# Antiquity in Popular Literature and Culture

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Edited by

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# INTRODUCTION

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> While antiquity exists for us, we, for antiquity, do not. We never did, and we never will. This rather peculiar state of affairs makes our take on antiquity somewhat invalid….We look at antiquity as if out of nowhere.

With these arresting words Nobel Prize laureate Joseph Brodsky began his 1994 essay "Homage to Marcus Aurelius" (Brodsky 1995: 267). The point Brodsky made in his first two sentences is undeniably true, but it is not something that classical scholars and teachers or students of Greece and Rome spend much if any time contemplating. There may well be rather a peculiar state of affairs in regard to our interest in antiquity, which is of a dual nature. It concerns, first, antiquity itself and for its own sake: its history, sciences, philosophy, literature, art, and culture. Secondly, it concerns the continuing importance of antiquity for civilization ever since the fall of Rome or, if you prefer the bigger picture, the fall of Byzantium. But is it correct to say that our take on the past is invalid, even if only somewhat invalid, and, by extension, incorrect or false? Do we really look at antiquity as if from nowhere or as if we had no *terra firma* under our feet? To paraphrase Archimedes, have we no firm place to stand on, even if we do not intend to move the earth, or even antiquity, from where we are? Do we not instead have for our aides or guides reliable predecessors: countless generations of scholars extending as far back as Aristarchus or the Presocratics, to name only a couple of obvious examples? In fact, we do. (Pfeiffer 1968 and Reynolds and Wilson 2013 are classic works on this subject.) We might not even be far wrong if we considered Homer one of the first archaeologists (in the term's literal meaning) of antiquity, if there actually was an individual Homer of the kind the Greeks and Romans believed in. The multi-volume series of publications titled *Archaeologia Homerica* practically tells us so, as do all manner of commentators on the Homeric epics. And, to call on Archimedes the scientist once again for an analogy, is not the entire history of classical and postclassical scholarship and all the fields it touches a kind of intellectual screw, a means with

which we can raise the level of our understanding of antiquity's greatness and complexity and, in the process, make our take on antiquity or at least on its continuing influence much less invalid and even worthwhile? Only Beckmessers (but not Brodsky, I am certain) are likely to answer with a resounding *No!* Or are we facing here a kind of scholarly revival of the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns? (On this now Norman 2011.) If we are, this would hardly be the place to continue the debate. But I believe that this *is* the place to remind ourselves of what one of the Ancients who may well have been a Modern to his contemporaries and to himself, at least to a certain degree, said on this subject about two millennia ago.

In Horace's *Epistles* 2.1, an open letter addressed to Emperor Augustus, we find traces of a debate about the Ancients, the Greeks, and their Modernizers, the Romans. (I have adduced Horace's eloquent and sensible perspective on the old and the new in different but not unrelated contexts : Winkler 2009: 68-69 and 2010: 161-162 and 175-176.) Horace writes that those who disdain recent adaptations of works by revered and usually long-dead authors, especially Homer, and who judge nothing to be comparable to the old masters are in serious error. Their judgment is wrong because it is no more than a prejudice against anything modern. "I find it offensive," says Horace, "when something is criticized...merely because it is new." Blind adherence to everything ancient and quick condemnation of everything modern denies the great authors of the past one of their most important achievements, which is the creation of a never-ending tradition of influence. As Horace points out: "If the Greeks had hated anything new as much as we do now, what would now be old?" (Horace, *Epistles* 2.1.76-78 and 90-91; my translations). Horace previously observed in this letter that the earliest works of the Greeks are the greatest of all, so the attitude with which he takes issue, had it prevailed, would have stopped any literary creativity since the time of Homer dead in its tracks.

That such was not the case is due to two main factors. One is the flexibility and adaptability of myth, the earliest and perhaps greatest source of subject matter in the ancient literary and visual arts. The other is the Greek and Roman view of artistic creativity, which is best described in the Latin terms *imitatio* and *aemulatio*. Poets' creative imitation of, and intellectual competition with, their predecessors ensure the presence of the Ancients among the Moderns without any anxiety of influence. (I borrow this well-known phrase from Bloom 1997.) As Manilius, another Augustan poet, said about Homer: "Posterity has led all the springs flowing from his [Homer's] mouth into its own poetry and so has dared to distribute [one] stream into [many, if smaller] clear rivers" (Manilius,

*Astronomica* 2.8-10; my translation). We may compare another image drawn from the natural world that has been adduced by one of our own contemporaries. Wolfgang Petersen, director in 2004 of the Hollywood epic *Troy*, said about Homer, the *Iliad*, and its tradition: "If there is something like a tree of storytelling, on which each book, each film, is a tiny leaf, then Homer is its trunk" (Kniebe 2004, my translation; on the film: Winkler [ed.] 2007 and 2015).

