

**INVENTIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS: AN EXPLORATION OF
MYTHIFICATION AND REMYTHIFICATION IN FOUR CONTEMPORARY
NOVELS**

by

MATHILDA SLABBERT

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PROMOTER: PROF L VILJOEN

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I declare that **INVENTIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS: AN EXAMINATION OF MYTHIFICATION AND REMYTHIFICATION IN FOUR CONTEMPORARY NOVELS** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

.....
SIGNATURE
MS M SLABBERT

.....
DATE

SUMMARY

- (i) Title: **INVENTIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS: AN EXPLORATION OF MYTHIFICATION AND REMYTHIFICATION IN FOUR CONTEMPORARY NOVELS**
- (ii) by Mathilda Slabbert
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- (vii) Summary

The reading of four contemporary novels, namely: *Credo* by Melvyn Bragg, *The Catastrophist* by Ronan Bennett, *Everything You Need* by A.L. Kennedy and *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman explores the prominent position of mythification and remythification in contemporary literature. The discussion of Bragg's novel examines the significance of Celtic mythology and folklore and to what extent it influenced Christian mythology on the British Isles and *vice versa*. The presentation of the transition from a cyclical, pagan to a linear, Christian belief system is analysed. My analysis of Bennett's novel supports the observation that political myth as myth transformed contains elements and qualities embodied by sacred myths and investigates the relevance of Johan Degenaar's observation that "[p]ostmodernism emphasises the fact that myth is an ambiguous phenomenon" and practices an attitude of "eternal vigilance" (1995: 47), as is evident in the main protagonist's dispassionate stance. My reading of Kennedy's novel explores the bond that myth creates between the artist and the audience and argues that the writer as myth creator fulfils a restorative function through the mythical and symbolic qualities embedded in literature. Gaiman's novel *American Gods* focuses on the function of meta/multi-mythology in contemporary literature (especially

the fantasy genre) and on what these qualities reveal about a society and its concerns and values. The thesis contemplates how in each case the original myths were substituted, modulated or transfigured to be presented as metamyth or myth transformed.

The analysis shows that myth can be used in various ways in literature: as the data or information that is recreated and transformed in the creative process to establish a common matrix of stories, symbols, images and motifs which represents a bond between the author and the reader in terms of the meaning-making process; to facilitate a spiritual enrichment in a demythologized world and for its restorative abilities. The study is confirmed by detailed mythical reference.

KEY TERMS

Myth transformation, mythification, remythification, mythopoesis, myth criticism, celtic pagan mythology, Christian mythology, political myth, theory of ideology, sacred and ancient myth, fantasy, ritual, quest, shamanism, sin/guilt, scapegoats, election and initiation, *Credo*/Melvyn Bragg, *The Catastrophist*/Ronan Bennett, *Everything You Need*/A.L. Kennedy, *American Gods*/Neil Gaiman

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PROLOGUE

It is not so much that literature was born at a specific time, and then began to evolve on its own ... to a certain extent the history of literature is the history of a continual process inasmuch as particular formulas are created and reinforce each other. These are general formulas within the language itself, not literary language as such but an artistic agenda, exemplars of linkages, and models of images and genres. The result is a common background in which writers continually situate themselves. Although they transform the elements that are placed at their disposal, the link with the background is always present.

(Meletinsky 2000: viii)

Ancient myths have defined the spirituality of humankind since time immemorial. In Jostein Gaarder's words: "A myth is a story about the gods which sets out to explain why life is as it is" (1995: 19). People invent myths or narrative stories in order to explain and make sense of their environment, culture and society. Myths can be individual in nature or can form part of a larger mythology. Comte explains that mythologies¹ "expressed the needs, desires and aspirations of men and represented something beyond the mundane nature of their lives, the limits of their actions and the dangers of their undertakings" (1994: 1). Mythologies may be religious accounts handed down through generations, initially through oral transmission and later in written form.

This thesis focuses on the importance of individual myths and mythology, the elements identifiable in myth and mythology that can be traced in contemporary literature, and the creative, educational, informative and restorative value of myth in the contemporary novel. Myth explains and reflects the civilisation from which it

¹ "The word 'mythology' is derived from the Greek word '*muthos*'. This means 'speech', and *muthos* itself is derived from the Indo-European word '*mudh*', which one can take to mean a thinking-over or reflection. Partridge, in his etymological dictionary, considers *mudh* to mean 'imagine', and he also suggests that another more obscure root of the word '*muthos*' may be the Lithuanian word '*mausti*', which means 'to yearn for' [T]he root of the word 'fable' is the Latin word '*fabula*', which means 'story' ..." (O'Connor 2001: 2).

comes and therefore the transformed myths which will be discussed in this thesis reflect only on the belief systems and civilisations presented in the novels chosen for discussion, but also on the value of myth and mythology² in postmodern literature and the writer's role as myth creator.

Ancient mythologies deal with gods, heroes and demons. Christianity introduced a single god and the Christian myth systematically replaced the legends of ancient mythology. The ancient forms were analysed, criticised and utilised to facilitate the conversion of pagan peoples. This is evident, for instance, in the way Christian holy days have been superimposed on the dates when pagan festivals were celebrated, and Mary's position as a holy female figure has been incorporated to replace goddesses and heroines. Centuries later, humankind has become disillusioned with its very existence and the meaning of its mythologies has emptied out. The reasons are multiple: technology, fundamentalism, spiritual dissatisfaction, and universal disappointment in the failures of political ideologies and traditional belief systems. Apart from the new trendy fascination with paganism and ancient cultures, the fact remains that the artist (for the purpose of this study *the writer*) is still one of the prominent myth creators, re-creators and incorporators of myth in modern society. As psychologist Peter O'Connor remarks: "The 'poet' as writer, painter or musician, sustains the imaginative life, the necessary antidote to materialism and the pervasiveness of banal secularity" (2001: 201). It is for this reason that this thesis explores and analyses the role and function of myth in contemporary literature.

Myth criticism or mythopoesis has received attention in literary studies since the sixties, and this thesis focuses on aspects of the theories and methods articulated by various theorists from a variety of disciplines. These include J.G. Frazer, Northrop Frye, Roland Barthes, Georges Sorel, Eleazar Meletinsky, Mircea Eliade,

² For practical reasons the use of the terms 'myth' and 'mythology' in the body of this thesis will be interchangeable – indicating a singular myth or a set of myths unified in a particular mythology, unless otherwise stated.

Carl Jung, Christopher Flood, Johan Degenaar, Erik Davis and Terence McKenna, amongst others. Relevant aspects of these theories are utilised in support of my argument that myth holds a prominent and vital position in the contemporary novel and fulfils a functional role, not only in providing thematic material and formative information to the reader, but also in establishing a shared matrix between reader and author, so that in return, the reader's interpretation of the text gives meaning to his/her world.

Four contemporary novels by Anglo-Irish writers have been selected to illustrate some possible functions of myth in contemporary English literature. The novels are *Credo* by Melvyn Bragg (1996), *The Catastrophist* by Ronan Bennett (1999), *Everything You Need* by A.L. Kennedy (2000) and *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman (2001).

The discussion of Bragg's novel examines the significance of Celtic mythology and folklore and to what extent it influenced Christian mythology on the British Isles and *vice versa*. The presentation of the transition from a cyclical, pagan to a linear, Christian belief system will be analysed. My analysis of Bennett's novel supports the observation that political myth as myth transformed contains elements and qualities embodied by sacred myths and investigates the relevance of Johan Degenaar's observation that "[p]ostmodernism emphasises the fact that myth is an ambiguous phenomenon" and practices an attitude of "eternal vigilance" (1995: 47), as is evident in the main protagonist's dispassionate stance. My reading of Kennedy's novel explores the bond that myth creates between the artist and the audience and further develops my argument that the writer as myth creator fulfils a restorative function through the mythical and symbolic qualities embedded in a novel. Gaiman's novel *American Gods* focuses on the function of a meta-mythology in contemporary literature (especially the fantasy genre) and what these qualities reveal about a society and its concerns and values. The thesis contemplates

how in each case the original myths were substituted, modulated or transfigured to be presented as metamyth or myth transformed.

It is impossible to focus on all writers that have ever incorporated some aspect of myth and mythology (and specifically Celtic mythology) in their work, but the above writers have been selected either for their Celtic heritage, their deviation from contemporary trends or for creating a myth which incorporates traditional mythical elements. Special reference is made to myths pertaining to the Celtic tradition in large parts of this study (especially the second and fourth chapters). Elements and motifs related to other Indo-European, African and Native American mythologies and a detailed historical contextualisation when the setting of the novel requires this, underpin the literary analysis. In addition, in the analysis of *American Gods* I attempt to illustrate that the author has created a meta-mythology in a fantasy setting which reflects on popular culture.

Each of the selected authors integrated, reconstructed or employed specific aspects associated with traditional myths, ancient mythologies and cultural history in an exceptional way. The relevant chapters identify and elaborate on these processes.

In mythopoetic thinking, the creation of myth is functional because it fulfils a basic human need. The process of myth creation is closely related to the human need for ritual. As John Vickery points out in *Myth and Literature* (1996), myth is the historical and psychological source of literature and represents a collective human desire (ix). Besides functioning as a basis for artistic creativity, myths serve as mediums to facilitate the interpretation of a specific literary work according to a particular framework such as cultural background, time and historical setting. The reader responds individually according to his or her understanding and interpretation of these concepts. In *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) Vladimir Propp is of the opinion that literature is unchangeable once it has been written down. As a

result, written art relies on the perception of the reader and this is constantly altering. Although Propp would regard the works of the authors selected for this study as immutable, contemporary theory on the other hand explains that texts are constantly subject to ‘change’ with readings brought to them, regardless of their historical setting and place in time. For instance, from a new historical point of view, a cultural understanding of a specific literary text is important. This includes the historical, political circumstances and traditional customs of the time in which the work was created and set. Therefore such a perspective is relevant to this study.

This study was prompted by an interest in ancient history and cultures and the influence of global shrinkage on beliefs and cultural identity. Over the last few decades technology has expanded and currently fulfils a prominent role in society, to such an extent that some regard it as a transformed mythology. Consequently, a desire to rediscover ancient roots has been created by the effects of modern existence, which include feelings of alienation, dislocation and isolation. This thesis shows that even in a technological, alienating environment, elements can be identified that originate in antiquated myths, no matter how altered these elements seem to be in representation. In this respect literature is functional: it continues on the mythical path, giving meaning to a world largely devoid of mythology.

It might be asked why specific emphasis is placed on Celtic mythology in a large part of this study. My interest in and fascination with Celtic mythology more than any other mythology function as the main motivation for my research. Through the ages writers of English literature such as Pope, Wordsworth, Browning, Forster and Graves (to name but a few) have been fascinated by the customs and cultures of peoples far removed from Britain: Hellenic, Oriental, Classical German, Norse and so forth. People are known to disregard that which is closest to home and romanticize that which is foreign. Distance gives rise to a utopian dream. In this process, Celtic mythology (apart from the Arthurian romances) has been sadly neglected. Hence the focus of this study echoes Moyra Caldecott’s words: “...I am

writing about Celtic myth rather than any other, not because I think Celtic myth is more important than any other but because it is no less important” (1988: 2). The incorporation of various myths into English literature illustrates the indispensability of myth in creative works. *Credo* and *Everything You Need* are set in a traditional Celtic environment and therefore call for Celtic orientation. In the discussion of *The Catastrophist* (which for the greater part is set in the Congo) mythical elements are identified and discussed in relation to political myth. *American Gods* is set in America, but contains a multitude of references to a variety of mythologies and folklore with the predominant emphasis on Norse mythology. A wide range of mythologies is therefore drawn on to illustrate the function of myth in these contemporary novels.

