

Genealogy and re-writing of myth: Blake and Pessoa

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In response to the topic of rewritings of myth in Britain and Portugal, we would like to share some thoughts on the mythic writing of William Blake (1757-1827) and Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935). By identifying common features in their writing of myth, it will become clearer why these authors – or rather, their texts – are considered difficult, if not impossible, to classify, or to know. On the basis of how mythic writing is intimately related to the topic of knowledge of being, a comparison between Blake and Pessoa seeks to approach the question of how, or to what extent this relation (myth-knowledge-being) is put into practice, experienced, or “comes to life,” in poetry. Since we believe that the poetic ambition of both poets was to go beyond a mere passive understanding of being and the world, they wanted to activate poetry, and in order to do so, some re-thinking as regards myth had to be done. Finally, we will look at how the poets utilise their upgraded technology of mythopoesis to engage with the multivalent idea of Empire, both as an example of its application and as an extrapolation of the logic of bringing myth back into relationship with the contemporary world.

Although their hugely complex texts are to a large extent made up of a dialectic structure, or contraries, such as good/evil, light/darkness, *tudo/nada*, Blake and Pessoa clearly show that the philosophical idea of a final synthesis (understood as reconciliation, truth, representation) must be replaced by a notion of what could rather be named a generative poetic (“mythic”) paradox, according to which good = evil, light = darkness, etc. This is, moreover, a paradox,

whose *function* it is to incite a re-writing (and re-reading) of myth. Blake and Pessoa, in their re-writing of myth, seem to be positing that fiction is always *more* than philosophical truth; that is, its continuation is a result of an excess of *real*, which is manifested in the shape of fictitious forms, undergoing infinite transformations in language. Four aspects of such forms will be brought into question: 1. the manifestation (“Eternity”) and transformation (“Generation”) of mythic form; 2. the generic complexity of a literary (mythic) system; 4. “Empire,” understood as personified representation (for example Orc, Caeiro, or Supra-Camões).

1. Change of mimetic paradigm

The idea of “re-writing myth” and implicitly of re-thinking “knowledge” entails a sense of profound change in our perception of what it means to see and to be. In the case of Blake and Pessoa, as mentioned earlier, when speaking of poetic ambition, poetry is no longer held as a mode in which to make sense, or tell the truth. Instead, the poets are seen to be – in a more conscious and proleptically postmodern manner than others of their times – playing with the question of representation and of mythic “constructedness” (Larrissy 2006:12), hence with the question of religion (“source”), philosophy (“end”) and, in general, the role of language and signification. It is from this playful feature that a more precise generic classification of their texts becomes problematic. Blake, often regarded as a member of the Romantic Movement has, posthumously, become more known for how he diverged from it, and could rather be said to anticipate Modernist and even Postmodernist tendencies (Larrissy 2006:1). Therein he shares an affinity with Pessoa, whose “non-metaphysical” ideas of unlearning how to think in order to learn how to see sought new ways in which to experience and manifest *being*. Myth, thus, is nothing but a lie, and the poet’s greatest task – indeed, his *duty* – is to create it on behalf of all humanity (Pessoa 1966: 100).

According to this profound change of perception, in which the lie becomes more real than reality itself, the poet rejects a “Christian,” philosophical paradigm of establishing knowledge and in its place, embraces a concept of the supreme imagination, or “the true faculty of knowing,” or “Spirit of Prophecy” (van Lieshout 1994:2-3). This *kind* of Imagination in its replacing God is probably best described by its “revolutionary,” “hellish,” or “devilish” organisation, built, as it is, on diversity, instability and variation of form(s). And in possession of it, stands the figure of the Poetic Genius. To speak with Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, one could say that the poet villain has “left the paths of ease, / To walk in perilous paths...” as “a new heaven is begun.” “The Eternal Hell revives” (Blake, 1988: 33-34), although, for Blake, the accepted image of Hell may itself be another lie – and we experience a sense of “not knowing how to have life,” (Pessoa, 2001:11). As a consequence, as semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares puts it in *The Book of Disquiet*, “we’re left with the aesthetic contemplation of life as our reason for having a soul” (11). And, finally, as Los declares in *Jerusalem*: “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create” (Blake 1988: 153).