Horace was outspoken in his attack on the self-appointed keepers of the classical flame. In his *Epistle* he reveals a decidedly modern outlook. But Horace was not in the least disdainful of the Ancients and did not deny them their high standing. Virtually all his works, most famously the *Odes*, illustrate how elegantly Horace balanced the old and the new. In this he could be our model, pointing us to an open-minded appreciation of both. Yes, antiquity does exist for us. Nor, *pace* Brodsky, do we look at it quite as if from nowhere. Even so, how we see it depends at least as much on ourselves as it does on the Ancients. Nor is what we say about antiquity ever the last word. *Panta rhei*: Heraclitus' famous apothegm applies to the works of scholars in any field and of any era just as well. Their endeavors might be – *sit venia lusui* – invalid, but they are not entirely invalid. Their readers, of course, will have the last word on the degree to which they are or are not.

*Spiritus flat ubi vult academicus*. It seems evident that the study of antiquity and the study of antiquity's persistence will continue to dare to be distributed *ubique terrarum*. This pleasing circumstance was exemplified in January, 2014, at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, an institution named after Poland's influential nineteenth-century epic and lyric poet. As part of an ongoing series of such academic meetings, the university hosted the Seventh International Conference on Fantasy and Wonder (FANCUD 7 to the cognoscenti). Its topic was *Antiquity in Popular Literature and Culture*. Several of the papers given in Poznań appear in this volume in revised form. They demonstrate – of course not exhaustively; no one volume could – the continuing presence of the past or, to put it slightly differently, the importance of the past in the present and, by extension, for the future. The variety of topics to be encountered in these pages is but one illustration of what Horace and Manilius, two representative voices from the past, and Brodsky and Petersen, two exemplars from the present, will have had in mind.

*Domine, quo vadis?* St. Peter's question to Jesus and the latter's reply (*venio iterum crucifigi*) during Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians in 64 A.D. have been well known since the late nineteenth century through the title of Poland's most famous novel set in antiquity, Henryk

Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* (1895). Its eventual adaptations to the screen – three times in Italy (1912, 1925, 1985), once in the U.S. (1951), and once in Poland itself (2001) – have kept the legend of Peter's encounter with Jesus alive even more than the novel could have done. (Zwierlein 2010 examines the textual variants, e.g. *quo venis* for *quo vadis*, in the sources. On the films: Scodel and Bettenworth 2009.) So it may be fitting for me to conclude with a rhetorical question and answer that adapt the original exchange to the occasion of the Poznań conference from the temporal perspective of its participants:

ANTIQVITATIS FAVTORES, QVO VADITIS?

VENIMVS ITERVM
EXPLICARE MAGNIQVE AESTIMARE
NONNVLLAS RES GRAECAS ET ROMANAS
IN VRBE POSNANIA
ANNO MMDCCLXVII A.V.C.
FELICITER

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# PART I:

# ANTIQUITY IN POPULAR LITERATURE

# ANTIQUITY IS NOW: MODERN STRANDS OF THE MYTHICAL METHOD IN CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT SPECULATIVE FICTION

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**Abstract**: This chapter looks at the most common uses of the trope of antiquity in modern YA fantasy and science fiction and theorizes them as strands of what T.S. Eliot once dubbed as "the mythical method." It identifies two strategies used by authors of speculative fiction – ancient locations and ancient presence – and examines one framing device representative of each strategy: the moving center and the ancient wisdom. The analysis draws on examples of literary and filmic narratives. It suggests why the "Antiquity is Now" concept has become central to many works of contemporary speculative fiction and seeks to account for its continuing appeal to the 21st century audience.