CHAPTER ONE

APPROACHES: A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Twentieth-century mythification ... is complex and contradictory. Many interrelated factors are at work here, and mythification cannot be reduced to other, simpler factors such as, for example, being considered the sum of various mythologies ...[T]he nature of twentieth-century mythification cannot be understood without looking back to the characteristics of the mythology of primitive societies and of antiquity. To understand the present, we must somehow come to grips with the past.

(Meletinsky 2000: xxi)

The aim of this chapter is to define the methodological and literary-theoretical framework for the reading of the selected texts and to formulate a suitable, functional definition of myth for the purposes of this thesis. In order to do so, a survey of relevant theories and the history of mythopoesis is called for. The chapter addresses various issues highlighted by these theories in the selected novels. Relevant concepts from theories based on myth criticism are briefly explained. Problems surrounding the application of myth theories to the selected contemporary texts are articulated and the scope of the study defined.

In this thesis I intend to trace in four selected contemporary novels four main aspects of mythification and myth transformation: the transformation of myth from pagan times (especially Celtic mythology) to Christian mythology, political ideology as a form of myth, myth creation by the author, and the interaction of such mythification with technology. Myth transformation in this context can be defined as the modulation of ancient pagan myths or mythical elements into new myths inherent in the individual novels, or the re-use of such elements in new ways. The transformation cannot be regarded as complete, because no new, coherent mythology is created: it is partial because only some mythical elements resurface in new combinations. The first of the novels to be discussed is Melvyn Bragg's

historical novel *Credo* (1996), followed by Ronan Bennett's *The Catastrophist* (1999), A.L. Kennedy's novel *Everything You Need* (2000) and finally Neil Gaiman's fantasy *American Gods* (2001).

The selection of novels and their relation to mythification and myth transformation could be viewed as ambiguous and problematic with regard to literary theories concerned with myth, because not all the novels (especially *Credo* and *American Gods*) would necessarily be regarded as 'literature' in the canonical sense. At this point I would like to draw attention to Terry Eagleton's remark concerning 'literature'. He says:

...it is most useful to see 'literature' as a name which people give from time to time for different reasons to certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michel Foucault has called 'discursive practices', and ... if anything is to be an object of study it is this whole field of practices rather than just those sometimes rather obscurely labelled 'literature'.

(1983: 205)

The novels I have selected for scrutiny are therefore representative of the contemporary segment of the field of 'discursive practices'. This study explores either the novels' divergence or their congruence with the concept of mythification and myth transformation as defined above. My interest in ancient mythologies and especially Celtic mythology motivated my initial investigation into the mythopoetic field. The selection of novels might seem somewhat arbitrary but, as previously stated, *Credo* seemed a valid starting-point for the mythification process from pagan to Christian times. Few mythologies had such a geological, spiritual, psychological, historical and lasting impact on humankind for such an extended period as Christianity. *The Catastrophist* was selected because, as Flood remarks: "Political myth does not possess the aura of sacredness, but it can nevertheless harbour an authority as near to that of sacredness as the secular world in which it exists will allow" (2002: xi). The lack of theoretical work on political myth motivated me

further and I decided to focus on a novel with a non-European or non-western setting. The artist or writer's "artistic agenda" (Meletinsky 2000: viii), the self-reflective quality of mythification in contemporary literature, made *Everything You Need* a relevant choice. The mystery surrounding the setting and the characters of the novel contributed to my selection. *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman came as a natural choice, as it confirms Meletinsky's observation that "the nature of twentieth-century mythification cannot be understood without looking back to the characteristics of the mythology of primitive societies and of antiquity" (2000: xxi). The novel's pop culture setting, its evocation of American consciousness, the opportunity to reflect on shamanic qualities in contemporary society and the metamythology represented in the novel seem to encapsulate the discussion in the preceding chapters and illustrate that contemporary society still needs myth to "explain why life is as it is" (Gaarder 1995: 19). My discussion illustrates that this need finds creative expression in and is relevant to contemporary literature.

Myth criticism: a survey

Tracing the chronological history of the poetics of myth is a vast task, especially as it involves a variety of disciplines "such as classics, anthropology, folklore, history of religions, linguistics, psychology and art-history" (Ruthven 1976: 3). When the role of important theorists of myth criticism in relation to literature, and in particularly English literature, is considered, the scope is mercifully narrowed.

Apart from the classical philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus and the like, who evaluated the importance of myth and its relationship to narration, many diverse approaches followed in comparative methods in later centuries. I would like to quote from an essay written on myth criticism by E. W. Herd in *Theories of Myth* (Segal 1996). Herd relates Northrop Frye's astonishment at being branded "a member of a school of 'myth criticism'" (1996: 173) of which he had never heard before. He goes on:

Even today it is hardly possible to speak of a school of myth criticism, although the more extravagant devotees of this approach to literature, and their more fiery opponents, both tend to give the impression that myth criticism is a well-defined movement. Certainly it has become fashionable to accept an established lineage of myth criticism.

(1996: 173)

It seems that the concept of myth criticism developed from the various approaches to myth in different disciplines. My own approach in this exploration will be eclectic and multifaceted, incorporating many elements from the various positions. Johan Degenaar's view on the utilisation of myth in literature seems to support my approach:

With regard to the phenomenon of myth, postmodernity manifests a more relaxed view [than premodernity or modernity] for it sees myth as a schema of the imagination which can be used in a variety of ways to illuminate human experience.... The best example of the use of myth in a metamythical way is the sphere of literature where myth can give imaginative power to a novel and endow it with meaning which is not only accessible to initiates but open to public scrutiny.

(1995: 47)

As mentioned above, much has been written about myth from the time of Plato and Aristotle in a diversity of disciplines. Cultural anthropology in literary criticism has a significant place in this discussion. Haskell M. Block remarks in his essay "Cultural Anthropology and Contemporary Literary Criticism" that: "[o]ut of understanding of human behavior in times past we have come to know a good deal more about ourselves. And new interpretations of customs and beliefs have led to new ways of looking at literature" (Segal 1996: 2). There is a long list of anthropologists whose theories have influenced literary criticism. Each contributed in a specific way to the development of myth criticism. It is neither the aim nor is this the place to summarize contributions of the long list of writers such as Giambattista Vico, Herder, Renan, Sir James Frazer and Claude Lévi-Strauss, but

when relevant, some of these theorists will be discussed in greater detail, especially Frazer's observations on scapegoats (2004: 507–38), ritual sacrifices, "Sacrifice of the King's Son" (1957: 381–86) and killing the God or divine king. These have a direct bearing on all four selected novels.

Melentinsky's remark that "[t]he modern novel has been ... steeped in a neo-psychological bath that has resulted in an emphasis on the psychology of the subconscious" (2000: 276) is apposite for my reading of all four the selected novels. Sigmund Freud's concepts on sexuality, complexes and the death drive, explained by Eagleton in his chapter *Psychoanalysis* (1983: 151-93), are germane to this study in the discussion of *Everything You Need*, and Carl Jung's theories on the unconscious and archetypes are relevant to all the selected novels. According to Meletinsky

...the Jungian universalizing and metaphorical interpretation of the unconscious play of the imagination, links the feeling of isolation, oppression, and alienation that plague modern man to the pre-reflexive and intensely social psychology of archaic society, albeit a society that is relatively primitive. In the modern novel, this link is, however, attenuated by a sense of irony.

(2000: 277)

Jung further observed that primordial imagery, archetypes or "*Urbilder*" (Walker 2002: 17) are expressed through mythological imagery. Ruthven differentiates between Jung's "archetype" and an "archetypal image" (1976: 20) as follows: "The term 'archetype' ... is not meant to denote an inherited idea, but rather an inherited mode of functioning corresponding to the inborn way in which the chick emerges from the egg" (20). Walker elaborates on the distinction between the two concepts in *Jung and the Jungians on Myth* (2002) by explaining that an archetype is an "inherited thought form" (12) or instinct and an archetypal image is "the symbolical formulation of the instinct itself" (12) and "can be perceived ... in dreams, visions

and fantasies” (13). Furthermore “archetypes are conditions ... rather than pure causes.... They express themselves in a variety of archetypal images, which can become culturally elaborated into myths and symbols” (14). Walker also remarks that Jung and his followers, referring to either of these terms, often employ the term archetype. In this study I have followed suit. The contributions of Freud and Jung in the mythical field are useful not only for the light their concepts shed on the therapeutic qualities of myth for the people who believe in them, but also for the value of their views on the subconscious and unconscious in the discussion of literary work. All the selected novels relate the occurrence of dreams and it is in the observations of Freud and Jung that the structure of myth in these dreams may be found. Meletinsky further remarks on the importance of psychoanalysis in literature and observes that “[s]ituating the main action in the interior dimension of human experience is the basis for the technique of the interior monologue” (2000: 276). This technique is noticeable in especially *The Catastrophist* and *Everything You Need*. In the latter novel myth is instrumental in the repair of psychological damage. The views of another psychologist, Peter O’Connor, as expressed in *Beyond the Mist* (2001), are helpful in interpreting imagery and conflict in *Credo* and *Everything You Need* in relation to Irish mythology.

At the outset the term “myth” calls for definition. Ruthven argues that it is impossible to define myth in general, as we have “...no direct experience of myths as such, but only of particular myths...” (1976: 1). This study will therefore deal with the general concept that myth is a story – true or ambiguous – that has been handed down from “olden times” (1976: 56). The myths I mention are regarded as sacred tales with subject matter viewed as truth in a particular community. These views may or may not include religious beliefs, but have a definite social function. It might be a thesis in itself to attempt a definition in a universally acceptable manner. A brief definition (relevant to this study) and a short discussion, drawing on various sources, will have to suffice. The definition will hopefully avoid restricting the meaning of the word, and depriving it of its energy and universality,

but may well be viewed as problematic in relation to the vast field I aim to cover. The four contemporary novels I have selected are not mythical novels in a Kafkaesque or James Joycean sense, but the aim is to establish their mythical qualities or lack thereof in a more transcendental and “cosmogonic” (Palencia-Roth 1987: 12) way. With the exception of *American Gods*, the novels are not based or focused upon a specific myth or system of myths, but rather carry echoes of myths and employ mythical elements and motifs. My study classifies the novels into the categories I have already defined in the Prologue in relation to the transformed state of myth in each novel. These categories are: the transformation of myth from pagan times to Christianity, political ideology as a form of myth, myth creation by the author, and the interaction and intermingling of myth with technology.