2. Forms, formations, transformations

At the heart of these aesthetic projects is the tension between oneness and manifestation, between nothingness as the void, the truth, the ultimate ground of being, and the forms and divisions required to express and engage with life in its seeming complexity and diversity. For both poets, this tension describes the paradox both of existence itself – perhaps even to the extent of a total metaphysical cosmology – and the operations of the imagination and the poetic consciousness. The mythopoetic project, then, is to cloak the mutable energy of being in forms and personas that will allow their expression and representation to an audience; and yet in their organisation and interactions, to demonstrate a hidden logic that yet suggests their

ultimate identity in the same source. The “lie” of poetry and of myth, then, is seen to be the same lie that the world practices upon souls – the veil of Maya, or ‘Vala’ as Blake re-terms her, that, through the interplay of contraries, creates forms, as brief moments of stability in the flux to close us off from apprehension of the infinite – and the truth hidden within this world can, thus, germinate equally well in the soil of poetic constructions. It is in the interplay of the seeming contraries of these two spheres that separation appears to manifest itself and that inner unity can yet be discovered. Blake’s contraries are not stable oppositions, but rather complementary aspects of a single principle. The significance of this is perhaps accentuated if we recall that Blake’s “infernal” method of printing reversed the usual process, marking lines into an acid-resistant varnish to leave the penstrokes and letters, rather than the blank spaces, raised in relief, and that he would have necessarily written his works in mirror-writing to anticipate their reversal during the printing process. This means, of course, that the hidden messages that appear in reverse (for example as demonstrated by the title page of *Milton’s* 2nd book), were, in fact, the only parts of the text written the right way round in Blake’s own hand. Are we to consider them in actual fact the ‘exoteric’ aspect of the text; the only place where Blake’s meaning is not hidden, obscured, ‘occult’ in the strictest sense, but where he actually speaks openly of his beliefs? And would this imply that our reading of the rest of the text(s) must undergo an equivalent inversion, akin to that of the printing process, whereby we understand the images, personas and ideas of the poetic myth recounted to be the emanation or the shadow of the formless truth hidden within?

The manifestation of these ideas in the poetic myths created by Blake can be seen most clearly in the question of the various personalities he creates to represent different aspects of being; but who must themselves then struggle with the same questions of reason and imagination, stable systems of negations versus evolving constellations of partial and shifting affiliation and signification. Arguably all myth engages with this same issue, referring to its

own status as explanatory paradigm in the process of describing the birth and evolution of a system of gods or powers, but Blake and Pessoa take this further, destabilising their own poetic constructions in such a way as to force the reader to continually re-ascribe their attributions of specific meaning to different personas and subpersonas, and to continually re-affiliate their attitude towards the text as a repository or operation of truth.

One way of aesthetically looking at what happens when “Eternal Hell revives” is to consider the modifications that are being made regarding the concept of (mythic) identity (after the Fall). In the two cases, by turning away from a traditional philosophical paradigm and in creating a different system of the Imagination, the power of the creative process works in two ways, as for example for Los, who claims to be “[s]triving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems” (Blake 1988:154), meaning that the (mythic) forms extracted from the system (Imagination), are activated in two opposite directions *simultaneously*: towards “reason” and “revolt,” “form” and “deformation,” “innocence” and “experience,” “identity” and “ambiguity.” In the *The Book of Urizen*, where Blake re-writes the story of the Fall and of Genesis, we can see how this is illustrated by the roles played by Urizen, Los and Orc. In chapter 1, we read of Urizen’s battle with himself in order to take shape after his fall from Unity:

2. Times on times he divided, & measur’d / Space by space in his ninefold
darkness / Unseen, unknown! Changes appear’d / In his desolate mountains
rifted furious / By the black winds of perturbation // 3. For he strove in
battles dire / In unseen conflictions with shapes / Bred from his forsaken
wilderness, / Of beast, bird, fish, serpent & element / Combustion, blast,
vapour and cloud. (Blake 1988:70)

Urizen’s formation and transformation oscillates between division and measurement; between representing and de-representing an ambiguous, disordered self (=God and Satan in one) and his world, a “self-contemplating shadow, / In enormous labours occupied” (Blake 1988:71). As an opposing spectre of the case of fallen Urizen, as the figure of the imagination, Los appears, burdened with the task of giving form to the chaotic universe: “The Eternal Prophet

heav'd the dark bellows, / And turn'd restless the tongs; and the hammer / Incessant beat;
forging chains new & new / Numb'ring with links. hours, days & years [...]" (Blake: 75).

The role of Los in this part is illustrative both of the battle between reason and the imagination (each a spectre of the other) as well as of a self as other, caught in a continuous transformation. In other words, interlocking, yet divided by mutual inclusion *and* exclusion, Los and Urizen could be said to form an example of the generative poetic paradox, referred to initially. In terms of the poetic manifestation and generation, the two forms seem both to constitute self-closed entities as well as merging into a larger imaginary/creative process, in turn closed upon its own activity. This same striving and forging (thus opposing the idea of form, whilst, at the same time, extracting separate forms from it) can be recognised in how Pessoa – another poet forging his creations – wrote his heteronym drama as a way of *re-*, but also *de-*presenting the plural self. His act of *se outrar* must be viewed on the basis of how the subject cannot perceive of his self as anything but an objectified other and whose unstable status cannot be outlined by anything but an early version of the concept of *différance*. One of the ways in which to look into this particular paradoxical aspect is to briefly examine what role Blake's Energies and Pessoa's Sensations play in the constitution of a literary system (or State).

2.1. Forms of Energy and Sensations: Urizen – Los – Orc

In order to compare the underlying currents of Blake and Pessoa's literary systems, we will take a brief look at the function of "Energies" and "Sensations" respectively. Pessoa held, in an early note, that "the only reality in life is sensation" and that "there is no philosophy, no ethics and no aesthetics even in art, what ever there may be in life. In art there are only sensations and our consciousness of them" (Pessoa 1966: 130-31). The logic of sensations, it seems, disregards a strict division between ethics and aesthetics, or, rather, rejects the mere

existence of such distinctions altogether. Sensations, thus, are superior, or indifferent, to moral judgements. Writing and language, as the expression of sensations, must flow unhindered by such categories, ideally so that the sensations captured by consciousness may be expressed merely as what they *are*. For Pessoa, all sensations are equally true and equally false, both real and unreal, and as such, impossible to capture, to fixate, or to *know*. *To be*, and to know oneself as an unknown being, embodying sensations, provides the poet with a potential to feign to be something he is not and where the feigned reality becomes more real than reality.

Blake, then, in the voice of the Devil, and possibly as the spectre of the way in which Pessoa would use the interlocking / separating forces of the intellect and the sensations in his creative process, holds that “[e]nergy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy” and, “[w]ithout Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence (Blake 1988:34). As an illustration of this active Evil, “springing from Energy,” is Orc, son of Los and Enitharmon, the voice and revolutionary agent of Los’ Prophecy, or, as mentioned earlier, a form of energy, created out of an “excess of *real*.” So it is, that we will interpret Orc (as a spectre of Los and) as the revolutionary poetic force and desire to found a new paradigm (State, Being) of knowledge, which is that of the Poetic Genius.