The resilience of myth and mythic structures in literature has been the delight of readers and a despair of commentators. From Church fathers and their medieval successors through Enlightenment philosophers and their 20th century heirs, the big question has been why stories reflecting beliefs that died out millennia ago continue to appeal to modern readers[1]. How is it that something that can mean many things at the same time (Honko 1984: 41ff) has provided a repository of ideas on which the European nations have built much of their own cultural lores and conceptual structures? The rise of anthropology, folkloristics, fairy tale studies, linguistics and psychology – all of them products of the positivistic 19th century – were informed, among others, by the desire to explain how myths have exercised an unbroken authority over the European imagination and what should replace them in a more rational age.

Among the many delightful problems with myth, one that has especially frustrated scholars has been that myth makes something ancient and bizarre appear modern and relevant. In the words of Brian Attebery, myth's elaborations make "ancient and powerful symbolic structures available to modern readers" (Attebery 2014: 5). This notion

offends the Enlightenment's most cherished conviction about the hegemony of reason and questions a conceptual system built upon it, in which myth is synonymous with what is ancient, irrational, and ought to be long dead[2]. Yet, instead of becoming obsolete, myth has remained a persistent and pervasive force in the modern age. In the past century, boosted by the explosion of speculative fiction, the impact of myth has actually grown.

Although literary uses of myth are always appropriations, one possible explanation for the currency of myth in modern literature can be found in T.S. Eliot's 1923 review of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In this often-quoted piece Eliot identified "the mythical method" as a way to create "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity." The benefit of this method, Eliot asserted, is that authors who build on myth are able to order, shape and give significance "to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." In other words, they can make the modern world "possible for art" (Eliot 1975: 177). To Eliot and his contemporaries who saw the collective suicide of the West as it putrefied in the trenches of WWI, the mythical method was a means to reinvent the novel form. A sort of "ancient stay against the present chaos," the mythical method soon became widely adopted in fantasy and evolved into what can best be described today as

> a publishing author's practice of taking an ancient or received myth, legend, or traditional, archetypal, or historical story … as the skeleton or organizing principle or scaffold or template or infrastructure or pentimento for a narrative or plot that is both ostensibly self-standing and in some sense 'modern,' or more contemporary, and yet can be mapped onto a kind of archaeological other original. (Nohrnberg 2011: 21)

The archeological original that Nohrnberg refers to here is an anchoring in antiquity; an anchoring that in narrative fiction is possible only through reference to elements from stories – characters, settings, plotlines and motifs – that are recognized for their ancient provenance. Thus the question Eliot's mythical method begs – what, really, is myth? – is also a question that can be asked about antiquity.

The answer is far from simple. Just as myth is an open-ended category, impossible to be contained in an unequivocal definition, so too antiquity is a stretchable construct. When seen through the European lens, antiquity refers primarily to the Greek and Roman period, but that is not the case in other contexts. For example, editors of the journal *American Antiquity*, published by the Society for American Archeology, identify antiquity as a period in history of North America rather than Europe. Including essays

ranging from those on Clovis bison hunting to those on removal of the Potawatomi of northern Indiana in the first decades of the 19th century, this antiquity is a broad term spanning the entire history of North America that predates any living human's memory. There is also no reason why antiquity should be reserved as a privileged term to describe only European or North American past; each culture and continent boasts of its own antiquity. The term is obviously a politically charged one, in history and literature alike. In African-American fiction, for instance, antiquity functions at the same time as the idea of pre-slavery idyllic life in Africa and the dark time of slavery until the Civil War. In much Slavic literature, by contrast, the default antiquity tends to refer to the pre-Christian world of tribes and beliefs that Christianity wiped out. Without splitting hairs, a modest definition of antiquity for this chapter is a period of existence and the cultural products of a historical civilization that is 1) removed from ours by some radical discontinuity – like white-European conquest of the indigenous Native American cultures – but is at the same time 2) seen as foundational by a particular ethnic, cultural or national group in a way Greece and Rome have been for the Euro-American civilization. Antiquity is clearly a stretchable term in both history and literary fiction.

