.²⁴ Barthes defines a denotative statement as: “a first-order statement: a statement that concerns the literal (first-order) meaning of the words that make up that statement.”²⁵

²² Plato, *Republic*, 328.

²³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 4.

²⁴ It may be helpful to review the definitions offered by Saussure of the signifier and the signified. The signifier refers to a meaningful form. The term signified designates the concept which that form evokes.

²⁵ Barthes, *S/Z*, 50.

The second level as described by Plato, in which we reach the world through our senses, is the level of myth precisely because myth deforms language. This level copies and deforms the ideal world referred to as the first order level of language. This is the level in which the true Form of the first level is crafted into the form of a myth. In the case of myth, myth takes the first level object, that of a story of a man or of woman, or of some act done in ordinary life, and attributes to it a mythical quality. As stated by Barthes in his *Mythologies*, myth constitutes a “vol du langage” in that it uses language to attribute new meaning to the very elements of language. In the case of St. Veronica, attributes to the acts of a woman named Veronica the powerful role of the Savior of Man in that she reveals the sacred image of the face of Christ through her kind act of wiping his face on her veil. In each of these myths, the simple denotative level of language is rendered more complex through the addition of a supplemental connotative signified or context. That is to say that myth takes the act of an ordinary person as a model from which is erected a new context which attributes to this act a superhuman or mythical quality. This signifying operation is continued in the writings of Tournier for he promulgates this mythical slippage as Jacques Derrida refers to it, to a third-order level of representation, in which an additional signifier is added.

Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* summarizes the semiotic process through which myth reaches a third level. As he states:

A vrai dire, la meilleure arme contre le mythe, c'est peut-être le mythifier à son tour, c'est de produire un mythe artificiel... Puisque le mythe vole du langage, pourquoi ne pas voler le mythe? Il suffira pour cela d'en faire lui-même le point de départ d'une troisième chaîne sémiologique, de poser sa signification comme premier terme d'un second mythe.²⁶

Myth is Language

This brings us to the issue at hand: that of unraveling the layers of myth in the writings of Tournier and of ascertaining the chronological relevance to its contemporary milieu which is the postmodern world. It is the premise of this study that myth in the writings of Michel Tournier functions as a language, that is to say a system of signs and mythemes which recombine the pre-existing mythological components into a new system which alters the meaning of the myth. As Lévi-Strauss confirms: “myth is language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech. In order to preserve its specificity we must be able to show that it

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 209.

is both the same thing as language, and also something different from it.”²⁷

Let us begin by showing how myth and language are similar. Considering that both are systems made up of units, be they phonemes or mythemes, what is important is the fact that they are networks of signifying units:

Myth, like the rest of language, is made up of constituent units. These constituent units presuppose the constituent units present in language when analyzed on other levels- namely phonemes, morphemes and sememes....they belong to a higher and more complex order. For this reason we shall call them *gross constituent units*.²⁸

If we want to penetrate this network, one must break down the individual units and identify original meaning, as Lévi-Strauss states: “myth tells the past, the present and the future.” Thus myth is paradoxically dependant on its chronological milieu and universal, for one myth can be understood by people from other societies and other times. Myth’s ability to represent the passage of time may be understood through Saussure’s distinction between synchrony and diachrony. Saussure postulates that language is a system of signs which must be studied as a complete system at any given point in time. The most important part of language is how the components function relative to one another. A synchronic relationship is one where two similar things exist at the same time and form a system. Diachrony is the change in the meaning of words over time through the collective body. Saussure clarifies the meaning of synchrony and diachrony in the following way:

Synchronic linguistics will be concerned with the logical and psychological relations that bind together coexisting terms and form a system in the collective mind of speakers.

Diachronic linguistics, on the contrary, will study relations that bind together successive terms not perceived by the collective mind but substituted for each other without forming a system.²⁹

Given that myth is a sign system similar to language, Saussure’s theories of diachrony and synchrony are tools which allow us to follow the movement of meaning through time. This new meaning given by the myth echoes the societal characteristics which welded its new form. In the case of Michel Tournier’s writings, the postmodern world, with its proliferation

²⁷ Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie Structurale*, 209

²⁸ Ibid., 210

²⁹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 99-100.

of mini-narratives, proves to be the driving force behind the transformation of the myth. It is my intention to examine on a structural level the mythical components of the stories and novels of Tournier in the spirit of Lévi-Strauss. In his “Structural Analysis of Myth”, Lévi-Strauss emphasizes the importance of including in ones analysis all the versions of the myth to find common traits and oppositions, as he states: “The true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations*.”³⁰

This theoretical groundwork provided by Barthes, Plato and Lévi-Strauss will now be applied to a textual reading of several stories of Tournier, including *Gilles et Jean* and *le Roi des Aulnes*. It is only through the application of such a semiological approach that we may truly identify the tri-dimensional signifying structure at work in the signifying process through which Tournier alters myth.

