Minor Mythologies as Popular Literature

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Minor Mythologies as Popular Literature:

A Student's Guide to Texts and Films

By

Richard Pine

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For my grandson

Alexander Theo Pine Pietruszka

May he find fables to excite and protect him
and may he,
from his grace and wisdom,
find his own story to tell to the world

CONTENTS

PREFACE:
ADDRESSED TO YOU, THE STUDENT

This is a book for you, to assist you in discoveries about stories and storytelling, about ritual, about our deepest emotions, fears and hopes. And it is also a book about enjoyment and indulgence. It's about a journey through stories to an understanding of what we are. It's unfortunately also about snobbery – of the intellectual kind, which is perhaps worse than social or economic snobbery, because it creates a false sense of superiority in people who are just as ordinary as you and I.

Each of us may deplore certain aspects of the popularisation of culture. The fact that my study excludes the "airport" fiction of, for example, Danielle Steele or Cecilia Ahern, or the "Mills&Boon" generic industry of romance, suggests that I am prejudiced against them. That is not so. I approve of any means of publication which supports my central tenet: that popular literature simply re-presents the perennial archetypes and stereotypes of mythology, and that cinema and television audiences can appreciate these mythologies in far greater numbers than the readers of the texts. But the fact that I do not care to read them is not an act of disapproval, merely one of disassociation from genres of communication which, to be honest, I don't understand or trust. I *do* trust (and I think I understand, or I would not be sharing this book with you) Bulldog Drummond, the Scarlet Pimpernel and Robin Hood, and, to a lesser degree, Sherlock Holmes. In fact I am very much persuaded by Cecilia Ahern who says "I'm not saying I'm Anne Enright. I'm not delusional about what I am writing. I just think everyone should be given the chance to enjoy it."[1]

I want you to read the texts, to know something – but not too much – of the critical assessments of these texts, to be able to watch the screen adaptations intelligently and with discretion, but I also want you to be aware of the wider intellectual and artistic world that surrounds these

[1] Interview with Patrick Freyne, *Irish Times*, 12 October 2015. Anne Enright (b.1962) is one of the leading Irish novelists, whose *The Gathering* won the 2007 Man Booker Prize.

stories and the entire phenomenon of storytelling that lies at the heart of our lives as humans.

I want you to be not afraid to read anything that adds to your understanding and *enjoyment* of great stories and at the same time to be suspicious of theory-for-the-sake-of-theory (see my note at the end of this Preface). Too often we encounter the formulae of theory ("paradigm", "structuralism", "defamiliarization") which put me in mind, and on the side, of the television lawyer "Kavanagh QC": "Forgive us our platitudes, as we forgive those that cliché against us".[2]

The assumption of intellectual superiority is probably (in my opinion anyway) the second greatest crime against humanity, the first being the absence of a sense of humour. Most intellectual snobs, I've found, also lack the ability to laugh either inwardly or out loud, because it would diminish their self-inflicted status as superior persons.

If I can put it this way, the only fault of which I am intolerant is intolerance, because intolerance emanates from a lack of understanding and empathy, and literary reading demands both of these. If a writer is offensive, we can of course put down the book and say no more. But to identify certain works, and even whole genres, of literature as unworthy of the reader signifies a lack of sophistication in the critic, rather than the reader. This is what occupies the time of the intellectual snob, and in my opinion it is unforgivable. As you will discover in the introductory chapters, the appreciation of popular literature and film is inhibited by our education, which tries to instil a love of "highbrow" works which somehow puts a barrier between us and the more accessible works we might otherwise enjoy.

If, like me, you had been educated during the 1960s or 1970s, you would most probably have been induced to regard popular literature as inferior, good only for time-wasting escapism, while the "great" works constituted our proper study. Even if you are today's student, you are quite likely to be studying popular fiction in a context where it is tolerated but still demarcated from the "highbrow" canon of the classics. It's part of the purpose of this book to explain how this demarcation came into academe, and how we might reduce its constricting effect by learning to appreciate the significance of *all* literature, whatever its merit as fine writing or otherwise. I'm not suggesting that we should qualitatively equate pulp fiction with Jane Austen, or *Star Wars* with Henry James, but I *am* arguing that we should recognise that the storyteller, in every case, is presenting

[2] *Kavanagh QC*, series 4, episode 1; broadcast 17 March 1998, ITV channel (UK).

opportunities for the reader/viewer to come to terms with perennial aspects of the human condition.

Bruno Bettelheim suggested that "how and by whom works of literature are mediated to us can account for the depth of meaning they acquire".[3] Most children absorb stories "at their mother's knee" or, in my case, my father's. The after-supper-and-before-bedtime story was in itself a *ritual*. The romances of Scott, the excitement of *King Solomon's Mines*, the magic of *Treasure Island* and *Robinson Crusoe* – and a sibling close to our family's heart, Henry Neville's novella *The Isle of Pines* (1668) – were as unquestioned as my later exposure to the Leavis philosophy of criticism which my school and university curricula sustained by concentrating our minds on Chaucer, Shakespeare, Keats, Hardy, Eliot, Woolf and Lawrence. Thus on top of the paternal mediation, which had provided me with "depth of meaning" on the level of the hero, came the appreciation of "fine" writing in the classics, with little or no reference to the "minor" literature at a lower level of the literary pyramid.