The definition aside, perhaps just as relevant is the question why antiquity should matter. A number of theories have been put forth to explain the meaning of the supposedly ancient past. Eliot's contention, for example, assumes that antiquity – whose most tangible trace is myth – was a time of order, unity, beauty, creativity or other qualities that are distinctly lacking in modern anomic culture. Antiquity matters for Eliot, because he sees the concept as a synecdoche of a human life making sense. Other answers were offered too: for 19th century evolutionary-comparativist anthropologists from Tylor to Frazer antiquity mattered because it was a childhood of humanity and should be studied to reconstruct the earliest stages of human life and culture[3]. This Enlightenment premise was also shared by Freud who believed that the history of humanity follows a uniform development everywhere from savagery to civilization[4]. Relics of primitive belief and custom to be found in myths and folklore, he thought, shed light not just on the evolution of culture but of consciousness too.

Alternative theories that emerged in reaction to Freud's views did not question that antiquity is the record of human psychological make-up; they merely questioned the content of that hidden component. Comparative mythographers and religious scholars such as Cassirer and Eliade, depth psychologists such as Jung and Hillman, as well as myth critics from Campbell through Frye all saw myth not as something humans ought to grow away from but as something to grow toward[5]. Understanding myth,

living myth, or perhaps even recreating myth through art became the highest aspiration, a sign of maturity rather than infantile arrested development, in some cases – a lifeboat for crossing life's stormy waters. This was nowhere more evident than in the field of fantasy where myth and the antiquity it spoke of became the subject of Romantic admiration.

Although both Jung and Freud shared a focus on how ancient patterns shape modern human's behavior, perhaps the most antiquity-centered ethno-psychological theory to date has been the hypothesis of collective amnesia put forth by Immanuel Velikovsky. Much less known but even more widely contested than the theory of primordial urges proposed by Freud, Velikovsky's hypothesis also deals with what has been suppressed, even though he identifies the suppressed differently. "Freud was nearly correct in his diagnosis when he wrote that mankind lives in a state of delusion," Velikovsky declares, "but he was unable to define the etiology [… and] the nature of the traumatic experience" (Velikovsky 1982: 33). According to Velikovsky, the great trauma of humanity is not the suppressed desire of patricide and incest, but the suppressed trauma of repeated near-extinctions of the human race as a result of great cosmic catastrophes. In a series of best-selling books – starting from *Worlds in Collision* (1950) through his magnum opus, the posthumous *Mankind in Amnesia* (1982) – the Russian-born omnibus scholar collected impressive evidence, based largely on comparative mythology, to suggest that our planet, within the historical memory of human societies, has been subject to numerous cosmic disasters on a global scale. Supposedly recorded by all ancient civilizations as "wars in the celestial sphere" (Velikovsky 1950: vii), these cosmic events "were either accompanied or caused by shifting of the terrestrial axis or by a disturbance of the diurnal and annual motions of the earth" (Velikovsky 1955: 263-4), which led to hurricanes, rain of meteorites, floods and earthquakes. Time and again, these upheavals almost wiped out the entire human race.

Provocative yet circumstantial and lacking hard evidence,Velikovsky's mytho-historical cosmology has been rejected by the scientific community[6]. Nevertheless, in the light of such happenings as the still unexplained Tunguska event or the Chelabynsk meteor that crashed into Russia in February 2013, it is not unthinkable that similar events did happen in the past, even if on a smaller scale than Velikovsky suggests. Specific dates and scale aside, Velikovsky's theory is perhaps most interesting when he considers to what extent near-extinction events might have become part of the human unconscious. Here, at least, he speaks not as an amateur astronomer or an armchair world historian, but as a trained

professional with long clinical experience. Already in *Worlds in Collision* Velikovsky claimed that

> [t]he memory of the cataclysms was erased, not because of lack of written traditions, but because of some characteristic process that later caused entire nations, together with their literate men, to read into these traditions allegories or metaphors where actually cosmic disturbances were clearly described. (Velikovsky 1950: 302)