Fables, legends and stories that are echoed in the novels enhance their larger mythological implications, but are not the main focus of the discussion. Hence the thesis does not employ Proppian analysis as introduced by Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1968) since the novels do not deal with folktales or fairy tales as central themes.

I have adapted and defined the term myth in terms of various relevant definitions. Here, then, is the working definition relevant to this study:

Myth is a culturally significant story about gods or characters with godlike qualities and belief systems. It embodies the basic symbols, images, rituals and values contained in ancient (specifically Celtic) mythologies and is revealed and represented in transformation in the artistic process where it establishes a bond between author and reader and facilitates spiritual restoration and enrichment.

Symbolism is the basic underlying principle of mythology and I use “image” in the sense suggested by the German philosopher F.W. von Schelling, who sees it as the “concrete reproduction of the object” (Meletinsky 2000: 9). This can again be

explained with the help of Northrop Frye's statement in *Spiritus Mundi* (1976) that we find the same images in all mythologies, for example, a hero, a god, a tree (or a piece of wood), a scapegoat and so forth, in transformed representations (17). This observation by Frye is significant for all four novels I have included in this study.

The similarities between mythologies were also recognised by the French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who saw "different myths as variations on a number of basic themes" (Eagleton 1983: 103). Lévi-Strauss is of the opinion that each myth has its individual group of relations which constitutes the myth's real meaning. This conclusion encapsulates the methodology of this thesis. In addition, Frye argues that all mythologies are basically the same and that the evolution or transformation of mythology is rooted in the society in which it is structured. Myth is humankind's attempt to articulate what is of human concern in a specific society. Frye uses the example of Christianity that has absorbed Classical, Celtic, Norse and Teutonic mythologies to show how basic principles of one mythology are recreated to suit another (1976: 17). Each of the following chapters elaborates on this point of view in the light of Frye's theory on archetypal meaning and his opinion that literature and myth are closely linked. Frye argues that mythology represents "human desires and anxieties and preconceptions ... and ... is always, and necessarily, geocentric and anthropocentric..." (109) The four novels have different geographical, historical, cultural and time settings and therefore reveal particular needs and apprehensions pertaining to the circumstances and narrative events of each.

The analysis of Melvyn Bragg's novel *Credo* traces elements and motifs of myths from Celtic and Christian traditions with particular attention to how these elements support or fail to support the female protagonist Bega's actions as heroine or martyr. This historical novel is set in the seventh century at the height of the opposition of pagan and Christian customs. My reading of the dilemma Bega faces

in *Credo*, namely to choose between a life of spiritual devotion and a more sexual existence, underscores the significance of the following statement:

Christian mythology is concerned with the working of fate and moral values. The symbol that stands for the world of ideas in Christian mythology is not nature and being but humanity and its actions: instead of the elevation of humanity to the divine, there is the humanizing of God; instead of pantheism, there is a hierarchy (God, angels, and men) and a rigid division between good and evil (angels and demons); instead of the religion of poetry, there is the religion of revelation.
(Meletinsky 2000: 10)

The remodelling of pagan values into Christian values particularly in the female protagonist Bega is significant in this regard. It is necessary to destroy or remove the fascination with a previous myth for a new one to develop and therefore, conversely, a previous myth is needed for a new one to emerge. In this reading of *Credo* the opinions of Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles in *A Beowulf Handbook* (1997), which focus on Christian and pagan elements as well as myth and history are helpful in explaining the destruction of a heroic past by a new faith; they simultaneously illuminate the assimilation of symbols and elements into a new mythology. The importance of history in relation to any discussion of myth is summarized in Niles's statement that "[H]istory, like myth, assumes a high truth value for those who believe in it" (1997: 216). He explains that "mythistory" (217) faces the dialectic between reality or fact versus the fabulous.

Paul Ricoeur's discussion of guilt in *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967) illuminates the complicated psychology behind Bega's religious turmoil and is elaborated on in Chapter Two. At first reading, the impression arises that Bega is at fault for the direction she chooses, but Ricoeur explains that 'fault' and 'guilt' are two separate emotions (103). Bega's awareness of sin (and the Christian concept thereof) leads to guilt. It is her sense of guilt and fear that motivates her decisions. Bega's position in the novel calls for a discussion of female values in Christianity

versus female characteristics in the traditional mythological heroine, queen and goddess. Bega suppresses her attraction to Padric and her sexuality in favour of spiritual devotion. The shift from a primarily matriarchal (Celtic) to patriarchal (Christian) mythology calls for investigation, although it must be emphasised that this study is not a feminist evaluation.

The discussion of Ronan Bennett's *The Catastrophist* in the third chapter of this study illustrates political ideology as "a kind of contemporary mythology" (Eagleton 1983: 135). I conclude that political ideologies can be transformed in the imagination of the followers to become mythical in nature. This confirms Sorel's interpretation of myth as "a modern ideological phenomenon" of "political mythification as one of the aspects of the rebirth of mythology in the twentieth century" (Meletinsky 2000: 16).

Bennett's novel is set primarily in the Congo amidst the struggle for independence from Belgium and deals with the opposition of imperialism and nationalism. It evokes historical figures that are shrouded in myth. The novel will be discussed in relation to Christopher Flood's (2002) observations about political myth and Frye's opinion that all mythologies contain the basic need to transform chaos into harmony. Political ideologies and revolutions and the multiplicity of perspectives related to these often become mythological in the cultural discourses of a nation. The views of Sorel and Barthes on the interaction between revolution, political ideologies and mythification are useful because of their opinions on the interpretation of political discourse and signs by receivers. In addition, the novel contains identifiable elements of ritual and cyclical myths both in the ideologies presented and in the actions surrounding the historical political characters and the protagonist James Gillespie. The conflict between Gillespie's and his girlfriend Inès's political convictions is central to the theme of political myth in the novel and illustrates Gillespie's postmodernist stance as dispassionate observer. Inès is certainly not responsible for the political situation in the Congo, but her action is seen to be motivated by the collective subconscious or an archetypal sense of guilt

and fear. The conflict between James's and Inès's political sympathies is illuminated in Gillespie's remark:

She divides me. Her words divide me. Her language refuses the disciplines of the eye, of history of the world as it is. Her imagination turns on symbol and myth. She lives in the rush of all-embracing sympathies, and sometimes, listening to her song, my lulled emotions slip their noose and follow in the blind career of her allegiance....

(Bennett 1999: 45)

The differences between the political sympathies of James and Inès and how these serve the process of mythification will be elaborated on in Chapter Three.

When we return to Frye and his opinion that "literature is subsumed under myth" (Meletinsky 2000: 81), the importance of A.L. Kennedy's novel *Everything You Need* becomes apparent in relation to the artist as myth creator. Frye states that:

Mythology is a form of imaginative thinking, and its direct descendant in culture is literature, more particularly fiction, works of literature that tell stories. There is thus also a central place in literature for schematic thinking, an emphasis on design and symmetry for their own sakes. Such pattern-making is also inherited from mythology....

(1976: 71-72)

In other words, storytelling is myth creation, and literature can be regarded as a complex form of myth creation. Dabney Townsend elaborates on this bond between artist and audience: "[m]yth is a telling of stories that are culturally significant, and ritual allows those stories to be re-enacted and actualised. Thus they create a place in which artist and audience can meet, a shared set of symbols, and an account of the significance of aesthetic experiences" (1997: 193). Ben Okri supports this observation in *A Way of Being Free*: "When we have made an experience or a chaos

into a story we have transformed it, made sense of it, transmuted experience, domesticated the chaos” (1997: 113). He continues:

A great challenge for our age, and future ages: to do for storytelling what Joyce did for language – to take it to the highest levels of enchantment and magic; to impact into story infinite richness and convergences; to make story flow with serenity, with eternity.

(1997: 111)

Kennedy ‘tells a story’ and creates myth in a realistic and contemporary fashion and in so doing illustrates the artist’s creation of an individual mythology and myth’s restorative function. As Vickery remarks, “...to create imaginative literature is to reassert the utility of myth...” (1966: ix).

As in *Credo*, the concept of guilt is also present in *Everything You Need*, but on a more conscious level. To a large extent, Nathan Staples’s attitude towards his daughter Mary is motivated by his feelings of guilt about abandoning her and her mother. The result is a feeling of failure – as father, as husband and as artist – manifested in repeated attempts to commit suicide, a form of self-punishment which in its turn reflects on Freud’s views of the death drive or Thanatos, a “blissful inanimate state where the ego cannot be injured” (Eagleton 1988: 161). Mary seems to fulfil the role of what Neumann terms the “transformative character of the Feminine” (1983: 33) and she functions as mediator in the creative healing process in which myth creation or story-telling becomes instrumental in psychological restoration.

The discussion of Gaiman’s *American Gods* elaborates on and adds to the concept of myth creation. Gaiman draws from a variety of mythologies to create his own, thus confirming and elaborating on what Frye writes in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Frye says:

Myths of gods merge into legends of heroes, legends of heroes merge into plots of tragedies and comedies; plots of tragedies and comedies merge into plots of more or less realistic fiction.

(1957: 51)

Gaiman extends Frye's statement; in *American Gods* the fiction becomes a kind of bizarre surrealism where realism, fantasy, myth, technology and history coalesce in a new mythology. Eleazar Meletinsky takes Frye's view further in *The Poetics of Myth* (2000). He explains that one should not only trace the survival of past mythical elements in literature but should "concentrate on the survival of myth as a form of thought..." (viii). Meletinsky argues that myth should be seen in its total social and cultural context in order to be understood. I show that Gaiman complies with this view by presenting questions related to American culture and its consciousness. This concurs with what Palencia-Roth says: "...in every mythical novel there will be mingled elements of creation, destruction, and recreation" (1987: 17). Meletinsky's observations on "Mythification in Twentieth-Century Literature" (2000: 259-340) are further explored in the course of my analysis.

Various theorists have stated that literature is flanked by history and philosophy and that myth can be used as a historical source to reflect reality. This concept is employed prominently in my discussion of all the novels. I focus on the process of transformation in relation to the historical, realistic and fantastical settings of the novels. For legend and mythological information I draw heavily on the following anthologies: Geddes & Grosset's *Celtic Mythology* (1999) and *Classical Mythology* (2002), *Introduction to Mythology* (Spence 1994), *Dictionary of Mythology* (Comte 1991), Delaney's *Legends of the Celts* (1989) and Eleazar Meletinsky's *The Poetics of Myth* (2000). Historical sources on Celtic and British history include *Kingdom of the Celts* (King 1998), *The Celts* (Davies 1988), *The Offshore Islanders* (Johnson 1995), *The Age of Arthur* (Morris 1995) and *The Story of Britain* (Strong 1996) amongst other sources. A variety of histories have been consulted for information on colonization in Africa and related ideologies. For the

section on *The Catastrophist*, Ludo De Witte's book *The Assassination of Lumumba* (2001) has proved invaluable, as has *King Leopold's Ghost* by Adam Hochschild (1998) and *Political Myth* by Christopher Flood (2002).