The Third Order of Abel Tiffauges in *le Roi des Aulnes*

After having defined and developed the concept of third order representation as a connotative signifying system, let us turn to the study of the *parole* of Abel Tiffauges to reveal how it functions precisely on this third level. Abel Tiffauges himself is the product of the inversion of several binary pairs and mythical characters which allow Tournier to recombine mythical meanings and to alter their signification. Through the use of inverting established meanings in a positive or negative way, *inversion bénigne* and *inversion maligne*, Tournier connects these meanings in new ways which create a new connotative discourse, that of Abel Tiffauges, the *porteur d'enfants* of the Jungmannen in WWII. Returning to the mythical models from which he fashioned Tiffauges, a structural study of the mythical reworking will reveal the different levels of this mythical transformation.

Tournier himself speaks of his mythological models St. Christopher and Der Erlkönig in his article *Comment j'ai construit le Roi des Aulnes*:

Néanmoins, il y a un autre modèle mythologique que j'ai placé au début, et qui est Saint-Christophe. Le Roi des Aulnes serait le modèle noir, et Saint-Christophe le modèle blanc, le bon. Saint-Christophe était un géant qui vivait auprès d'un fleuve tumultueux... Il prenait sur ses épaules les voyageurs et les faisait passer. Et un jour il a fait passer ainsi l'enfant Jésus. Quel rapport y a-t-il me direz-vous entre le Roi des Aulnes et Saint

³⁰ Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie Structurale*, 219.

Christophe? En ceci qu'ils sont tous les deux les porteurs d'enfants.³¹

It is through the optic of Roland Barthes' distinction between denotation and connotation, based on the definition of Louis Hjelmslev, that we can discern and unravel the particularities of these orders of representation to see how Tournier recombines the mythical models of which he speaks.

The first order level constitutes the denotative level. At this level, the plane of expression consists of words used to describe the acts of Christopher in carrying the young boy across the river on his shoulders. In order to infer symbolic meaning from this statement, we must move to the second-order connotative level which is precisely the level of myth. As Barthes states in his *Elements of Semiology*: "the first system (ERC) becomes the plane of expression, or signifier, of the second system... the first system is then the plane of denotation and the second system (wider than the first) the plane of connotation. We shall therefore say that a connoted system is a system whose plane of expression is itself constituted by a signifying system."³²

Semiology is particularly useful to Barthes in his studies of how myth produces meaning. Barthes reminds us in "Myth Today" that the concept of the sign is crucial in this work and that it is involved in a three-part relationship between the signifier (the word or image) and the signified (the cultural concept) which together create the sign. Myth acts on already established signs, or first order denotative systems. The connotative mythical level takes this global sign, or the combination of the denotative signifier and signified, and uses it as the initial signifier of a second order level of representation which widens the plane of expression according to the cultural code of the time. As Barthes confirms: "myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second."³³

In the case of the construction of the character of Abel Tiffauges, let us begin at the denotative first-order level to define its attributes. The signifier would be the image or the word "Christopher" carrying the young boy on his shoulders. The signified would be: the kind of act of Christopher who carrying the young boy across the river. Together they create the sign: Christopher the strong man who bravely rescues a young boy by carrying him on his shoulders to safety. Thus, at the denotative level, the meaning

³¹ Tournier, "Comment", 88.

³² Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 28.

³³ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 114

is restricted and the plane of expression is limited to the literal meaning of the words. This denotative sign, or global sign as Barthes refers to it, becomes the signifier of a second-order connotative level which contributes a culturally influenced universal meaning. In the case of myth, this process is particularly consistent and effective for it is on this second order level that myth functions.

Continuing our example of the acts of Christopher, myth takes the sign and provides the supplemental signified of a brave man who courageously and selflessly carries the weight of the savior of our world, as a young boy, Jesus Christ, across a river. This connotative signified combines with the denotative sign (signifier), to create Saint Christopher: the Savior of Man, for he was the original porteur of the child Jesus-Christ.

Mythology takes the denotative order and turns it into a second order meaning or what Barthes calls signification. Signification refers to the second-order sign of St. Christopher whose meaning was established by culturally transforming a pre-existing meaning established in the first-order level. Myth is a meta-language: a second-order language which, acting on the existing meaning of the acts of Christopher, generates new meaning. This meta-language of the connotative level speaks about the first-order level and concerns itself precisely with this global sign as Barthes states:

In myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language (or the modes of representation which are assimilated to it) which I shall call the language-object, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system: and myth itself, which I shall call metalanguage, because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first.³⁴

Having established the first-order denotative level which creates the global sign from which is established the connotative second-order level of the myth of St. Christopher, we now turn to the writings of Tournier which use this global sign as the initial signifier of yet another level of representation: the third order.