It's an extraordinary fact that so much of what remains popular literature today was popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That's because popular literature is the telling of convincing and satisfying stories more successfully and to a greater audience than a type of storytelling which we might call "*un*popular literature". A book need not be a "bestseller" in terms of huge sales in order to be popular, but it is the distinguishing characteristic that the book is enjoyed by more than the élite.

A further point of significance – which constitutes the core of this book – is that almost all contemporary popular works – whether in film, television, cartoon, books or even video- and computer-games – derive their attraction for us, the consumers, from the same sources as the older work: from the ideas of good and evil, hope, despair, giant-killers, megalomaniacs, heroic stunts, beauty and ugliness.

The case studies in this book feature works from earliest times to the late twentieth century. The earliest, the Grail Quest, is evident today in film, whether serious or light-hearted, such as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* or *National Treasure* or spoofs such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Why? Because the idea of a *quest* – whether for a treasure or a sacred object or a lost world – continues to resonate in our conscience and our consciousness: the discovery of a secret, the recovery of lost values, the clue to identity. And there is a cluster of works published in the period 1880-1930, which remain popular today. Why? Because figures

[3] B Bettelheim, *Freud's Vienna*, p.103.

like Robin Hood, Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Dracula and the Scarlet Pimpernel continue to fascinate us as signposts towards ideas of justice, detection of the truth, the dangers of evil genius and the glories of heroic bravery.

One could argue that these are lacking in our everyday lives, or that they don't figure in contemporary writing, but that wouldn't be true: the Edward Snowden revelations about modern espionage in our own backyards, the melodrama of the Entebbe raid in 1976, the "heroic" achievements of men like Bill Gates and George Soros in, respectively, computer science and capital acquisition, are all documented and re-presented to us in the same manner as the old heroes and demons. But the names I have listed (and we could add John le Carré's spymaster George Smiley, Ian Fleming's James Bond, Tolkien's Gandalf, Bilbo and Frodo) live and are celebrated in folk-memory, each name summoning a mental icon which often comes to us first through a screen image.

I'm not making any claim that the "Sherlock Holmes" stories or *The Lord of the Rings* are the equivalent of what we regard as "classic" novels such as *Wuthering Heights* or *Pride and Prejudice* or *Bleak House* or *To the Lighthouse*, but I *am* claiming that they incorporate the same themes and depict them by means of the same strategies: mystery, passion, misunderstanding, tragedy and comedy, which are the lifeblood of all great storytelling. I find it very humbling that a great storyteller like Harry Mark Petrakis can acknowledge that a writer can "dream that he could, within the pages of a book, cultivate a garden beyond the darkness of his death".[4]

It's somehow become unfashionable to read for pleasure; or, rather, that reading for pleasure means that what we are reading cannot be much good. The mere fact that a book sells thousands of copies or that a film is seen by millions of viewers (in the cinema, on DVD or via an online medium such as NetFlix) seems to condemn it automatically to second-rate, and to label their readers and viewers as "lowbrow" or at best "middlebrow". But do we read "highbrow" books or watch "serious" movies in order *not* to gain pleasure? Is the intellectual thrill (or not) of a Theo Angelopoulos film or a Virgina Woolf novel incompatible with enjoyment? The fact that the reader-viewer of Indiana Jones or Dan Brown does not, or maybe cannot, get to grips with the "highbrow" stuff does not diminish the status of either the reader-viewer or the material which he or she reads or views.

As we'll see in Chapter Three, some critics have insisted that "pleasure" means "frivolous time-wasting" or "escapism", even "irresponsibility", as if

[4] HM Petrakis, from "The Eyes of Love" in *Collected Stories*, p.220.

reading for pleasure is equivalent to endangering civilisation. And as we shall also see, there is a distinction to be made between "culture" (what the élite get up to) and "civilisation" (what everyone else does – the "masses"). Such snobbery becomes preposterous when we consider that *all* storytelling goes to the roots of our fears, our hopes, our explanations of the perceived and unperceived worlds, our exploration of the incidence of good and evil, beauty and ugliness. Homer (yes, even Homer Simpson), Aesop, Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Dan Brown, Georgette Heyer, Danielle Steele, are all in the same department if not in the same league.

Having attended the same school (but not at the same time!) as the philosopher John Locke, John Cleland (author of the erotic novel *Fanny Hill – the Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*), Matthew Lewis (author of the gothic fantasy *The Monk*), the Arabian explorer Harry St John Philby and his son "Kim" Philby, the Soviet spy, and Sir John Gielgud, who played Lord Henry Wotton in the BBC production of *Dorian Gray*, I realise that they provide me with a ready entrée into our minor mythologies: identity, erotica, orientalism, betrayal and impersonation. Who we are, what we read, how we interpret it, how we understand otherness, how we keep – or don't keep – faith, and how we present and re-present ourselves, are all crucial not only to the way we live our own lives, but also to the way we interact with others and, ultimately, how society is organised. In all of those aspects of our humanity, stories and storytelling are the motive power for understanding ourselves.