This insight grew into his last book, *Mankind in Amnesia*. Taking as a starting point the claim that all modern humans are "descendants of the survivors, themselves descendants of survivors" (Velikovsky 1955: 264), Velikovsky claims that the dark anxiety that plagues humans is the fear of a cosmic catastrophe. This fear – whose manifestations range from Celts' anxiety that the sky would collapse on their heads to stories about the end of the world found in all world religions – has analogs in two common phenomena encountered in psychiatry. One is partial amnesia, the erasure of painful experiences from conscious memory. The other is psychological scotoma: an inability of the afflicted individual to recognize certain phenomena or situations though they may be obvious to other persons (Velikovsky 1982: 10). Velikovsky applies these reactions to all humanity and argues that the traumatic memory of past catastrophes – what today would be treated as post-traumatic stress disorder – has been imprinted in the human collective mind, in which it was suppressed and pushed into the darkest recesses of the unconscious. Because any trauma produces two related reactions – endeavors to remember or relive it and endeavors to forget and erase it – Velikovsky's mankind in amnesia is caught up in a conflict it cannot resolve. The "repetition compulsion" to relieve the terror and anguish associated with near-extinction explains, according to Velikovsky, some of the human propensity to violence, factual or imagined. The denial reaction, in turn, offers a new perspective on the post-Enlightenment hostility to myth and on the evolution of Western science, whose development Velikovsky sees as "a codification of the oblivion" (43). From Aristotle's cosmology based on "astronomical uniformitaranism" (52) and designed to eliminate the possibility of planetary near-collisions in a rational and predictably-moving universe through Darwin's evolutionism based on ascribing all changes in the natural world to a very slow evolution over millions of years and predicated on the assumption about the peaceful history of the Earth, much of Western science, as Velikovsky sees it, appears as a large-scale attempt to reassure humanity that the universe is rational and predictable, that the planet we live on is not an accident-prone vessel, and that cosmic

catastrophes are so improbable that they do not need to be considered. If Velikovsky were alive, he might also see the current denial of the ongoing environmental derailing as part of the same post-traumatic inhibition.

How does all this relate to contemporary speculative fiction in general and young adult fantasy in particular? The connection, I believe, is profound and operates on many levels. For one thing, like Freud, Velikovsky claimed that suppressed memories of trauma lead individuals and groups toward a repetition or recreation of the traumatic experience. If so, might this be one reason behind the rise of apocalyptic imagination that permeates so much of modern fantasy and science fiction? Tolkien was certainly not the only author of speculative fiction who stressed that he always had "a sense of recording what was already 'there,' somewhere; not of 'inventing' " (Tolkien 2000: 145). Middle-Earth, he claimed, was "not an imaginary world" (239).

Even if one rules out the possibility of a collective suppressed trauma, another connection between antiquity and speculative fiction is that the latter is an attempt to speak for the former. Virtually all psychological theories proposed in the 20th century share a fear or hope that antiquity is far from gone. Whereas genetics sees human individuals as carriers of ancient genetic codes, psychology asserts that individuals and societies alike are motivated by invisible psychological drives rooted in archaic situations. Antiquity thus trickles down to the present not just through our genes but also through the human unconscious. It comes alive through our artistic creations, especially those that recreate mythic stories. That is why, according to Attebery, the history of literary fantasy is

> a history of mythopoiesis, modern myth-making – though fantasy 'makes' myth only in the sense that a traditional oral performer makes the story she tells: not inventing but recreating that which has always existed only in performance, in the present" (Attebery 2014: 4).

Both levels are mutually reinforcing and activate experiences in the other sphere: the unconscious in myth, and myth in the unconscious. For psychologists who wrote about the unconscious – often using myths to support their cases – as well as for scholars who wrote about myth and literature, the antiquity that modern people confront in their own souls and in art is thus a tangible presence that requires attention. In other words, antiquity, in its remembered and forgotten aspects, is an important component of the present. It has implications both for the creative process and for the reception of literature, especially speculative fiction.

Like psychology, speculative fiction strikes at the "control belief" foundational to modern science, and does so especially in its questioning

of the narrow confines of the real. By focusing on the possible or thinkable, science fiction, fantasy and other speculative genres create mental spaces where the reader is free to consider alternative ways of seeing the world, remembering it, or interacting with it. Although not all speculative fiction is explicitly based on myth, most of its genres use the mythical method to achieve their effects and create worlds where elements of the past, present and future coexist seamlessly. In allowing this particular confluence, speculative fiction plays a unique role as a modern mouthpiece of myth. Although it does not tell timeless stories, speculative fiction offers narratives that invite the reader to consider the "antiquity is now" concept as a real possibility.