In the chapter on *American Gods* I have utilised concepts dealing with shamanism such as Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism* (1989) for support. In addition, I have consulted various books by the ontologist Terence McKenna and Internet articles. The novel deals with the syncretism of ancient and new gods, "gods of credit-card and freeway, of internet and telephone, of radio and hospital" (Gaiman 2001: 148). *TechGnosis* by Erik Davis (1999) has provided useful insights in this regard.

I draw upon a wide range of opinions in support of the argument that myth – although metamorphosed and transformed – holds a functional and valuable position in the contemporary novel, and in doing so, it remains an integral part of literature and the creative literary impulse. Myth provides the rich fundamentals for narrative reinventions.

CHAPTER TWO
BEGINNINGS, TRANSFORMATIONS AND CONTINUATIONS

Elements of myth in Melvyn Bragg's *Credo*

Both were Celts, he British, she of the Irish strain. A sadness in repose lay within both of them as if they sensed that time was shortening for that ancient race.

(1996: 11)

The importance of *Credo* by Melvyn Bragg in relation to the direction of my argument in this thesis is contained in the presentation of the two relevant mythologies in the novel, namely pagan (Celtic) mythology and Christian mythology. The discussion supports Frye's observation that "Mythology does not expand and progress in the way that science does, but it keeps constantly transforming itself, as though there were a power of renewal within it as infinite as the galaxies" (1976: 96). It is within this transformation and the telling or capturing of the process of transformation in written form that the contemporary novel fulfils a formative and informative role. As Markale remarks, myths tell "the story of our beginnings" (1978: 16) and by understanding the process of transformation, the reader can create meaning, not only of the world presented in the novel, but also of the past and the present. By understanding the history of the universe the reader can attempt to understand "the intrusion of the sacred into daily life" (Markale 1978: 17) and people's desire to give meaning to existence. *Credo* is therefore a relevant starting-point for the discussion of the importance of myth in the contemporary novel because it not only clearly illustrates the process of transition from one mythology to the next (the progression from paganism to Christianity), but illuminates the conflicts and elements of integration embodied in the process.

Credo relates the story of Bega, the daughter of a Connaught chieftain, who flees to Britain to escape an arranged marriage. Bega is in love with Padric, a prince from Rheged (today the south-western part of Scotland and north-western part of England) who claims direct ancestry from King Arthur. Bega is driven by her

religious convictions to choose the church above her love for Padric. Both characters are Christians and desire to spread the gospel, although their respective societies contain evidence of the preceding pagan traditions. Bega's entire life is consumed by the idea of complete devotion. Padric wants freedom for his country (independence from Northumbria) and he wants Bega as his queen. Bega, who comes from an Irish tribe that continually had to fight for its own sovereignty, understands Padric's wish, but is proselytised to retain her virginity after Donal, the village priest, convinces her that the Virgin has appeared to him with a fragment from the cross and told him to give it to "a young girl, a virgin" (1996: 4). In Donal's opinion this "girl" is Bega. During their flight from Ireland, Bega and Padric have sexual intercourse, but Bega subsequently seems to suffer from amnesia related to the incident. An expectation that Bega will eventually succumb to her love for Padric is what motivates the reader to continue and propels the story forward.

The reader's expectations seem to echo the new historical perspective, which suggests that the reader's outlook and preconceived notions influence and contribute to the "episteme" (<http://www.cumber.edu/litcritweb/theory/newhistoricism.htm>) or complete comprehension of the novel's meaning. Yet, the events in the novel do not anticipate the biases and preconceived ideas of the reader and instead focus on the historically acceptable reactions of the time. Despite all expectations and frustrations Padric and Bega never marry. Instead, Bega is victorious in her quest to follow a life of chastity as the Bride of Christ.

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the function of myth in a historical novel such as *Credo*, by identifying elements of myth present in both pagan (in this case Celtic) mythology and in Christian mythology as presented in the novel. The chapter illustrates how elements of ancient or sacred myth presented in transformation inform the reader, assist in shaping the meaning derived from the events and prompt him or her to further reflection. Ultimately the discussion in this

chapter forms the foundation on which the subsequent chapters build and illustrates that mythology is a valuable source of information for thematic material and is an essential element in the creation of contemporary literature. The findings add to Bakhtin's observation "...that as long as mythology continued to be 'used' ... as long as it remained a common and universal characteristic of literature, then the flame of 'mythology' cannot be considered spent" (quoted in Meletinsky 2000: 260). This continued process of renewal to suit particular socio-political environments and cultural belief systems is supported by Eliade's remark that "the myth of origin is the origin of myth" (<http://www.bookwire.com/bookwire/bbr/reviews/june2001/GREENBLATTInterview.htm>).

The novel deals with a period in history which witnessed the transformation from ancient to Christian myth. The clash of mythologies is metaphorically represented in the central theme of unrequited love. The historical time-frame of the novel and the specific process of mythical transformation it embodies provide a relevant starting-point for the progressive argument this thesis develops. It will therefore be important to identify mythical elements in both mythologies and discuss the similarities, differences and representations in relation to the protagonists, time, customs or traditions, setting, belief systems and conflict between the characters representing the different mythologies or the process of transition from one to the other. Degenaar has shown that "within premodern minds tension between cultures can develop into a collision in a negative sense" and that this "entails an absence of respect for the otherness of the other culture and an inability to apply the principle of the negotiation of difference" (1995: 47). This collision between cultures and different belief systems is evident in the novel.

Credo is historical in nature, illustrating religious fanaticism and true devotion as well as the far-reaching consequences of differences within a faith or belief system. The colourful representation of the past is the prime attraction of the novel and it does not focus on stating any moral lessons or great truths. The

historical, religious and political struggle between the various areas in Britain and Ireland completes the setting of the novel and prepares the foundation for my focus on political ideology as myth in the next chapter. New historicists, such as Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher, recognize that history in literature contributes to the definition of a culture in terms of specific eras and *zeitgeist*, and rather than just regurgitating the history, it assists in our attempts to interpret the problems, struggles, anxieties and contemporary issues of the time. Stephen Greenblatt explains: “The goal of new historicism for me ... is to put cultural objects in some interesting relationship to social and historical processes” (<http://www.bookwire.com/bookwire/bbr/reviews/june2001/GREENBLATTInterview.htm>). This perspective adds to an understanding of the value and meaning of each mythology for its followers. This chapter illustrates how myth is central to a particular era, namely the seventh century in the British Isles, as it is presented in a twentieth-century novel. Michel Foucault, regarded as having a significant influence on new historicists, refuses to look upon history as a continuous process with an original cause which leads to a final ending, but rather sees each historical event as part of a “vast web of economic, social, and political factors” (<http://www.virtualLit>). *Credo* reflects on such a ‘web’ surrounding a particular group of people in the late seventh century and this discussion illustrates the presence and function of mythical elements in the novel.

The novel contains echoes and modulations of Irish folklore and mythology, but is not based on a specific myth. Rather, *Credo* is a realistic description of the process of transformation from ancient Celtic mythology to Christian mythology. The novel illustrates the gradual shift from what O’Connor terms the “*muthos* to *logos*”³ (2001:2) or “...from the circularity and meandering to linearity...” (2000: 2). Bega moves away from the customs of her Irish heritage, which was essentially oral, cyclical and orientated towards reincarnation, towards a belief focusing on one linear life with one omnipresent god and one written source.

³ Cf. footnote no. 1.

Because reference will be made to ancient Celtic myths in the course of this discussion, it is necessary to mention the origins and grouping of these, be these Gaulish, Irish or medieval Welsh in nature. For comparative purposes various modern translations or collections of Celtic myths are used. The groupings of these ancient myths are briefly discussed in order to identify possible similarities and probable historical characters and to illustrate how the author uses these ancient mythistorical sources to create a shared frame of reference between him and his reader.

The discussion of original myths will show how Bragg has incorporated and transformed myth in the creation of his novel. The prologue and first book of the novel are set in Ireland and the remainder of the action takes place in Bragg's favourite setting, Northumbria and surrounding areas. Historically, the novel is a sound representation of the events of the day. For instance, the description of the Synod of Whitby, which was indeed a turning-point in the history of the English church, becomes almost tedious in its attempt at historical veracity, but is functional in that it illustrates the differences which can arise within a faith. The same can be said about other historical events. But it is not only with history that this novel appeals to the reader. Bragg conveys much about the Celtic and early Christian customs of the time. Many fables and stories are told which add to the understanding of the physical and psychological milieu of the era, providing the reader with insight into cultural-historical problems.

In addition to the cultural and historical setting, the actions and motivations of the protagonists Bega and Padric are discussed in relation to values attributed to heroes and heroines in traditional pagan and Christian stories. I evaluate Bega's position as devotee of a patriarchal mythology and to what extent her motivation demonstrates the transformation from pagan heroine and princess to a Christian nun. Parallels are drawn between Padric's quest and the quest tales of other ancient

heroes. Where called for, other characters in the novel are discussed and compared in order to emphasise mythological threads and motifs.

Original Celtic myths and their groupings

...the world of Irish mythology is complex and devoid of the linearity and order that are found in e.g. Greek mythology. It is like being permanently in a dream...
(O'Connor 2001: viii)

The main literary source and basis for the belief systems of Christian Mythology is the Bible. Pagan sources and systems are more complex. Originally myths were conveyed orally as no written language (except Ogham⁴) existed in Celtic regions prior to the arrival of Christianity. I elaborate on the influence and importance of Christianity on the capturing and presentation of sacred myths and legends later in this chapter. A summary of original Celtic myths and literature, as well as some detail about the traditions surrounding the manner in which these myths were relayed, are necessary for two specific reasons: to identify and draw parallels between the two relevant mythologies in *Credo*, and to facilitate the identification of myths within certain groups in the Celtic tradition.

Irish literature can be classified into four main groups. The first relates to early gods of the Tuatha de Dannan⁵ and is known as the *Mythological Cycle*; the second concerns the Ulstermen and is known as the *Ulaid* or *Ulster Cycle*; the third deals with the *Ossianic* or *Finn Cycle* and relates the adventures of the hero Fionn Mac Cumhaill (Finn MacCool). The final group is concerned with presumed historical figures and is called the Kings' Cycle or *Historical Cycle* (King 1998:

⁴ Ogham is regarded as the secret alphabet of the druids. King explains, "Ogham was a system of writing which used horizontal or slanting notches cut on stone or wood to indicate letters. Each letter could also be indicated by using joints of the fingers, like a modern signing alphabet for the deaf" (1998: 62).

⁵ The titles of historical texts and names are often rendered differently in sources; I therefore use the spelling as these appear in the texts from which they have been quoted.

206). The Welsh tradition is grouped into the *Llyfr Gurn Rhydderch* (The White Book of Rydderth) and the *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (The Red Book of Hergest) (1998: 207). In addition, there are the Arthurian cycles and related romances connected with Cornwall and coupled to Celtic myth. The relevance of the legends and myths contained in these sources is shown when called for, as the following example demonstrates.