You will find (in Chapter Two) instances of today's influential and highly respected authors who have acknowledged the presence of minor mythologies in their own childhoods. In my own case, I was fortunate to grow up in a highly literate household, where, in addition to scholarship, the power of storytelling – the sagas, the allegories, the medieval legends, the romantic novelists – was a living presence, especially at the bedtime readings when the love of these mythologies was instilled. Storytelling is not always overtly didactic. Its morals can be inferred almost intravenously and certainly subliminally into our emotional and ethical hinterland.

It is naturally to be hoped that "great" novelists will emerge, with stories that reach the highest standards, but that should not mean that their readers should condescend to those who read less elevated narratives. Greek tragedy *may* be superior to *House of Cards* or *Midsomer Murders* but is that necessarily so? The love story may be just as intense in a Mills&Boon title as in *Sense and Sensibility*.

The absolutely basic point to be reiterated is: that the "Penny Dreadfuls" – those cheap editions of basic thrills, produced for the mass

markets – achieve the same effect as George Eliot, Proust, Kafka or Borges, because they tell a narrative which deals with the basic characteristics of the human mind.

Indeed, what is the status of *any* book which, like the Bible itself, is junior in date to the *Odyssey* and the dramas of Aeschylus? If there is a genealogy of literature, each genre descends from a particular *fons et origo* and never, in fact, arrives at a destination because it is continually amended, grafted, genetically modified, transferred, adapted.

Is *The Matrix* anything more than a copy of the Gnostic Gospels? A retelling of the eternal quest for the meaning of – and difference between – the real and the imagined, where all writers have lived their double lives since the beginning of time?

I've written this book as far as possible in the vernacular, because I hope that you will find that more accessible than if I were to adopt the mandarin prose of academe. Lecturers don't exactly announce "Whilom as olden stories tellen us" (perhaps they should) but they do tend to speak as if they were addressing the British Academy. I, on the other hand while admitting that, in my late sixties, I am old-fashioned and unable to get my head around much of the new technology or, worse, the new cultural forms that technology has created, am anxious to speak as clearly as possible – without jargon or pretensions to literary merit.

On this journey we – you and I – are concerned with the syntax and vocabulary of the middlebrow, the ordinary folk who live between sophisticated literature and the cartoonic tabloid in a middle ground occupied by the vast majority of readers of fiction, viewers of film and television. So it makes sense for me to use the same ordinary speech – cadences, rhythms, mental images – as the consumers of this middlebrow material. You will, however, find me using some words such as *topos*, *limen*, *transitus*, *agon* in their classical forms precisely because they take us to the roots of language which are also the roots of feeling: in the case of *topos*, the place where it happens; *limen*, the threshold you cross in order to get there; *transitus*, the journey; *agon*, the struggle either with others or with ourselves. And I have referred frequently to the *merveilleux* because the word expresses, more effectively than any of its English-language equivalents, the sense of the *wondrous* that is essential to storytelling. All these terms emphasise that all storytelling is a journey from one state of mind to another, from one state of knowledge to another.

The book is addressed principally to students and their teachers who are either taking a course in Popular Literature or exploring it as part of their wider education. I've written it because, in my own pursuit of the themes which popular literature addresses, I've been frustrated by the lack

of a single volume dedicated to the subject. Most textbooks are sectoral – dealing with the phenomenon of the bestseller, with mass production and consumption, levels of literary taste, or the generically divided areas of detective fiction, Gothic horror, et cetera – or they are collections of essays by various scholars on specific themes such as the *Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction* (2012) or the *Bloomsbury Introduction to Popular Fiction* (2015). These are all valuable in themselves, but seem to miss the greater picture. In this book I've tried to present an overview of the nature of storytelling and its development as popular literature, before proceeding to classify popular literature in the main genres in the case studies illustrated.

As I wrote this book – and its composition has occupied me for over a decade – my initial perspective developed under the influence of the books I was reading and re-reading. In particular, the rather obvious opening case study of the *Quest* made itself ever more obvious and insistent in the structure and spirit of the succeeding studies. But another, more psychologically interesting and compelling spirit was the growing awareness of the importance of the relationship between *self* and *other* and the *uncanny* which seems to stand between them.

The footnotes have been kept to a minimum, mainly citing references to quotations; more extensive notes, references and issues for discussion are signalled in the text as **[WP]** and relate to **Workpoints** at the end of each chapter. These incorporate ancillary and supporting documentation which would burden both the main text and the footnotes, but which merit inclusion for the benefit of any reader who wishes to pursue a particular argument or reference.

Each case study includes a Filmography, giving minimum information: title, date, author (of original book), screenplay, director, and the most prominent cast members (with these abbreviations: w= writer; d=director; c= cast members). I have added explanatory notes where necessary and short comments where it seemed appropriate; these vary from the terse to the more extensive.

Richard Pine
Corfu
Mid-summer Day, 2018

A note on "Theory"

My natural inclination is to avoid "theory", by which I mean an approach to life – and therefore literature – which is primarily cerebral rather than instinctive. To conceive of, and explain, the world by means of reason came to humans only after they had already reacted to the phenomena in their emotional and instinctual fashion. Ideas were formed from experience, not from intellectualisation.