This “troisième chaîne sémiologique” as Barthes names it, continues the signifying process into a second connotative order which continues the promulgation of meaning in myth. We now enter into the literary domain of *le Roi des Aulnes* created through techniques such as *inversion bénigne* and *maligne* by Michel Tournier. Through recombining the pre-existing elements of the mythical models of St. Christopher and the poem *Der Erbkönig*, Tournier takes the established connotative sign of the second-

³⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 115.

order and transforms it into the signifier of a third order level of signification. He supplies a new signified, one that perverts and alters the established global sign and connotative sign of myth. The connotative sign of St. Christopher, savior of Man and original *porteur d'enfants*, becomes the starting point of this third order. Tournier ascribes a new signified, that of a *porteur d'enfants*, who instead of carrying the young boy to safety, carries him to his death. This signifier and signified of the second connotative level create a new sign: that of Abel Tiffauges the monstrous ogre who derives pleasure from "la phorie" he experiences from lifting young boys and carrying them to their own destruction in Nazi Germany's Jungmannen.

Let us not forget the tremendously dense network of intertextualization at work in the character of Abel Tiffauges who functions explicitly on this third level. Here in the shadows of the second order, St. Christopher and Der Erlkönig combine malignantly to widen the plane of expression of the myth to include more sinister propensities.

Tournier, in so doing, alters the sign of the second system and thus profoundly alters the mythical meaning. This third level speaks of the second level, just as the second-order is a meta-language of the first-order. The third level builds on, and in the case of Abel Tiffauges, contorts the established meaning of his mythical predecessors. Instead of the Savior of the young boy, Tiffauges is the doom of young boys. He derives pleasure, due to the influence of the mythical character Gilles de Rais, from the suffering and death of the young boys. This transformation takes place semiologically in the very structure of the myth in the narratives of Tournier.

Through the creation of this third order Tournier creates an individualized discourse which stands in opposition to the universal sign of the second order. The story of Abel Tiffauges is temporal and individualistic and placed in a particular time: that of WWII. Due to a syntagmatic combination of terms through his technique of malignant and benign inversions along the horizontal axis of the narrative, Tournier creates a mini-narrative. As overtly individualized, this mini-narrative resembles a *parole*. This *parole* stands in contrast to its second-order connotative precedent which is the myth of St. Christopher that universally signifies the salvation of Man. Remembering Saussure's distinction between *parole* and *langue*, *langue* is the whole system of language that precedes and makes speech possible. Grammar, spelling, syntax and punctuation are all elements of *langue*. *Parole* consists of the individual utterances which constitute the use of the *langue* or language.

For the purposes of my study, a *parole* closely resembles a mini-

narrative or an individual utterance that does not attempt to impose a universal truth on the collectivity. As non-utilitarian and non-representative of a collectivity, the *parole* of Tiffauges is postmodern. Tiffauge's mythical predecessor St. Christopher, the *langue* of the connotative, 2nd order level, is modern. It does impose on the collectivity a universal truth through its signification in Christianity, a modern ideology.

What then are the ramifications of such a "parole" whose sinister super being Abel Tiffauges, unravels and perverts the long held mythical belief in St. Christopher and the good he represents to the world? Why do I evoke "into the shadows" when describing the evolution from denotative first-order to connotative second and ultimately third-order representation? To answer these questions we go to the heart of Tournier's "mission suprême d'un romancier" for he challenges each one of us to acknowledge our own complicity in such historical atrocities through the propensity for evil possessed by each individual. As Josette Wisman states in her article: *Une lecture herméneutique du Roi des Aulnes: "le Roi des Aulnes" essaie d'expliquer, pour un public averti et sous le couvert d'un personnage fictif, comment beaucoup ont vu et vécu la deuxième guerre mondiale.*"³⁵

Tournier's third order connotative process succeeds in engendering a new mythology, one which is paradoxically individualistic in nature. It is due to his literary genius and his narrative structuring consisting of inverting long-established binary pairs that he enables the third order level to signify.

Abel Tiffauges the Sinister Supreme Being

In the case of Abel Tiffauges, Tournier's third order of myth alters one of myths founding traits: voicing the Gods and Supreme Beings that formed our world. In Tournier's texts the identities and characteristics of these Supreme Beings are profoundly perverted, as are many other aspects of myth. Using one of his literary techniques known as *inversion maligne*, Tournier inverts the positive connotation attached to these Primordial Gods and instead creates a Supreme Being whose monstrous qualities offer to Man no salvation, no *sacré*, rather a re-creation of hell on earth, known as the Second World War.