The *Mythological Cycle* contains a story, *Tragedy of the Children of Lir*, which tells of the four children of Lir who were changed into swans by druidic magic at the insistence of their stepmother Eva (Aoife). They could only escape from their transformed bodies if Larguen, a prince from the north, united with Becca, a princess from the south (MacLean 1998: 144–45). Irish manuscripts add that the swans would become human again when St Patrick brought the word of the gospels to Ireland. In the end it is St. Kemoc who brings the Christian word and releases the children from their physical transformation. At this stage the children are very old and they die after baptism. The coincidence of the similarities in the names in *Tragedy of the Children of Lir* and some in *Credo* (for instance the wicked stepmother Eva versus Una), as well as the storylines, could suggest that, like Larguen and Becca, Bega (Becca) and Padric (Patrick) could possibly have ‘released’ more souls, had they united in marriage.

This legend is mentioned as an example of how Christian myth supersedes ancient Celtic myth in this novel as it does in history. The Celtic myths and stories were only written down during the sixth century AD and were often transcribed by monks. The original, pagan storylines were retained, but Christian aspects were superimposed to make them more acceptable to a contemporary Christian audience. For example, the hero Cu Chulainn⁶ from the Ulster Cycle is said to have believed

⁶ Various spellings exist for the hero’s name. I make use of John King’s spelling in *Kingdoms of the Celts* (1998), unless directly quoted from another source. As for other characters from mythology and folklore I adhere to the spelling of the names as these appear in the relevant sources. Italics and emphases in quotations are devices employed by the relevant author unless otherwise stated.

in God and St Patrick; and Conchobar (Conor Mac Nessa) to whom the tales of Cu Chulainn's deeds belong, died on the same day as Christ (O'Rahilly 1970: 19).

To further establish Bega's pagan roots, the wedding scene in *Credo* recalls the myth of *Diarmaid and Grainne* (paralleled in the legend of *Tristan and Iseult*) in the Fenian Cycle. The settings are identical, the marriage is strategic and the bride is restless and unwilling. Grainne, the daughter of the High King of Tara, is betrothed to marry the much older Finn MacCool. At the festival she falls in love with Diarmaid, one of the warriors. She proceeds to give all but five guests (including Diarmaid) a sleeping potion and then flees with him from Tara. A furious Finn MacCool stalks them through many fantastical adventures to finally slaughter Diarmaid and reclaim his bride. This is not Bega's fate in *Credo*, but the wedding echoes elements from this particular myth to add further resonance to the process of remythification the novel embodies. Bega's choice and fate are influenced by her belief in a new mythology.

Another aspect at the beginning of the novel which illustrates the transformation from the pagan to the Biblical is the presence of both poet and priest at the court of Connachta in Ireland. Connachta was traditionally seen as the centre of druids and magicians. In *Credo* Cathal's court poet is Muiredach. Through Muiredach, Bragg reveals the importance of the spoken word in the vernacular tales, in which the greatness of a king depended on the praise bestowed on him by the poets or druids. The king's bravery and heroism were immortalised in the stories and songs these wise men composed. The bards and druids can be seen as the myth creators and therefore as the precursors of the author as myth creator in literature, a topic on which I will elaborate in Chapters Three, Four and Five.

Bragg's avoidance of the word 'druid' is strange. We read, "he (Muiredach) had been trained in his art for almost twenty-five years since his boyhood, when he sat confined in a dark room while he chanted and revised the verses and the histories

of his race” (65). Naddair explains in *Keltic Folk & Faerie Tales: Their Hidden Meaning Explored* (1987) that the training for a bard or druid was rigorous, with the main aim of obtaining wisdom and techniques to ensure a high standard of accuracy in the transmission of ancient traditions. Initial training lasted for eight years, after which a student became a Bard and could then work for a chieftain, or instruction could continue for another four years by which time the student could be initiated as a Fili. Another eight years were needed to become a real Shaman Druid.⁷ If Muiredach trained for twenty-five years, he would certainly be a Shaman Druid. Sources, such as King and Geddes & Grosset, remark that nothing was ever written down at these druidic ‘schools’ as they were concerned with the development of a higher consciousness. Pagan history relied on the mental and oral abilities of these wise men, which explains the lack of a written language. Bragg writes: “Caesar had marvelled at the accuracy and stamina of such Celtic poet-historians who considered it a sign of weakness to write things down” (65). The village priests gradually replaced the druids and poets. Nichols is of the opinion that many of the priests of the early Celtic Church were druids and “maintained [their] connection with Nature – as a study of their prayers and poetry will show...” (1990: 14). In *Credo* we find both Muiredach the druid and Donal the priest. Cathal’s sympathies tend towards the pagan customs: “[he] was seeking comparison with men of legend” (41). He hopes to be immortalised amongst the mythical heroes of Irish history, as was the case with kings like Finn MacCool, Cormac, Cu Chulainn, Conor MacNessa and the O’Neills. In Celtic sagas heroes and kings are often portrayed as having godlike characteristics. Cathal’s pagan affinities are clearly explained by his wish to be verbally celebrated in the oral traditions of his culture and ancestors. We learn that Muiredach has “turned his [Cathal’s] epic exploits into epic verse” (65). This glorification of the self stands in direct contrast to what the Christian myth proclaims: humility – as is evident in Donal’s character. Cathal’s inner struggle between the two traditions is explained: “[he] had great trouble with Christ, not the

⁷ Shamanism as mythical element will be extensively discussed in the chapter dealing with *American Gods*.

birth but much of the teaching and everything about that compliant death. He senses a concealed motive for all this piety” (35). This observation reflects directly on Bega’s sentiments and the element of fear (to which I return later), especially when hell is the reward for a lack of piety in a linear religion and reincarnation the reward of a pagan, cyclical belief system.

What the novel competently illustrates is a transitional phase where one mythology is in conflict with, and gradually replaces, another, the pagan versus the Biblical. Northrop Frye views the absorption of one mythology into another as an indication that all mythologies are “imaginatively” (1976: 17) the same. As previously mentioned, the importance of certain symbolical metaphors are present in both mythologies; a stone, a tree, a piece of wood, fertility images, “a world-girdling serpent” (17), a mother goddess and a god sacrificed on a tree. In the novel, the main differences between pagan and Classical mythologies and Christian mythology seem to be the cyclical versus the linear, the seasonal and matriarchal versus the patriarchal and the seriousness or lack of pleasure attributed to Christian mythology. (Paging through the novel, it is impossible to find one moment of pure light-heartedness in any events related to the Christian characters.)

Historical setting and verification of characters in *Credo*

This book is a work of fiction. While I enjoyed both using and following the history, I ‘made’ the characters – even the historical figures – as I wanted them to be. I tried not to misrepresent the history but I always put the fiction first.

(Bragg 1996: 785)

The novel starts in 647 A.D.,⁸ preceding and following the Whitby Synod. During this time the Catholic Church in Ireland and Scotland was still quasi-pagan and struggling under the pressure of the Roman Catholic Church, the occupation of England and the invasions of the Vikings. At the same time, tribes fought each other for leadership in various areas of the British Isles. These religious and geographical struggles are intertwined in the plot and contribute to the process of transformation in the novel. The main implication of the transformation is evident in the actions of the female protagonist, Bega.

Bragg writes in the afterword to the novel that he created Bega's character after a visit to St Bega's church in Bassenthwaite in the Lake Districts. It is uncertain whether this is the same person mentioned in Bede's *A History of the English Church and People* (1982) but the invented characters in the novel often have an historical, or in this case partly hagiographical, underpinning. Bragg admits that "the great debt for the largest part of the historical access to this elusive, largely unknown ... dramatic period in ... history" is Bede's text (1996: 785). Bede relates the following in his chapter on St Hilda's life about a nun who had a vision of Hilda's death:

In this place (at Hackness) there was a devout nun named Begu, who had vowed herself to God in virginity in the monastic life over thirty years previously. As she was resting in the sister's dormitory, she suddenly heard in the air the well-known note of the bell that used to wake and call them to prayer when any of the sisters had died. Opening her eyes, as she thought, she saw the soul of God's servant Hilda borne up to heaven in the midst of the light accompanied and guided by angels. Then she awoke, and seeing the other sisters lying

⁸ Morris gives an historical summary: "600-650. The empire and Christianity of Kent collapsed, 616. Northumbrian supremacy, 617-642, was overthrown by Penda of the Mercians, with Welsh allies. The monastic impetus faded in Wales but renewed its vigour among the Irish. 650-800. The Mercian kings held empire over the southern English; the Northumbrian monarchy lost authority after 700. The Northumbrians and Mercians accepted monastic Christianity from the Irish, and the English and the Irish carried it to Europe north of the Alps" (1998: 518).

around her, realized that what she had seen was either a dream or a vision.

(1982: 249)

The historical event therefore seems to support the fictional Bega's devotion, chastity and contact with Hilda. Bega's character will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter as she is central to one of the main differences between Celtic and Christian mythology, namely a matriarchal belief system versus a patriarchal hegemony.

The first few chapters in Book One (A.D. 657) of the novel describe the simple yet regal life at the court of king Cathal of Connachta, ancestor of the great Brion.⁹ Connachta or Connaught, as it is now known, is one of the 'five fifths' (King 1998: 106) of Ireland. According to myth Eochaid, the first true king of Ireland, divided the country into the provinces that are known today as Leinster, Munster, Ulster, Connaught and Meath, the fifth with the seat of the High King at Tara. These areas were each given a series of characteristics. Connaught is regarded as the area of wisdom, true judgement and the centre of druids and magicians. Ulster was the province with the fiercest warriors. In the myths these two regions were constantly involved in a struggle, as is evident in the Ulidian tales, which describe their continued state of warfare. Cathal's desire to see Bega married to an Ulsterman is therefore strategic. Bega is well aware of this when she contemplates that "[h]er father's insistence on searching out a dynastic marriage had resisted her fiercest arguments" (1996: 14-15). Not only would it ensure the likelihood of peace between the two counties, but also, in the light of Celtic custom, the female had equal opportunity to be the ruler of an area, which could mean territorial expansion for Cathal's off-spring and ultimately more power. Bragg's

⁹ Cathal and his suggested ancestry are invention. Brion could refer to the god Bran, as Celtic myths often regard kings and chieftains as the children of gods and goddesses. Yet Bran is more a Welsh god, from the Brythonic pantheon, than Gaelic. King claims that "before the sixth century, there is no record of any native Briton using it [the name]" (161). History tells of Brian Boru, one of the greatest warrior kings of Ireland, but Boru lived after the time of *Credo* and defeated the Danish at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 (183-84).

description of the disaster at the wedding contributes imaginatively to the age-old struggle of history and legend.

In the chapters that deal with events in Ireland, Bragg further introduces the reader to other typical Celtic characters: the lawgiver Eogon, the witch-like soothsayer Cassayr (most ancient mythologies contain an oracle, prophetic or priestess such as this; the phenomenon also has a parallel in the prophecy related by Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother in the Bible), and captives from other tribes who become slaves like Maeve, Bega's personal companion. The contrast between the remaining ancient traditions and the Christian milieu in the rest of the novel is representative of the mythological transformation it represents.