There are at least three general types of antiquity particularization in speculative fiction, two of which may be seen as strands of the mythical method. The first strategy, which I will not discuss here, is setting the story in historical or imagined antiquity that has no relation to the reader's present. Nancy Farmer's the Saxon Saga – a mythopoeic fantasy trilogy set eighth century Anglo-Saxon England, Celtic Scotland, and Viking Scandinavia – and Harry Harrison's West of Eden series – an alternative history science fiction set in the late stone age America, in which the dominant intelligent species are dinosaur-evolved lizards – are two of the many examples for this category of historical and para-historical speculative fiction.

The other two strategies of antiquity particularization can be found in fiction whose settings may be contemporary or historical, but where antiquity is embedded in the narrative so as to create a link between the past and the present. The first strategy, which I propose to call *ancient locations*, is to devise certain places where antiquity – seen as a kind of eternal reality – still exists, although it may be inaccessible except only by supernatural means. This includes Rivendell, Narnia, alternative or parallel worlds, worlds of gods, ghosts, and spiritual/nonmaterial presences. The other strategy, perhaps best captured by the phrase *ancient presence*, involves awakening modern characters to the realization that aspects of antiquity infiltrate their lives in the present. Conversing with ghosts in dreams or visions, fulfilling one's destiny through an act that was foretold in the past, time traveling to fix the present, discovering one's legacy, ancient forgotten wisdom, or places of power are all motifs that support this stepping outside of time. These two strategies are not exclusive and are often used simultaneously. Each is a broad pattern with so many variations that even a modest attempt to review them would burst the frame of a study much larger than this one. In the remaining part of this

chapter I thus focus on two selected framing devices representative of each strategy: the moving center and ancient wisdom.

The moving center is perhaps the most commonly encountered motif in the ancient locations strategy. In classic works of fantasy such as Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, or Alexander's The Chronicles of Prydain the moving center was usually one or another variation on the theme of thinning: the passing away of a higher and more intense reality and the loss of old richness. As the Third Age draws to a close, elves depart the Middle-earth and magic fades, leaving frail humans in charge and without supernatural help. Magical objects lose their power or are destroyed; magical places disappear or are sealed off; magical beings depart to another reality. The moving center in this traditional version is a representation of a fading Golden Age. More recent fantasy, however, has abandoned thinning. Instead, it has moved toward a conceptualization of the moving center as a secret dimension of the present: something that makes contemporary reality richer rather than diminished.

A good example of the use of this framing device is Rick Riordan's the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series. Starting with *The Lightning Thief* (2005), Riordan's series outlines the contemporary United States as an arena of conflict of ancient Greek gods, heroes, and titans. In the world of Percy Jackson, contemporary characters can literally encounter Poseidon strolling down the beach in New Jersey, Hades cruising through California, and Dionysus who happens to run a summer camp in upstate New York. All these gods did not simply immigrate to America. As the readers learn from Percy's Latin teacher Mr. Brunner – in fact, the satyr Chiron – it is the ancient and immortal center represented by these gods that has moved to America. "What you call 'Western civilization'," Chiron explains,

> Do you think it's just an abstract concept? No, it's a living force. A collective consciousness that has burned bright for thousands of years. The gods are part of it. You might even say they are the source of it, or at least, they are tied so tightly to it that they couldn't possibly fade, not unless all of Western Civilization was obliterated. The fire started in Greece. Then, […] the heart of the fire moved to Rome, and so did the gods. […] They spent several centuries in England. […] And, yes, Percy, of course they are now in your United States. […] Like it or not […] America is now the heart of the flame. It is the great power of the West. And so Olympus is here. And we are here. (Riordan 2005: 72-3)

In Riordan's highly Eurocentric series, the moving center concept achieves more than just a recreation of the late 19th century American

claim that the United States is the new Rome of the world. By linking immortal Greek gods, "great beings that control the forces of nature and human endeavors" (67), with the metaphor of a traveling flame of Western civilization, it creates a connection between classical antiquity and contemporaneity as filtered through the eyes of a modern American teenage protagonist. Throughout the series Percy and his friends encounter a multiplicity of Greek gods, goddesses, supernatural creatures, monsters, and powers. All of them are both ancient and strikingly modern. For example, although Mount Olympus does look like an ancient Greek city, it is now located in New York, on the 600th floor of the Empire State Building and has a sleek modern zing to it. Its residents are ancient yet modern, taking advantage of everything offered by the past epochs but also by contemporary technology. Thus, Hades' palace guards include skeletons wearing Greek armor as well as Vietnam-era U.S. Marine uniforms; they are skeletons "from every time period and nation in Western civilization" (311). At the same time, the Kingdom of the dead is run efficiently through several departments, Mount Olympus has Hephaestus-TV, its streets teem with hawkers and flashy stores, and Zeus wears a dark blue pinstriped suit.