3. Empire: Self-clos’d, all-repelling: the Poetic Genius

The very cursory outlines of that new paradigm can be perceived as a mytho-poietical empire (“Albion”; “Quinto Império”). According to Pessoa, the notion of experiencing and knowing his self as other is also something that is closely related to his being Portuguese (Pessoa 1966:94). Considering that Pessoa’s *pátria* was the Portuguese language, how are we to understand the connection between being Portuguese (belonging) and a sense of poetic/mythic

novelty and of being other than oneself (=not belonging)? It could easily be taken either as a joke, or at best, as some kind of benign, self-ironic criticism. However, if “being” and “sensing” in this case could be said to entail a notion of “making” and “imagining” (which is what Pessoa does in his heteronym writing), then the idea of equating “being Portuguese” with “feeling different to oneself” takes on a slightly different, prophetic character and mythic (=paradoxical, poetic) signification. In order to illustrate this relation, we can point to a connection between the heteronym *drama em gente* (=governed by the law of the imagination) and another hugely ambitious work by Pessoa, namely *Mensagem* (=Empire). The most obvious connecting figure, or voice, operating between the two literary projects is the interrelating notion of a Super-Poet, or *Supra-Camões*, possibly foreshadowed by Alberto Caeiro, who figures as a paradoxical master (mythic) form of the thoughtless imagination.

As concerns Pessoa’s revolutionary poetry, the prophetic “super-Poet” and his connection to the idea of “Portugal,” Pessoa, in an early text, famously writes that:

esta corrente vai ainda no princípio do seu princípio, gradualmente, porém, tornando-se mais firme, mais nítida, mais complexa. E isto leva a crer que deve estar para muito breve o inevitável aparecimento do poeta ou poetas supremos, desta corrente, e da nossa terra, porque fatalmente o Grande Poeta, que este movimento gerará, deslocará para segundo plano a figura, até agora primacial, de Camões. (Pessoa 1980:24)

At the time of writing these articles on the new Portuguese poetry, the idea of a new age, new language and hence, signification could only be transmitted in the form of a prophecy (“inevitável aparecimento”). The task of poetic writing, or re-writing, is to engender, to produce, and gradually to fixate the form(s) of this apparition, which, in turn, is going to elevate (“deslocará”) the figure Camões. In the famous lines of “O Infante,” the work is born out of man’s dream and God’s will; in the case of Pessoa and Blake, God must be interpreted as a figure of “Life,” and the work in question is the resurrected state (persona, figure) of the Imagination – Albion, or *Quinto Império*, whose voice is that of the Super Poet.

Conclusion

Our overall claim has been that a re-writing of myth equals a (re-)presentation of literature in works by Blake and Pessoa. By seeking to demonstrate the mytho-poietic genealogy of their work – forms, spectres, mirrors, masks – the complexity of the myth is represented by/in the mythic hero, or state, encompassing all of these energies; being both a hero of the imagination as well as a *re-presentative* of the national figure, thus merging the two traditions of genius.

As a mythic *figure*, the poetic genius is also the most absurd form of identity: “self-closed and all-repelling,” whose prophecy consists of announcing him/itself as a form of ever-lasting life, created by a self-engendering, energetic system, which in turn is what he constitutes. The resulting situation of infinitely expanding sensations/energies seems to fit in well with what Foucault describes as a “philosophy of the phantasm”:

It is all this swarming of the impalpable that must be integrated into our thought: we must articulate a philosophy of the phantasm construed not through the intermediary of perception of the image, as being of the order of an originary given but, rather, left to come to light among the surfaces to which it is related, in the reversal that causes every interior to pass to the outside and every exterior to the inside, in the temporal oscillation that always makes it precede and follow itself [...]. (Foucault 2000:346)

Behind Foucault’s phantasm/spectre, or say, Pessoa’s flux of sensations and Blake’s Energies, there is no truth; these beings are, as Foucault goes on to observe, “freed from the dilemmas of truth and falsehood and of being and nonbeing; they must be allowed to conduct their dance, to act out their mime, as ‘extrabeings’” (Foucault 2000: 346-47). To know and to experience oneself as a sensation, as Energy and as an extrabeing, as it were, defines the mythic figure as a senseless *thing*, a vision, which comes to represent an inner as well as a very physical experience of being, and that physicality, the *wording* of myth, is what I see as the *site* and Empire of knowledge in Blake’s and Pessoa’s writing.

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