As John Gross wrote in his *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, "To insist on the priority of theory over literature is bad enough. It is as though no-one were allowed to go to church without first taking a degree in theology".[5]

I do not condemn or dismiss "theory" as a form of ratiocination which is, after all, at the heart of all detective fiction. But I cannot condone those who argue that we *must* read literature in the light of theory, because the art of *reading* is to make personal decisions about the characters, their behaviour, the author's ability to tell the story without too many diversions, and about our own emotional response to the outcome. My enjoyment of a book may coincide with that of a theorist of course. And let us never lose sight of the cardinal fact that whatever the book – whether novel, scientific treatise, or a history – it is a story in the telling, an attempt at the communication of facts, ideas and emotions on which we, as readers, are expected to sit in judgement (the Greek word *kritikos* meaning "judge", makes us, the readers, into critics of the book).

I find theory useful if it illuminates a point in a primary text. But to treat theory *as* primary text, which may or may not be illuminated by novels, is anathema and pointless. Joyce read through the lenses of Derrida is profoundly depressing, when it should be a celebration of imagination.

[5] J Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, p.328.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My principal acknowledgement is to the late Lawrence Durrell, whom I knew from 1972 until his death in 1990. He became a friend and an encouragement. When, in the course of researching my study of his work, *Lawrence Durrell: the Mindscape* (1994, 2005), I found in the archive in Southern Illinois University at Carbondale the typescript of his essay "Minor Mythologies", I knew that eventually I would write a book in response to his implicit invitation and challenge ("How delightful a book on the minor mythology of the age could be made if one could persuade a serious critic to consider its figures"). This book is part of my repayment of a lifetime's debt to Larry.

I am grateful to Bernice Murphy and her students at Trinity College, Dublin, for listening to, and commenting upon, the basic ideas in this book at a postgrad seminar in 2016.

Tony Roche read Chapters 1-4 and made valuable and incisive comments about my presentation, in particular taming my animosity towards Queenie and FR Leavis. It still shows, but Tony's tact has helped. As one of my oldest friends he also brought to my attention Brian Aldiss's study of science fiction, *Billion Dollar Spree* and I wish I had been able to make better use of it. As a doyen of the fanzine, Tony has more of a place in this book than he may realise. I have only three words for Tony now: "Two men waiting".

I am also grateful to another friend of long-standing, Ismo Porna, who made me aware of *Rauta Aika* ("The Age of Iron"), the television dramatisation of the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, and gave me a memorable meeting in Tampere in 1986 with its director, Kalle Holmberg.

Both my daughters have contributed, unwittingly, to the evolution of this book, not least from the years of the bedtime story, through the rather larger stories that beset childhood, adolescence and family life. So to Emilie and Vanessa my heartfelt love and thanks for continuing to be my children.

This book is dedicated to Vanessa's sweet child, my grandson, in the belief that stories will provide the first stepping stone in his exploration of life, and in the hope that he will return to that starting-point frequently throughout his life. Without stories, without fables, without fictions and magic, without an enabling myth, childhood is difficult, if not impossible,

and adulthood is impoverished beneath belief. Alexander has already enriched my life with his humour: as he is partly Polish he has that great epic, *Pan Tadeusz* (in a copy given to my own father by a Polish airman during the world war) to look forward to, as it opens his eyes and ears to the heroic poetry of his fatherland.

PART I:

WHY WE READ THEM

CHAPTER ONE

THE MINOR MYTHOLOGIES

Introduction

My work as a critic has engaged me with two of the great writers of our time: Brian Friel (1929-2015) and Lawrence Durrell (1912-1980). In fact, they have inhabited and fuelled the greater part of my preoccupations for the past forty years. An Irish dramatist and an Anglo-Indian (perhaps Anglo-Irish) poet and novelist.[1] Each, after his own fashion, has pointed me towards the essence of storytelling and the inner compulsion of the storyteller, from which emanates, in my opinion, the entire body of the world's "popular literature".

While Friel, apart from some newspaper columns early in his career, hardly ever wrote below his highest standard, Durrell wrote both "highbrow" novels such as *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957-60) and *The Avignon Quintet* (1974-85) and what he called "makeweights" or "pot-boilers"; apropos his "Sketches of Diplomatic Life" he wrote to his friend Henry Miller "They take me twenty minutes to write. Only 1000 words. All this is very perplexing to my fans who don't know whether I am PG Wodehouse or James Joyce or what the hell".[2] So he was writing, unashamedly, on both the "highbrow" and "middlebrow" levels, which are the main concern of my book. (His own "minor mythologies" are considered in Appendix B)

Brian Friel said in an interview:

> You delve into a particular corner of yourself that's dark and uneasy, and you articulate the confusions and the unease of that particular period.

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[1] Durrell's possible Irish ancestry is discussed in, for example, Ian MacNiven, *Lawrence Durrell: a biography*, pp.152, 224, 370, 408, 511, 587, 606, 668; and R. Pine, *Lawrence Durrell: the Mindscape*, especially chapter 11, "Ireland as a State of Mind".

[2] I MacNiven (ed.), *The Durrell-Miller Letters*, p.306.