Antiquity in the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series is a world parallel to the mundane reality of the early 21st century and inaccessible to most mortals. Nevertheless it is real, impacts the mortal world, and exists no matter whether people believe in these gods or not (68). The Greek mythology used as the underpinning of the series has no religious component, but instead is conceptualized through power. Ancient gods reside where the center of power is.

This trope informs not just literary fiction but a number of recent blockbuster movies: fantasy and science fiction like *Thor* and *The Avengers*, as well as contemporary realistic fiction. For example, in the political thriller *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013), Olympus is a code name for the White House, which in turn is a synecdoche for the center of the Western civilization. Although there are no literal gods involved, the potential fall of the White House is projected to entail a thermonuclear annihilation of the United States and with it, in a domino effect, a global war across the planet that would likely end Western civilization. The links between the White House as the center or modern Olympus and Greek mythology are reinforced on multiple levels. For example, the fail-safe deactivation system of nuclear warheads is called Cerberus. The ultimate threat in the movie is that if the terrorists take over Cerberus, they would turn it from being a guardian of world peace to a dog of war.. When in the concluding sequence of the movie the President declares, "Our foe did not

come only to destroy our things or our people. They came to desecrate a way of life. To foul our beliefs, trample our freedom. And in this not only did they fail. They granted us the greatest gift: a chance at our rebirth. We will rise, renewed, stronger, and united. This is our time. Our chance to get back to the best of who we are" (np), the underlying assumption is that Olympus can never fail. It will not, the film proclaims, because it stands for values that transcend time and are the lifeblood of Western civilization.

The moving center motif does not need to be triumphalistic or Caucasian, though. Unlike in Riordan's series, it can come with a multicultural slant. Such is the case, for example, in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001). While Riordan's world is a playground for a handful of Greek gods who are as powerful now as they used to be millennia ago, Gaiman's picture is more complex. On the one hand it expands the trope of the moving center to encompass all religions and cultural traditions of the world. On the other, while it still accords America a status of a special place, the narrative makes it clear that "the center is not a stable place for anybody" (Gaiman 2001: 342). Gods rise and fade as human beliefs change and there is nothing special about Greek gods. Thus Gaiman's mythological and religious America is a land littered with forgotten gods who arrived in the New World with immigrants from different cultures and religions, many of them long before Columbus. "This country has been Grand Central for ten thousand years or more," explains Mr. Ibis – the Egyptian god Thoth. "The folk who brought me here came up the Mississippi [… t]hree thousand five hundred and thirty years ago" (153). Although all these gods can still be found in America, they coexist uneasily with one another and grow weaker as the belief in them fades from human memory. Some gods adapt to the new situation: Horus "spends all his time as a hawk, eat[ing] roadkill" (162), Thoth and Anubis live undercover in Cairo, Illinois, running a funeral parlor, and the Queen of Sheba works as a prostitute in Las Vegas. These gods have accepted the inevitability of change and their eventual demise – as did good-hearted Thor who blew off his head in Philadelphia in 1932. Others, like the Norse god of knowledge and wisdom Odin, who is incarnated in the body of a cynical con man Mr. Wednesday, travel across America to rally the old gods to one final stand. Like Mr. Nancy – the African god Anansi – they believe that the forgetting should not have happened and that they must fight for recognition and worship. "Our kind of people," muses Mr. Nancy,

> we are […] *exclusive*. We're not social. Not even me. Not even Bacchus. Not for long. We walk by ourselves or we stay in our little groups. We do not play well with others. We like to be adored and respected and

> worshipped […]. We like to be big. Now, in these shabby days, we are small. (342)