No critics to date have succeeded in penetrating the dense mythological network of Tournier's writings. Many critics recognize that Tournier uses *inversion maligne* to re-work the myth, such as Martin

³⁵ Josette Wisman, "Une lecture herméneutique du Roi des Aulnes." *Romanic Review* 80 (1989): 597.

Roberts in his work entitled *Michel Tournier: Bricolage and Cultural Mythology* in which he recognizes that “Inversion is more than just a theme in Tournier’s fiction....it is also a central mechanism in the thematic and narrative structure of the novels themselves.”³⁶ Yet none fully recognize how true to the very form of myth his writings are. In particular, certain traits of Tournier’s mythology perfectly echo the myths of primitive societies. The trait that is of concern to us at this point is the notion of the God or Supreme Being who created our world in the Primordial time. In the context of *Le Roi des Aulnes* the main character Abel Tiffauges proves to be the Supreme Being who is responsible for our world, a proclamation which has profound historical implications to be explored in this section.

Mircea Eliade in his *Aspects du Mythe* explores in depth the role of the original, divine creator who forged our world in his vision. This capacity of myth offered to primitive Man a justification for his existence:

un “primitif” pourrait se dire: je suis tel que je suis aujourd’hui parce qu’une série d’événements ont eu lieu avant moi. Seulement, il doit immédiatement ajouter: des événements qui se sont passés dans les temps mythiques, qui, par conséquent, constituent une histoire sacrée, parce que les personnes du drame ne sont pas des humains, mais des Etres Surnaturels”³⁷

This prevalence placed on the author of our genesis proves to be essential to the relevance of Tournier’s writings to the world in which it is practiced, that is, ours. Myth explains to Man how his world came into being and ultimately who he is as Eliade describes in his *Aspects du Mythe*:

En effet, les mythes relatent non seulement l’origine du Monde, des animaux, des plantes et de l’homme, mais aussi tous les événements primordiaux à la suite desquels l’homme est devenu ce qu’il est aujourd’hui, c’est à dire un être mortel, sexué, organisé en société, obligé de travailler pour vivre, et travailler selon certaines règles. Si le Monde existe, si l’homme existe, c’est parce que les Etres Surnaturels ont déployé une activité créatrice aux “commencements.”³⁸

The actions of the Supreme Beings that created Man’s world are told and repeated orally through myth, an act which allows Man to revisit this

³⁶ Martin Roberts, *Michel Tournier: Bricolage and Cultural Mythology* (Saratoga: ANMA Libri, 1994), 85.

³⁷ Eliade, *Aspects du Mythe*, 25.

³⁸ Ibid., 23.

Primordial time and to exist again in a new chronological milieu: the contemporary world. Thus, key to understanding myth is the understanding of its present and of its past, of analyzing the stories of myth and the histories that lie within. Using this approach, the role of Abel Tiffauges becomes increasingly clear and powerfully underestimated in modern literary criticism.

Vladimir Turmonov in his article: *John and Abel in Michel Tournier's le Roi des Aulnes* recognizes Abel Tiffauges as a messenger as well, but in his opinion that of an apocalyptic vision:

We find a similar situation in *Le Roi des Aulnes* where Tiffauges does not claim to access the signs on his own. As Gascoigne points out, "[John of Patmos] is giving an account of the genesis of his own writing, just as Tiffauges did at the start of his *Ecrits sinistres*, and in so doing both authors claim supernatural authority"³⁹

John J. Collins offers further insight into the role of Tiffauges as author or creator: "the apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world"⁴⁰ This otherworldly being Collins speaks of is Tiffauges who communicates his mythical vision in his *Ecrits Sinistres*.

Thus Vladimir and Collins share the view of Tiffauges as an author or a messenger of a divine message, yet they do not emphasize the importance played by myth. For his part, Vladimir emphasizes the apocalyptic nature of *Le Roi des Aulnes* which is recounted by Tiffauges. For my part, I view Tiffauges as the author of an apocalyptic story to be true, for the etymology of the word apocalypse means "revelation" or to reveal. Yet I emphasize that Tiffauges is the messenger of a mythical reality, that is to say expressive of the narratives at the heart of our collective existence which, in this case, represent the worst of Man. It is in his *Ecrits Sinistres*, in the very first page of the novel *Le Roi des Aulnes*, that Tiffauges proclaims his role as creator of our world:

Or moi, j'étais là déjà, il y a mille ans, il y a cent mille ans. Quand la terre n'était encore qu'une boule de feu tournoyant dans un ciel d'hélium, l'âme

³⁹ Vladimir Turmanov, "John and Abel in Michel Tournier's *le Roi des Aulnes*," *The Romanic Review* 90.3 (1999): 417.

⁴⁰ John J Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*. (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 4.