> When you do that, that's finished, and you acquire other sources of unease and discontent.[3]

The act of writing, therefore, is both public-political, in that it speaks to an audience of matters that concern them, and at the same time private-personal, since the writing – play, novel, poem – depends on the writer's own questioning of both him/herself and the ambient world, thus uniting inner preoccupations and anxieties with those of the community within which the writer exists. The essence of storytelling in the sagas, epics and fables is this same exploration of fears, and a possible rite of passage to enchantment, the *merveilleux*, an attempt to explain the inexplicable – the phenomena; in Milton's words (in *Paradise Lost*), to "justify the ways of God to man", but also to justify the ways of man to god.

For his part, Lawrence Durrell wrote in his novel *Tunc*:

> People deprived of a properly constituted childhood will always find something hollow in their responses to the world, something unfruitful [which explains] the central lack […] The central determinant of situations like this is that buried hunger which is only aggravated by the sense of emotional impotence.[4]

The anxiety created by the writer's awareness of a "central lack" and a "buried hunger" may also create a bond between the storyteller's own hurt and the pain of his listeners. The popular stories become communal; the storyteller speaks of and for his community.

I have juxtaposed these quotations because, having known both men on the professional and personal levels, I can assure you that they are profoundly truthful of themselves and of the fictional or imagined worlds of which they wrote. Perhaps the compulsion to seek heroes and to locate them in a secret, protected garden is magnified by, in the case of Durrell and Friel, their childhood insecurities. They have provided me with acute models of emotional and intellectual longing which popular literature might alleviate and to which it might provide answers.

Both experienced dis-enchantments in childhood, and both exported their bewilderment into their public writing, thus providing their readers and auditors with their responses to the "unease and discontent" of the wider world.

Durrell had previously written, in an essay on modern poetry, that "The trouble with the common reader is that he knows that the twentieth

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[3] B Friel, "Interview with Fintan O'Toole", p.110.
[4] L Durrell, *Tunc*, p.26.

century is a battlefield, but he does not know what the battle is about".[5] (Did he know Ortega y Gasset's 1930 statement "We live at a time when man believes himself fabulously capable of creation, but he does not know what to create"?)[6] One feels that Durrell would have insisted that in previous centuries (especially that of the first Elizabeth) the common man *would* have known the nature of the age's *agon*, so closely linked were his political and aesthetic preoccupations. The Elizabethan age, especially, was conscious of its status on the cusp between medieval and modern, whereas the twentieth century showed in its entirety that it did not understand the liminal status that had been highlighted by the theories of Freud and Einstein.

Durrell was trying, in his novels, to give modern, adult readers a route back into mythology, where they might find answers, in the treasure-house of the imagination, which somehow had been obscured or occluded in a civilisation which seemed to have turned its back on the essential motors of the mind.

To paraphrase Camus,[7] man, having deposed god, must build a cathedral, a place wherein the necessary rituals of life's drama can be enacted and, thereby, the meaning of life re-established and sustained. To tell a story successfully is to encode the sacred truths in language which can be decoded by the audience, whether in the schoolroom, the library or the cinema, embracing the community it creates in a ritual of meaning and recognition. All literature aims to achieve this enlightenment, and popular literature often achieves it more effectively than more sophisticated forms of narration.

There is one further aspect to my embrace of Durrell's essay on "Minor Mythologies", which also involves Friel: both Durrell and Friel had risen to a challenge offered to them by their predecessors. In the case of Brian Friel, he read an exhortation in Sean O'Faolain's biography of Hugh O'Neill, one of the last Gaelic chieftains, to "a talented dramatist" to bring O'Neill to life on the stage; Friel did so in his play *Making History* (1988).[8] In the case of Lawrence Durrell, he took the hint from Henri Bergson, that "some bold novelist" should expand the horizons of literature and science by a novel means of understanding time-space:[9] the result was *The Alexandria Quartet* and *The Avignon Quintet.*

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[5] L Durrell, *A Key to Modern British Poetry*, p.144.
[6] Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, p.44.
[7] See Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, pp.28-31, where he speaks of man's inexorable fate, to "kill God and build a church".
[8] S O'Faolain, *The Great O'Neill*, p.vi.
[9] H Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p.133.

Now Durrell was, in his turn, in his essay, challenging me to continue his discussion of the minor mythologies and the "myth-making faculty": "How delightful a book on the minor mythology of the age could be made if one could persuade a serious critic to consider its figures".[10] This book is therefore an attempt to follow Durrell's lead and to investigate the authors (and their creations) mentioned in his brief essay in relation to the general history of such works, mostly in a cluster between 1880 and 1940.

Durrell's personal strategy was expressed explicitly in his novel *Nunquam*: "from a publishing point of view the only irresistible themes are Quests, Confessions, and Puzzles".[11] **[WP1]** He could not have made a better case for bringing together "popular" literature – the catering to mass taste for stories of mystery and adventure – and the themes of the classics. Storytelling requires mystery. Mystery leads, through struggle, to revelation, ritual enlightenment, transfiguration and transcendence.

If, as Freud and Jung would argue, we find the root of a problem or a trauma[12] in our childhood joys and anxieties, then we can say that storytelling – whatever the genre, whoever the storyteller, whoever the audience – has its origin in fears and hopes. Fables begin in darkness and uncertainty and make their way, by means of narrative, towards light and the dispelling of doubt. This is a rite of passage which is at once fictive and true.