Throughout *American Gods* Mr. Wednesday presents the religious change in America as building up toward an inevitable impending war between old and new gods. None of them are immortal, but all vie for human attention. "We may not die easy and we sure as hell don't die well, but we can die," Mr. Wednesday admits. "If we're still loved and remembered, something else a whole lot like us comes along and takes our place and the whole damn thing starts again. And if we're forgotten, we're done" (301). Thus the greatest danger to old gods is the snowballing rise of new high-tech gods of modern life clustered around "growing knots of belief" (107) and new technologies: the credit card, freeways, internet, telephone, radio, hospital, television, plastic, and neon. "Proud gods, fat and foolish creatures, puffed up with their own newness and importance" (108), they are eager to replace the old gods. What they do not realize though, is that the entire conflict has been engineered by Loki and Odin who long for a mass blood sacrifice and chaos that would restore some of their lost powers (416). Although the novel ends with a peaceful resolution – despite mutual grudges and animosities the war among gods is averted – what remains is perhaps an even more painful realization that America is "a land that has no time for gods" (349). Old gods and new gods are ultimately in the same camp; their enemy is the fast-paced civilizational change that America embodies.

Besides using the trope of the moving center that draws gods and beliefs from other parts of the world and across time, Gaiman reinforces the "antiquity is now" concept in at least two ways. First, he presents multicultural America is a "televisual wasteland" (135), much like Eliot's modern wasteland, which needs the saving power of mythic belief to make it meaningful. For Gaiman it matters less whether this mythic belief is vested in the Slavic god Czerbobog or in the modern credit card; what matters is the strength of that belief. This emotional intensity, Gaiman suggests, is a quality that has accompanied all religious beliefs of humanity. It is that part of antiquity that carries over from one generation to another. Second, Gaiman suggests the existence of places of power that help people connect to what is both ancient and transcendent. In *American Gods* most of these places of power are recognized in the supremely American concept of a roadside attraction. Either natural formations or places that in some other way are seen as special, roadside attractions are locations that people, unconsciously, identify as "some focusing point, some channel, some window to the Immanent" (92). Like Cathedrals or stone circles in Europe, so too roadside attractions in America are places

where people go responding to a mysterious call. As Mr. Wednesday puts it, no matter how modern or non-religious they think they are, "people feel themselves being pulled to places where, in other parts of the world, they would recognize that part of themselves that is truly transcendent" (92).

This concept of places of power that connect people with something transcendent represents the other strategy of antiquity particularization, in which modern characters stumble across aspects of ancient wisdom and discover meaningful links between their own lives and antiquity. Although in *American Gods* this idea of places of power is rather peripheral, a number of other works make it central. For example places of power in the form of ley lines constitute the framing device of Maggie Stiefvater's *The Raven Boys* (2012). Set in a small town of Henrietta, Virginia, the novel tells a story of 16-year-old Blue – an odd non-seer from a family of psychics – and her troubled friendship with a group of four boys from the elite high school, Aglionby Academy. Although the many-strands plot of this novel is almost impossible to recount, the key events in the story are related to the existence of the corpse road or ley line that cuts through Henrietta. The ley line is "a perfectly straight, supernatural energy path that connect[s] spiritual places" (Stiefvater 2012: 24) across the globe and explains a number of seemingly unrelated phenomena: it is a path that spirits of those who will die in the following year walk on St. Mark's Eve, April 24; it is an energy field that keeps alive a ghost of a boy who had been murdered on the ley line several years earlier; it is also a portal into alternative reality where people may disappear and reappear – as does Blue's father years ago and her aunt in the course of the novel. Seen as the planet's arteries of spiritual energy, ley lines are currently dormant and are usually buried several meters under the ground. The centers of spiritual and magnetic energy they connect, however, are still active. One of them is a copse of ancient trees outside of Henrietta that introduces itself to the characters as Cabeswater. The thicket is a place where time does not work, where thoughts become reality, and where characters experience visions of the past and future. It is an energy vortex where "everything was alive, alive" (219) and a personification of life responsive to human emotion and desire. It also has a personality of its own and converses with the characters through Latin-speaking trees, a hissing rustle that sounds "distinctly like whispered, dry voices" (248). It is the trees that eventually kill the human villain Whelk, and encourage Gansey, one of the Aglionby boys, to find what he is looking for. This, of course, confirms Gansey's belief that the ley line hides the tomb of Owen Glendower, a medieval Welsh prince who fought against the English and eventually escaped to Virginia where he was buried not far from Henrietta. Because the ley line