With the introduction of Niall O'Neill, the son of a fellow chieftain, Bragg further establishes the traditional Celtic setting. Niall O'Neill is the suitor who is rejected by Bega. His elaborate arrival and jovial yet cunning approach is representative of a typical Celtic hero. In the legend *Mac Datho's Boar*, Conor Mac Nessa from Ulster arrives in exactly the same fashion at the castle of Mac Datho from Leinster (Delaney 1989: 50). Niall's historical relations are verifiable. According to John King (1998) and John Morris (1995) the O'Neill clan ruled for almost 600 years. The historical Niall Noigiallach was one of the Scotti and High King of Ireland; his descendants are known as "the Ui Neill" (King 1998: 180). Niall died in AD 405. The last king crowned at Tullaghoge¹⁰ in 1593 before the stone throne was smashed was Hugh O'Neill.¹¹ The political importance of the marriage Cathal plans for Bega is thus established, although the clan is portrayed rather negatively in the novel: O'Neill's role is finally relegated to that of a savage rapist.

¹⁰ Tullaghoge, which is in county Tyrone, is the historical crowning-place of the O'Neills. The king had to sit on the stone throne during his inauguration and sandals were fitted to his feet. This tradition continued from the twelfth to the seventeenth century. Lord Mountjoy destroyed the stone in 1602 (Pennick 2000: 45). The same tradition existed in Scotland where the stone was reputedly confiscated by Edward II of England, but is currently in Edinburgh Castle (Davies 2000: 158).

¹¹ Postdating Hugh was Phelim O'Neill, who was inaugurated without the throne (Pennick 1996: 45).

The horrific rape scene in Chapter Ten involving Niall O’Neill and Maeve is functional: it propels the story forward and sends Bega and Padric on their journey. It demonstrates a shift and is ominous as it foreshadows the savage rape of the Celtic cultures of the time by a new oppressor – be it the church, England, the Vikings or regional rivalry.

The historian is ultimately subjective and it is impossible to fully understand all the customs and cultural approaches of a specific era or nation from a temporal and geographical distance, but when the nature of Celtic tradition as related through sagas and historical sources is considered, a rape of this nature is unlikely, especially by someone of O’Neill’s heroic stature. Because women were afforded the same status as men and when the matriarchal role in Celtic society is considered, O’Neill’s action would have been a violation of the inherent heroic Celtic ethos.

The legend of Boudica (or Boudicca) adds support to this view. According to multiple sources Boudica was queen of the Iceni, a Celtic tribe in what is now called East Anglia. She ruled after her husband died at around AD 61. She refused to submit to Roman rule. Consequently, Roman soldiers repeatedly raped her two daughters, while Boudica¹² herself was severely tortured. The Iceni rebelled and, because of the offensive nature of the crime other Celtic tribes soon joined in. The rebellion against the Romans and the invasion of London can certainly be regarded as an act of revenge, but the unification of the Celtic tribes in support of Boudica’s cause illustrates the gravity with which the Celts responded to rape.

Whereas the reader is introduced to the Celtic characters in the first section of the novel, Bragg presents a whole range of Christian characters in Book Two.

¹² Boudica, called the “unclean lioness” by Gildas (Morris 1995: 36) consequently invaded many Roman areas and finally London. Although London (Londinium) was a very small settlement at the time, King remarks, “this is the only occasion in history when a Celtic army successfully invaded and occupied the city of London” (1998: 144).

Erebert, Cuthbert and Wilfred (all historical figures) are the patriarchal figures who replace Cathal in Bega's new environment.

In the context of the novel, Erebert is the epitome of a sado-masochistic messenger. He is like the malicious dwarf in *Tristan and Iseult*. The mental pain others experience has no impact on him. He is guilty of pride. His obsession to please Cuthbert and in the process claim some fame for himself removes him from any form of holiness. Erebert derives great joy from physical punishment to himself and others like Chad, the little boy in Bega's care. The story he tells Chad about St Alban in Chapter Twenty-eight is intended more to put the fear of God into the child than to relate the love of Christ. Contrary to his cruelty and insensitivity he wants to be a martyr. He has the very characteristics that the Inquisition needed in the Dark Ages. His hatred of anything pagan is evident and obsessive. The fact that he is obviously a Celtic Christian makes him seem more like someone who wants to deny his roots at all costs.

Cuthbert, on the other hand, is cold, calculating and very intelligent. He is a master strategist and orator. His final aim of conversion is to obtain more ground, souls and money for the church. Like Erebert he is intolerant of anybody who stands in the way of his great mission. He has no time for romantic desires and sees Bega and the wooden fragment as means to achieve what he wants.

Wilfred is charismatic yet intimidating, arrogant and charming and very aware of his sexuality. He is also greedy and materialistic and this observation is supported by most historical sources. Wilfred is playfully flirtatious with Hilda and annoyed because Bega does not falter before his charisma and authority. He becomes obsessed with Bega because of her attitude towards him. For all their apparent differences, there is something similar between Wilfred and Bega in their aim to outwit each other. The section where Wilfred quotes from the *Confessions of St Augustine* and Augustine's struggle with the desires of the flesh reveals both their

sensual needs. Bega has been found out and that gives Wilfred power over her. This power is enhanced by the fact that Wilfred is surrounded by his own personal myth. Hilda relates how flames appeared on the roof of the house when his mother gave birth and that a voice told her during the pregnancy, “before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee: and before thou camest out of the womb I sanctified thee and I ordained thee a prophet to the nation” (1996: 303). This recalls the prophecy of John the Baptist, where the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah in a vision and announces Elizabeth’s pregnancy and the birth of John:

...God has heard your prayer, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You are to name him John....
For he will be a great man in the Lord’s sight....
He will go as God’s messenger, strong and mighty like the prophet Elijah. He will bring fathers and children together again; he will turn the disobedient people back to the way of thinking of the righteous; he will get the Lord’s people ready for him.

(The Gospel of Luke 1: 13, 15, 17)

Wilfred is intolerant of anyone who stands in the way of the Roman Church and he regards the Celtic Church as irksome. Conformity to Rome is all he desires, for therein lies power. To him, there is no place for individuality in the Church. Wilfred wants power and wealth, not poverty and independent missionaries. This is evident in his close relationship with Queen Aetheldreda, who bestows land and money on him. His appearance is a far cry from that of Donal in Ireland or even of Erebert and Cuthbert. We read of his “multi-ringed hand” and “fine fur coat” (354). He regards Cuthbert as a threat to his popularity. The conflict which can arise within a faith (mythology) is embodied in Wilfred and Cuthbert’s discord and evident on a larger scale when the real historical issues are addressed at the Synod of Whitby. Like Cathal, Wilfred desires to be remembered as a mythical figure. One wants to be remembered as a pagan hero and brave warrior, the other as a Christian saint (which he indeed became).

The sub-plots in the novel contribute to the historical setting and add to the relevant mythological parallels. The feud between Padric and his cousin Ecfriþ¹³ (son of Oswy) from Northumbria is an example of the mythological transformation process. Ecfriþ, who is married to Aetheldreda, claims to be a Christian king, but his actions, arrogance and adultery contradict his proclaimed value systems, whereas Padric (also a Christian) seems to be more representative of the mythological hero as a descendant from “Arthur’s people” (Bragg 1996: 10). Padric is disturbed because Northumbria has occupied Rheged, rendering his father, Dunmael, subservient to the arrogant Ecfriþ. When the history of these areas is considered, fact once again fuses with myth in much the same way that Bragg uses creative licence to make the story flow, often including characters who lived centuries apart in the same time-frame. For example, Bragg writes that Urien is Padric’s grandfather and it is known that Urien¹⁴ was a historical king, “immortalised by his bard Taliesin, the earliest of the Welsh poets whose works survive” (Morris 1995: 219), who ruled in Rheged in the north-west of England around AD 570.

The history surrounding the occupation and rule of Northumbria and Rheged spans a few centuries.¹⁵ The novel deals with Egfrith’s rule in Northumbria and the occupation of Rheged.¹⁶ The dispute between Rheged and Northumbria recalls the

¹³ Morris confirms (as does Bede) that Oswy had a son called Egferth who was killed by the Picts in 685AD (1995: 303).

¹⁴ Ronan Coghlan (1991) explains that Urien was the father of Owain (who succeeded him), Riwallawn, Run and Pascen. No mention is made of Dunmael. Legend makes Urien the husband of Morgan Le Fay (Arthur’s sister). He is regarded as king of the Scots. Owain defeated the English around AD 593. Legend makes Urien and Owain contemporaries of Arthur. Run or Rhun’s historical lineage could not be traced.

¹⁵ Cf. footnote no. 7.

¹⁶ According to Phillips & Keatman (1992), Rheged belonged to the Novantae tribe that later became part of Northumberland. Historical texts explain that Aethelfrid of Bernicia (which was Northumberland) overpowered much of the northeastern areas to create the kingdom of Northumbria from about 598 to 613. Edwin from East Anglia who succeeded him after his death in 617 defeated Aethelfrid. Aethelfrid’s sons, Oswald and Oswy, were exiled to Ireland, but returned later and Oswy became the king of Northumbria. He continued to defeat Mercia and East Anglia. Penda was the king of Mercia and Aethelred the king of East Anglia. When Oswy defeated the two countries, he installed Penda’s son Peada and Aethelhere’s brother Anna as kings. Subsequently Oswy’s son Ecfriþ (Egfrid) married Anna’s daughter Aetheldreda (Etheldreda) whom we read about in *Credo*, but never meet.

warfare between Connachta and Ulster. Ecfriith claims that his country is Christian, but his actions contradict his convictions. He has no difficulty in seducing Penraddin, Padric's sister, although he is already married, and proceeds to treat Penraddin and her people in much the same way Cathal and the O'Neills treat their slaves and concubines. The physical likeness between Padric and Ecfriith is repeatedly stated and is functional in as far as it reveals to each qualities present in the other that they lack.

Similarities in mythologies

But a myth believed in becomes a 'truth' and other 'truths' have to be dismissed as mere fictions. Christianity is a recent myth that has exhibited this very pattern of deriding other religious myths as false and fictitious.

(O'Connor 2001: 1-2)

Bragg's fascination with Christianity is obvious, but his descriptions of pagan customs and traditions not only demonstrate the religious and cultural changes in Ireland and Britain at the time, but also explain the transformation of mythology from pagan to Christian. The historical events and geographical occupations reflect the gradual infiltration of paganism by Christianity. Myths might be renewed or recreated but the significance of the themes remains the same, because myths reflect the belief systems of a society and one myth is often superimposed on a previous one. The same basic concepts are remodelled, transformed and endowed with mythical qualities to suit the cultural environment and belief systems of another society or group: this process can be termed 'remythification'.

Of this process of transformation Meletinsky states: "Mythification is an aspect of the poetics of the contemporary novel. The result is a series of parallels..." (2000: 277). In *Credo* the elements of the Christian myth could be seen as parallels to various ethical values, motifs and/or themes in Celtic mythology.