In fact it is Durrell's fusion of "quest" and "game" which gives a further impetus to this book, since his combination of the linear centripetal narrative tradition of western literature with the cyclic, centrifugal mind of eastern philosophy emphasises the strategy by which storytelling, in all ages and all societies, has sought, by means of the fable, to achieve meaning, stability and assurance. The fable, the narrative, the drama – all taking their cue from ritual – create a hierarchy of mythologies which both underpin and exemplify man's search for meaning: his own meaning and that of the world in which he attempts to exist.

And we need to consider the dictionary's opinion of what a myth actually is, since this study will argue with the view that a myth is

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[10] "The Minor Mythologies" was eventually published posthumously, in an annotated edition with commentary by Charles Sligh in *Deus Loci*, NS7 (1999-2000). Quotations from the essay are taken from this source without further reference.

[11] L Durrell, *Nunquam*, p.52.

[12] I am using the word "trauma" in the twin senses of "dream" (German "*traum*") and "injury" (Greek "*traúma*").

> a (traditional) story either wholly or partly fictitious, providing an explanation for or embodying a popular idea concerning some natural or social phenomenon or some religious belief, or ritual *specifically* one involving supernatural persons, actions or events; a similar newly created story (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Although, as I have just argued, a fable can be both fictive and true at the same time, the "idea" that a myth is at least "partially fictitious" is a rather different one: the fables with which we are concerned may, indeed, feature fictitious *characters*, but the situations in which those characters find themselves, and the outcome of their stories, are by no means unreal or based on fictions. They are representations of eternal *truths*. As Anthony Stevens explained,

> Fear that the shadow may get out of control is one of the oldest terrors to haunt humanity […] It explains that odd mixture of fascination and dread evoked by horror films and moral histories about such figures as Faust, Dr Frankenstein, Dorian Gray, and Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.[13]

Durrell's essay "The Minor Mythologies" began as a study of PG Wodehouse and the figure of Jeeves; Durrell had corresponded with Wodehouse on the subject in 1948.[14] It became "The Minor Mythologies" at some stage in the period 1949-53, when Durrell was working as press attaché in the British Embassy in Belgrade (then the capital of the Yugoslav Federation, which inspired his "Antrobus" satirical stories of diplomatic life.)

Durrell's thesis was simple: literary myth-making operates "on different planes" but the distinction between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" is unjustified:

> the reader who enjoys Proust and Kafka will seldom confess that he enjoys P G Wodehouse and vice versa […] A critic interested in the creative process may find more food for thought in a Stephen Dedalus than in a Jeeves. Yet he should be prepared to acknowledge them both.

Not to acknowledge both planes in the one critical frame of reference encourages the pseudo-intellectual snobbery which is the subject of Chapter Three. Durrell argued that the myths from which literature derives its momentum descend from the fairy tale's "first drawing-board […] the carpet of the professional story-teller". Immediately Durrell creates a sense

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[13] A Stevens, *The Roots of War and Terror*, p.121.

[14] Wodehouse's letter to Durrell is quoted extensively by Charles Sligh in his introduction to "The Minor Mythologies".

of drama, a focus wherein we can visualise the storyteller, his audience *and* the story itself.

One might say that the art of storytelling is the enabling of one's readers to remember phenomena and events that they never knew: they become the memory-bank of a community, its emotional and psychological archive, revealing truths "immemorially posited" **[WP2]** of which they have known subconsciously but not yet experienced on the surface of their lives – myth made reality through the ritual of narration. When Durrell speaks of Kafka, we can profitably remind ourselves that Kafka said, famously, "a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us".[15]

Durrell saw the Elizabethan age (on which he hoped, without success, to write a book) as largely unified in cultural terms; but at some later stage the notion of "class-literature" developed, creating a rift between "high" art and popular literature. Against this rift, he contended that the figures of "minor mythology" were "part of the broad flood of a nation's literature" and that therefore neither writer nor reader can afford to ignore or dismiss them. He made the point that when the "high-low" distinction was introduced, some elements in literature parted company from society's understanding of what it was about.

Durrell's additional argument was even more compelling: that the heroic figures of modern literature were in fact as rooted in mythology and ritual as the "great" characters of the literary past.

To the Victorians, Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) and Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) "embodied […] the great popular myths of the age", "folk-metaphors" which would become the subject of *film*, such as Frankenstein, Jekyll and Hyde and Dracula, because "their literary ancestry stretches far back into the age of magicians and miracles". It was by this observation that Durrell encouraged me to study the transfer and adaptation of minor mythologies to the screen.

"Class-literature was being born" and with it "the battle of schools and terms". There was a polarisation exemplified in the difference between journals such as the popular *John O'London's Weekly* and *Scrutiny*, the critical journal edited by FR Leavis. The differentiation between "high" and "low" created a class war. Durrell preferred to apply the word "genius" to the "highest plane" of literature, and "the stock in trade of the successful entertainer" to the "lowest". This is instructive since not only did he himself aspire to "genius" in his more serious work, but also because he saw himself as a writer both serious *and* middlebrow, very similar to Graham Greene who also saw himself on both levels. For

[15] A cliché nowadays in Kafka scholarship; from a letter of 1904 to Oskar Pollak.

example, Greene was unsure of the status of *Brighton Rock* (1938) which is part detective story, part psychological thriller, but allowed it to be described as an "entertainment" (which it certainly was in the 1947 film version starring a young Richard Attenborough). Later in his career, however, he decided that there was no valid distinction between "novels" and "entertainments". Unlike some writers who compose "entertainments" under a pseudonym (such as John Banville as "Benjamin Black"), Greene continued, like Durrell, to author both "highbrow" and "middlebrow" under one name (see Appendix B).