The flight of Bega and Padric from Ireland recalls what Frye terms the “Exodus model” (20). These exiles come to deal with the same aspects of dislocation and isolation experienced by the Israelites in Egypt. The exiles harbour the same desires and goals: to return to their land of birth and to obtain freedom from oppression. Many Celtic heroes or/and heroines in the sagas (where flight or banishment is involved) express the same desires, for example in *Diarmuid and Grainne* and *Tristan and Iseult*. Padric and his brothers are motivated by this desire to create a country free from oppression, a land where he and his long-desired queen will rule in justice and devotion. His desire to achieve his goal by being a fierce and brave warrior gives him Arthurian qualities. This is much the same aspiration evident in saga heroes ranging from Cu Chulainn to Troilus. An obvious echo of these examples is Bega the exile’s expressed wish towards the end of the novel: “I want to go back the way I came and go to Inishboffin” (1996: 779).

Book Two (A.D. 657) of *Credo* highlights more similarities between the relevant two mythologies. Certain symbols feature as important metaphors, such as the fragment of the cross Bega carries with her, representative of the “cosmic tree” (Meletinsky 2000: 274). The wooden fragment adds impetus to Bega’s religious conviction and can be regarded as the motivation behind her decision not to pursue a romantic relationship with Padric. Her decision manifests itself in her initial illness. The fragment further encourages Cuthbert to obtain a promise from Bega that she will devote her life to the church as the bride of Christ. Cuthbert’s near-hysterical state of ecstasy draws to a close her feverish struggle between accepting Padric and accepting her vocation when she gives him the wooden fragment and accedes to his request: “You must tell God that you will be His and only His for whatever life He gives you. You must tell Him this now. And,’ he passed the fragment to her, reluctantly but firmly, ‘you must swear it on this cross” (1996: 228). The piece of wood symbolises the extended metaphor associated with the Christian cross. Christ died on a piece of wood, so did Cu Chulainn – on a tree. This parallel is also evident in other mythologies such as Norse mythology, which I will refer to in

Chapter Five when *American Gods* is discussed. Both Celtic and Christian mythologies therefore contain a god/hero on a tree. It is therefore no wonder that the main protagonists' futures in *Credo* are dictated by a wooden fragment. This discussion confirms Frye's remark that "myths differ in social function, but not in structure" (19).

The importance and sacredness of any Celtic site is often connected to a tree, a hill, stones or water. In the Christian mythology these sacred forms have remained the same even if the tradition has changed. Churches were often built on old pagan sites with stones inscribed as having Christian significance in relation to saints, such as St Patrick, or used as baptismal fonts. The hills (Tara and Golgotha), the holy rivers (the Shannon and the Jordan) and purifying waters feature in both mythologies.

Further similarities are noticeable in patterns of worship where Christian festivals are often practised on the same or around the same time as original pagan festivals.¹⁷ The crisis surrounding the Synod of Whitby centred on the exact date on which Easter should be observed. Thus we read in *Credo* that the Irish church "with [its] old-fashioned reckoning ... threatened the unity of Christendom.... Wilfred demanded conformity with the disciplined hierarchy of Rome" (Morris 1995: 394). Wilfred's pro-Roman affiliation supports the fact that although the dating of Easter was the ostensible problem, the Synod dealt with far more profound differences between the Celtic and Roman forms of Christianity. The fact that the more traditionally Celtic approaches of the Celtic (Irish) church succumbed to the far

¹⁷ According to King (1998: 58-59) and various other sources, the Celts measure the year from midsummer to midsummer with eight major festivals. The Celtic festivals and Christian equivalents are as follows: Beltane, a festival celebrated on 1 May which marked the beginning of Celtic summer; Midsummer, a fire festival (dedicated to St. John); Lughnasad or Lughnasa, celebrated in August (mass of the loaf or bread); Ostara, autumnal equinox (Easter); Mabon, vernal equinox; Samhain, celebrated in November (All Saints, All Hallows or Hallowmass); midwinter solstice celebrated the day the sun began to fight back winter (Christmas) and Imbolc, celebrated at the beginning of February or spring (Candlemas commemorating the purification of Mary).

more rigid, hierarchical Roman tradition is significant to the process of re-mythification in *Credo*.

Differences between Celtic and Christian mythology

It is not insignificant that the ancient Greeks [and other peoples] made gods of Love (Eros), War (Ares) and Retribution (Nemesis), but not a god of the word (the logos)... In opposition to this, Christianity made God one with the word and wiped out the others.

(Comte 1994: 1)

Fundamental differences between the two relevant mythologies in *Credo* exist and I have alluded to these at various intervals. I have mentioned that pagan traditions are cyclical, seasonal and reincarnational in nature; they are community-orientated, consist of a pantheon with a variety of gods and goddesses, kings and queens, heroes and heroines. Christianity, on the other hand, is linear, focuses on individual redemption, centres on one god (albeit a trinity), is devoid of female divinities, has the concept of guilt/evil/sin central to its tradition and focuses on spreading the 'word of God'. The "concept of guilt as original sin" (Meletinsky 2000: 294) is central to the Christian faith and is linked to punishment and redemption. The belief in punishment existed in pagan traditions, but the idea of redemption did not. Natural disasters such as drought or flood were regarded as punishment for lack of celebration at a particular seasonal festival. Sin as an inherited quality never existed before Christianity. Christianity emphasises the distance between God and humankind with the concept of sin and it is from sin and blame or guilt that mankind seeks redemption.

It is said that Christian missionaries found it easy to convert polytheistic pagans because of the monotheistic nature of Christianity (the unnamed god, who is the main god). Yet, Christianity (with God as Trinity) also contains dualism. The devil and Christ/God are often endowed with equal powers and emotions of wrath,

as is evident in Cuthbert's threat to Bega: "If you speak of this ... then God will use His strong right arm to smite you down in the fullness of your sins so that you will burn in hell for eternity" (226–27). Christianity teaches of the fear of God and the fear of the Devil. To anger any one of the two will have the same result – damnation. The inseparability between the two divinities is captured in Reggiani's remark:

I am not your devil. I don't know him any more than I know your God. And to be plain with you, I don't want to know either of them. They don't sound like the gods you need to lead a life through the days of it.

(1996: 430)

Eternal damnation does not exist in pagan mythologies and historically they contain no religious dogma. Therefore the contrast and conflict between Bega and Reggiani regarding their individual belief systems are functional in the novel in representing the different mythologies embodied in the process of transition.

The pertinent difference of sin presented in the patriarchal discourse of Christianity had a significant impact on literature and on the capturing of original sagas and myths. Purely pagan, oral transmissions of sagas and myths became distinctly flavoured with Christian values in medieval times. These sagas and legends were preserved by Christian monks and scribes. Meletinsky explains the broader implications of this for literature:

Even as Celtic, Germanic, and other European mythologies were exhausted in popular consciousness and paganism became sanitized and demythologised, myths became a source of a renewed poetic and literary inventiveness. In general, medieval literature seems to have been dominated by Christian religious mythology, a mythology that was more spiritual than its classical forebears. Christian mythology insists on viewing the phenomenal world as the material manifestation of a religious essence and of a higher morality.

(2000: 259)

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries literature started dealing with heroes contemplating the invincible forces of evil (such as *Hamlet* and *Faust*) and the moral dilemma resulting from sin (Meletinsky 2000: 261). An analysis of Bega's character is therefore integrated into this section as it is underpinned by the role of sin and the function of fear and guilt in Christian mythology. Furthermore, the essential difference of matriarchy versus patriarchy in the relevant mythologies seems to support Bega's decision to remain chaste. Bega's resolution is a direct contradiction of Celtic matriarchal values and their emphasis on fertility. She explains her resolution to Padric:

‘Virginity,’ said Bega, with a piety which unreasonably redoubled Padric’s dislike of Cuthbert – for he could see the zealot’s hand in this adamant dedication – ‘is the greatest gift any woman can give to Him. He rejoices in our virginity. For Him it is the first evidence of a pure soul.’

(1996: 232)

Her choice of chastity reflects on the patristic theology of the time in which the novel is set, but as the extract suggests, Bega's motivation seems ambiguous. One never gets the feeling that her decision is ever made in a logical, well-considered way. She is to adhere to the resolution of chastity, persuaded both by patriarchal figures (first Donal and then Cuthbert), as well as the myths surrounding her faith. In her choice of a religious vocation and virginity, Bega joins other monastic women¹⁸ such as St Etheldreda of Ely and St Hilda of Whitby, but her motivation and apparent amnesia about the physical nature of her relationship with Padric renders her choice questionable. Roz Kaveney remarks that Bega and Padric “are

¹⁸ In contrast to St Hilda, the reader never meets Aetheldreda, but she is a strong presence in both Padric's and Bega's lives. St Etheldreda of Ely is referred to in the text as Aetheldreda, wife of Ecfrith of Northumbria. Bede explains that Aetheldreda was previously married to Tondbert from South Gyrwas (1982: 238). Her virginity is said to have outlasted two marriages. She later entered the convent at Coldingham. She founded the double monastery at Ely, of which she was abbess until her death, and posthumously performed three miracles. The latter all occurred when the sanctity of her body was threatened.

motivated through half a century of plot by the single occasion on which their love was consummated” and that “Bragg conveys this crucial moment in a single unequivocal sentence” (1996: 40). The love theme is undermined by Bega’s indecisiveness, which casts doubt on her religious credibility. For all Bega’s declarations of holiness, she never quite comes across in the true image of a nun. She too often ponders the sensuality of her infatuation with Padric and responds to it. We read that when he smiles “her stomach leap[s] like a salmon” (452). She admits “that when most she wanted to worship Jesus Christ it was the face and figure of Padric who appeared and then her body grew hot until it shivered with remorse. How could she see this mortal man when it was the Son of God whose face she sought?” (299) Bega’s reaction every time she sees Padric contradicts the ideal behaviour of a devout nun:

The image of Padric came to her, striding across the field just the day before: the way he held himself, the sure thrust of his walk, the deliberate scanning of the landscape for her, her own quick, heart-leaping response, running at first, running until the beating of her own breath told her that she was behaving wholly improperly.

(1996: 466)

Ironically, she claims St Brigid as her patron saint. Brigit¹⁹ was a symbol of fertility, the Celtic mother-goddess, goddess of fire and light and the daughter of the Dagda (the father-god of Ireland). Bega’s desire for chastity contradicts the Celtic symbolism of Brigit.