Durrell acknowledged that Proust's Charlus and Doyle's Holmes or Moriarty are not in the same league: "Proust's great hero is the product of a sensibility and a technique right out of the reach of a literary journeyman like Doyle", but Holmes "comes from a long and solid line of folk-heroes". Durrell considered that critics had been slow to associate modern literature with "the funds of popular myth". Criticism "find[s] this type of myth too coarse and heavy".

Durrell saw the medieval morality play as a didactic source of "common lessons" rooted in "religious ritual and the sacred calendar" and the emergence of the Elizabethan drama as a natural consequence. The characters available to Shakespeare and his contemporaries (such as Kyd, Marlowe and Dekker) "come out of a stock picture of villainy" or "the romantic solitaries", "vices and virtues personified". The genius of Shakespeare was to turn these "grotesques" into "*people* […] injected with personal idiosyncracies" indicating "a deliberate and powerfully individual psychology at play".

The spectator of the Elizabethan drama possessed a "highly developed […] mythopoeic sense" which enabled him to appreciate both "the soliloquies of Hamlet [and] the roarings of a Tamburlaine", "capable of following the coarsest and the finest effects of literature with equal ease". This "homogenousness" represented an "undivided" audience, "a unified whole". In Durrell's opinion (we shall discuss this further in Chapter Three) "this state of affairs persisted up to the time of Dickens, whose great coloured projections of the common life thrilled everybody, from the lawyer and business man to the common reader". **[WP3]**

Queenie (QD) Leavis had discussed the unities of Elizabethan drama in similar terms in her *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) and it is possible that Durrell had read at least this part of her book. Mrs Leavis attributed the "undoubted popular appeal" of Shakespeare to his ability to

create character[16] while the Elizabethan dramatists in general employed "a rich speech idiom" abounding in "metaphors, allusions and proverbs" which derived from common speech (255). The spectators "might not be able to follow the 'thought' minutely in the great tragedies" but "there was then no such complete separation […] between the life of the cultivated and the life of the generality: the artist and the ordinary citizen felt and thought in the same idiom" (264-5). So far, Mrs Leavis and Durrell are in agreement.

But Durrell would have been in deep disagreement with her class-bound assumption that the common idiom was successful because "the masses were receiving their amusement from above (instead of being specially catered for by journalists, film-directors and popular novelists, as they are now)" (85). Durrell rejected the assumption that the breakdown in communication between "the cultivated" and "the commonality" had reduced the value of literature which, like that of the Elizabethan stage, remained popular: it could, and does, continue to provide us with psychological characters descended from mythology.

Mrs Leavis betrayed an ignorance of this possibility when she wrote of the concerns of Elizabethan culture as "an inexplicable mixture of the profound and the naïve, the fine and the gross, the subtle and the crude" (89). She failed to realise that these juxtapositions are the lifeblood of all literature, and that it is to the detriment of the "highbrow" that contact has been lost with the "naïve", the "gross" and the "crude" in favour of the "profound", "fine" and "subtle". These are the class-bound prejudices which we shall see her betraying copiously in Chapter Three.

Mrs Leavis offered the view that "Nashe's public would have been bewildered if faced with the modern magazine story or such a recent bestseller as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*" (Anita Loos, 1925). My answer is that the readers of Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* or Deloney's *Jacke of Newberie* would most decidedly *not* have encountered any difficulty in recognising the themes *or* the techniques of Anita Loos.

In effect, Durrell saw the writer as working outside, rather than within, society, possibly from the end of the Elizabethan era, and certainly from the late Victorian period. In his own expatriate life and all his work, he exemplified the writer who is both *engagé* and dislocated. For the writer, life is always elsewhere, pitching him into an eternal exile or, as George Steiner has termed it, "extraterritorial".[17] This exilic existence was

[16] QD Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p.59; further references to this work in this chapter will appear in parenthesis.

[17] See G Steiner, *Extraterritorial: papers on literature and the language revolution.*

Durrell's natural home and is an important part of both his own writing (his "highbrow" as well as his "minor mythologies") and the entire body of popular literature.

It is a commonplace that the writer is necessarily an exile, because he or she lives outside society and even, like the outlaw, sometimes beyond its permissible borders. Perhaps this explains the paradox of FR Leavis: that he could (as he said of *Scrutiny*) act as an outlaw and yet at the same time set boundaries within which the writer and the reader must function. Writers, according to the Leavises *and* Durrell, were, prior at least to the mid-nineteenth century, within society and its culture, whereas after the rift *some* writers *and* some readers were beyond the pale.

This was the point at which Durrell identified a sea-change in the temperament of society, the arrival of the reader on an incomprehensible battlefield, a place – or *dystopia* – where the break-up of culture and civilisation was signalled but could not be resolved. When he wrote (in *The Black Book*) "I am weeping for my generation. I am devising in my mind a legend to convey the madness which created us in crookedness, in dislocation, in tort"[18] he was expressing his bewilderment – and that of his readers – at the loss of cohesive values and *mores.*[19]

From the broad experience of exile came the constituent anxieties of displacement, homelessness, the problem of translation/metaphor, and the need to establish a location – even in the no-man's-land of meaning – through map-making. These would be aids to an elusive integer, a wholeness that was not entirely available but which offered a prospect for hope rather than despair. On the other side was madness.

I believe that it was these phobia in Durrell that propelled him towards the mythologies, the roots of psychic power and emotion, in an effort to replace whatever had occupied his lost centre, the "central lack", and to satisfy his "buried hunger".

If Durrell had at some stage read *Fiction and the Reading Public*, it was almost certainly during his period of intense reading in the British Museum at the time of its publication. Mrs Leavis' claim for the culture of the Elizabethan age is mirrored in "Minor Mythologies": that there was, among all classes, a unity of cultural understanding of the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare, "a standard of mental alertness and concentration that has never been reached by the London public since" (85).

That alertness, according to both Mrs Leavis and Durrell, was due to the fact that "the life of the nation as a whole" sustained its literature,

[18] L Durrell, *The Black Book*, p.138.

[19] He had been an assiduous reader of Spengler's *Decline of the West* which in part inspired the novel sequence *Tunc* and *Nunquam*.

incorporating "the body of traditional lore" and an inherited folk-history, "a picturesque store of classical, medieval, and biblical legends, on which the ballads embroidered endlessly, a series of traditional heroes of the people and of their adventures […] and all this supported an idiom rich in proverbial wisdom, that explains in some degree the wealth of allusion in the drama and the pamphlets of the age" (86).

The only word with which Durrell might quarrel would be "picturesque"; the word conjures up a "Merrie England" which, as we shall see in the study of Robin Hood, was far from merry. Durrell, by contrast, would have epitomised it as *visceral*, and full of the vigour of an age on the cusp of itself, painfully aware of its transitional status from medieval to modern, and preoccupied with thoughts of darkness as much as those of the light.

Durrell's popular heroes

In his essay, Durrell specifically listed his popular heroes – each of whom opens up an entire gamut of storytelling in their respective genres and in each case providing Durrell with a link back to the primal mythologies – as (in chronological order):

- Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" – the creator of life, pushing the horizons of science (1818);
- Jules Verne's "Captain Nemo" – a rebel, a scientist and an outcast (1870);
- Conan Doyle's "Sherlock Holmes" – detection in pursuit of the truth (1887-1927);
- Bram Stoker's "Dracula" – the vampire rampant in modern Europe (1897);
- Edgar Wallace's "Bones" – a hapless colonist (the junior of "Sanders of the River") struggling to understand African customs (1911-1928);
- Sax Rohmer's "Fu Manchu" – the sinister Chinaman bent on world domination (1913-1959);
- H ("Sapper") McNeile's "Bulldog Drummond" – fearless pursuit of villainy (1920-1937);
- Rafael Sabatini's "Captain Blood" – the innocent victim of injustice forced to become an outlaw (1922-1936);
- PG Wodehouse's "Jeeves" – the servant superior to his master, Bertie Wooster (1924-1974).

Durrell suggested that a critic might include his or her own examples from the genres of popular fiction. My own contributions will not only add to Durrell's list, but will argue with some of his judgements, discarding Bones, Nemo and, with the greatest reluctance, Fu Manchu and Jeeves. My additions are, largely

"Raffles", the amateur cracksman, created by Conan Doyle's brother-in-law, EW Hornung;
"Robin Hood", the composite hero, in folk-balladry, of the innocent outlaw;
"Jekyll and Hyde", RL Stevenson's contribution to the literature of "self-and-other";
"The Scarlet Pimpernel" by Baroness Orczy, the foppish dandy who becomes the man of action.

I would like to have included the "Richard Chandos" novels of Dornford Yates, offering a Ruritanian mix of romance and intrigue; and "Ruritania" itself, in *The Prisoner of Zenda* by Anthony Hope. But their current obscurity, and the fact that the Chandos stories were almost never filmed,[20] means that, however popular they were "in their own day" (and they were hugely popular) they cannot be regarded as retaining that popularity. But my advice to you is to read Dornford Yates as one of the finest writers of minor mythologies.

Perhaps Durrell's most surprising omission is Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, whose eponymous hero embodies those two overriding literary strategies, the *quest* and the *game*; surprising because Durrell acknowledged *Kim* to be his bedside book: "je reste un vrai enfant de *Kim*".[21] In *Kim* the game and the quest are knitted together in the personality and behaviour of the hero, in such a way that makes it inescapable as an Ur-text for my study. Durrell identified with both author and subject as typifying his own experience of an Indian childhood and the dilemma with which it presented him: Kipling (in Ashis Nandy's words) "could not be both Western *and* Indian; he could be either Western *or* Indian".[22] Durrell, like Kim, wanted and needed to be both, in order to complete his being, to achieve the wholeness of innocence-in-childhood.

[20] The BBC produced an adaptation of *She Fell Among Thieves* in 1977.
[21] Quoted in R Pine, *Lawrence Durrell: the Mindscape*, p.44.
[22] Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy* pp. 65-6, 71.