In contrast to Bega, the Abbess Hilda’s devotion seems more credible, as her realistic approach to chastity reveals: “Remember that it is not necessary to be a virgin. That is a high state for which not all are fitted. There are those whom God

¹⁹ She was later Christianised into St Brigid or Bridget and her name means “the Shining One” (King 1998: 59). Along with Saint Patrick she is the patron saint of Ireland. The feast of *Imbolc* (also known as *Oimealg* in Goidelic) was dedicated to her.

seeks out after they have lost their wholeness in marriage...” (1996: 463). This view relates to the fact that not all Anglo-Saxon nuns or even abbesses such as Hilda were virgins. Many of them were widows or separated from their husbands but took a vow of chastity when they entered religious houses, which provided sanctuary, especially to such vulnerable single women in times of invasion and upheaval. Hilda’s devotion seems less beguiling and without emotional intricacies, perhaps because, unlike the fictional character Bega, she is a true historical figure and her unconditional dedication well-recorded.²⁰ In contrast to Bega’s, Hilda’s decision to devote her life to her faith was made over a long period of time and not because of a mystical piece of wood. Bega’s ritual fasting and bodily suffering are firmly connected to her sense of guilt. Her extended self-punishment could be a result of what she refuses to acknowledge (sexual intercourse) or express (her continued desire for Padric) and her awareness that her “sin is within the absolute sight (*regard*) of God” (Ricoeur 1969: 84). Bega admits: “For surely it was a most terrible sin, a worship of something even more to be avoided than a graven image: to see a man where she ought to see her God?” (299) During her fasting she enters a hallucinatory state; these stages are often physically painful and filled with dark, seductive demons. Bega’s sense of guilt is over-powering and manifests itself in fear. As Ricoeur explains:

This “realism” of sin will not be fully understood until it is approached through the new factor in the consciousness of fault that we shall call guilt. Strictly speaking, it is only with this new moment that the *consciousness* of sin becomes the criterion and the measure of fault. The feeling of guilt will coincide

²⁰ According to Bede she spent the first thirty-three years of her life in “secular occupations ... renounced her home and all that she possessed...” (1982: 246) and devoted the last thirty-three years of her life to the church. Hilda died in 680 A.D. and was elevated to sainthood within a few years. On 17 November the feast of St Hilda is celebrated. Ironically, a very pagan-like myth is told about Hilda. It is believed that the migrating geese that annually fly down from the Arctic to the ruins of the abbey at Whitby are pilgrims paying respect in remembrance of St Hilda (Lacey & Danziger 1999: 168–69).

exactly with the consciousness that the guilty one has of
[herself]....

(1969: 81-82)

The situation is aggravated by her sporadic contemplation of the possibility of leaving the nunnery and marrying Padric, “How she would have to summon up all her courage to tell Hilda she wanted to cease being a nun” (512-13). She tries to justify this decision by planning to remain chaste in marriage (like Aetheldreda) and in the process only intensifies her sense of guilt.

The difference between Bega’s choice of religious vocation and that of female heroines or goddesses in Celtic mythology is clearly illustrated in her subconscious denial of her physical union with Padric. Her denial springs from the choice between virginity and fertility. It is within this consideration of virginity versus sexual activity/fertility, imposed by myths and their value systems, that the novel fulfils an additional informative function. From a feminist perspective one could embark on discussions about the effect of these value systems of the two relevant mythologies on the views of women in society (historically and currently). This thesis does not pretend to have a feminist approach, although feminist concepts are applied briefly in this discussion of matriarchy versus patriarchy.

The concept of fertility in Celtic traditions versus the choice of virginity in a Christian approach is clearly illustrated in the contrast between Bega and Reggiani, the pagan priestess or herbalist in *Credo*. Reggiani is representative of everything fertile, vibrant and matriarchal in the Celtic tradition. Bega seems bleak and sterile in contrast. Reggiani is the only female who directly confronts Bega’s convictions; “What puzzles me is why you Christians are so determined that the rest of us must share your faith. Why are you so fierce about it?” (1996: 429). Bega’s sense of piety is no greater than Reggiani’s sense of sacredness. Both women’s beliefs spring from what they hold dear, yet Reggiani’s point of view is more tolerant, accommodating and less judgemental. It is ironic that these two ‘monasteries’ lie so closely together and that Bega is dependent on Reggiani’s herbs for her settlement’s

well-being. One never gets the feeling that Reggiani is prejudiced against Bega's religion, although the opposite seems to be true. Bega's subjectivity is evident in her thoughts, "Seductive as Reggiani was, her authority came from sources and gods which were the enemies of the one God. Bega needed to make clear the gulf and the separation between them" (1996: 440). On the other hand, a sardonic amusement is detectable in Reggiani's response to Bega's remarks:

'The herbs are the gifts of God.'
'Ah yes. Your God makes everything, doesn't he?'
'He does.'
'The good and the wicked?'
'The good to combat the wicked.'
'And that is why you starve?'
'And that is why we fast. That is why we pray.'
'We too pray,' ... 'Every day. To the waters, to the woods, to the sky, to all our gods who live in this place.'
'We have total and complete faith in the one God.'
(1996: 429)

In these words Reggiani summarises, from a pagan perspective, the intolerance and monotheism of the Christian faith.

Whereas Bega is described as "pale, wretched, scraggy", "wild, pinch-faced, dirty" (372) and often ill, Reggiani is always described in vibrant and sensuous tones:

Reggiani had dressed in all her magnificence. Though the steel dawn was only just raising itself, her jewels and polished ceramics glittered. She was as blond as Bega was dark, as lush as Bega was lean, as open as Bega was secretive. She had acted all her adult life in the knowledge that no one could afford to be without her skills in medicine and no man would resist her wish to take him. Legends were woven about her powers, her life and reputation in that valley and even beyond, and she was aware of this. She glowed as if she herself had brought up the dawn.

(1996: 607)

Celtic myths, unlike other ancient European myths, are more female-orientated and have “little of the heavy crudeness that repels one in Germanic and Scandinavian stories” (Geddes & Grosset 1999: 14). O’Connor confirms female prominence and states that “...it is the goddesses who emerge as the most powerful divinities in Irish mythology. There seems to be within Irish mythology a permanent supremacy of divine women, and the male divinities must acknowledge this supremacy” (2001: 29). The queen, goddess or heroine is the one with whom any aspiring king must mate before they can rule and thereafter she is never relegated to a lesser role, but often transformed into another form of powerful divinity. The female is essential in the eternal cycle of birth, life and death, representative of the renewal of the seasons. O’Connor writes: “her promiscuity clearly symbolizes the ongoing fertility of the land” (2001: 9). This is evident in myths about Queen Medb of Connacht as it is related in *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* (Delaney 1989: 99). Queen Medb (Maeve) becomes Cu Chulainn’s fiercest enemy in the struggle to obtain possession of the all-powerful Brown Bull. Her husband King Ailill seems but a weak follower of her fearless, cunning and savage strategies in battle. In addition, even Cu Chulainn steps back when Medb’s fertility (menstruation) becomes evident before a battle. In the saga *Tain (The Cattle Raid of Cooley)*, reference is made to this incident. As soon as Cu Chulainn realises her situation, he spares her life:

Maeve’s army retreated, a phalanx of shields protecting their rear flank. Cuchulainn caught up with her as she attended to women’s business in the place that they call the Poisoned Glen, ever since Maeve’s blood fouled it. While she squatted there she asked Cuchulainn for mercy and he granted it – as he said, he did not kill women.

(Delaney 1994: 131)

The menstrual cycle is regarded as essential in the continued cycle of fertility, procreation, birth and death, and was treated with great respect in the sagas.

On the other hand, in Christian mythology female sexuality and the female body are seen as representative of evil and desire and are relegated to something sinful. This approach is evident in Chapter Twenty-Five where Bega is suffering from unexplained bleeding. Cuthbert remarks: ““It is the devil coming out of her.... He has taken possession and now she is attempting to throw him out”” (225). In the Bible menstruation and bleeding after childbirth are regarded as a time of impurity (likened to contamination) and not related to sexuality or fertility. In Leviticus it is stated that “the Lord gave Moses the following regulations for the people of Israel. For seven days after a woman gives birth to a son, she is ritually unclean, as she is during her monthly period” (12: 8). This patristic corporeality is further extended should the child be female, in which case “[the mother] is ritually unclean ... for fourteen days” and “...it will be sixty-six more days before she is ritually clean from her loss of blood” (Leviticus 12: 5). Leonie Viljoen explains the “three basic images of the possibilities of woman” as viewed by the dominant patriarchal hegemony: “woman as whore, woman as wife, and woman as virgin” (2002: 21). She further clarifies that: “The coding of femininity with corporality in effect leaves men to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order while at the same time enabling them to satisfy their (sometimes disavowed) need for corporeal contact through their access to women’s bodies and services” (2002: 23-24). This misogynistic approach disregards the reality of femininity and is still currently evident in social attitudes. The conflict between Bega and Reggiani not only drives the development of the plot in *Credo* but also prompts the reader to reflect on issues of female embodiment as manifested in the two conflicting mythologies.

Christianity is based on patriarchal values and by remaining chaste Bega ensures her place of honour in a faith where the purity of the chaste female body is revered above any other female qualities, because the female body is associated with sin. By denying her sexuality, Bega becomes more like the Virgin Mary (the sacred female icon in Christian mythology) and less like Eve (the temptress and

seductress),²¹ while becoming closer to the masculinity of the man who is regarded as the true image of God. Urien's contemplation confirms this approach: "Women were for dynastic breeding or irresponsible lust.... Women were admired because they were like men or adored because they were like the Virgin Mary" (338). Because of her conviction, Bega is more bent on submission and martyrdom than on sensuality. O'Connor summarises the different approaches towards sexuality as follows: "... Christianity has demonised both body and bodily pleasures, and the Christian otherworld, hell, has become a place of punishment for the very pleasures that the ancient Irish delighted in" (38). Ironically, Bega's decision to remain a virgin bride of Christ is a lie, because she has already consummated her relationship with Padric. Her repeated bouts of fasting and hallucinatory states can therefore be regarded as forms of self-punishment and acts of repression, because of her overt sense of guilt. According to Hjelle & Ziegler, "Freud regarded repression as the primary ego defense....²² Sometimes described as selective forgetting, repression completely obstructs the expression of unconscious sexual and aggressive impulses so that they cannot be admitted to awareness, at least as long as they remain objectionable to the person" (1981: 47-8). Bega's physically ill appearance, hallucinatory trances and emotional turmoil in reaction to "anxiety-provoking conflicts" (1981: 48) seem explanatory as the consequences of long-term repression. The following remark is pertinent in this regard:

[t]he constant striving of repressed impulses for overt expression may find momentary gratification through dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue, and other manifestations of what Freud called the "psychopathology of everyday life". Moreover, from the Freudian perspective, repression is centrally involved in all neurotic behaviour, psychosomatic

²¹ In his article *The Cain myth: a discussion of its historical roots and an interpretation* Donovan Marais argues that "[t]he narrative of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is entirely based on myth. Not only is Mary the replacement of Eve, the 'New Eve', but also the 'Mother of God'. Through her association with Jesus, Mary, a human, became elevated to the ranks of the gods" (1994: 85).

²² "Defense" as discussed in the source under "Ego Defense Mechanisms" (1981: 47-50).

ailments (e.g. ulcers), and psychosexual disorders (e.g. impotence, frigidity).

(Hjelle & Ziegler 1981: 48)

Bega's 'anxiety-provoking conflict' seems to be her choice of vocation, her desire for Padric and her repression of the memory of their sexual union.

Bega's character contains some qualities of the Celtic warrior woman, such as bravery. Her fighting skills are revealed when she attacks the chief and his men who threaten her mission party on the way to Whitby. Celtic women were renowned for fighting alongside their men and her action illustrates her pagan roots: "Bega was relentless ... even when they began to back away and their cries went up for mercy, she kept moving forward, the sun glittering about her, the sword seemingly dipped in fiercest light as it swung and slashed and stabbed, the blood itself glistening in the sun's light..." (293) The slaying of the people who resisted her is justified within the framework of Bega's convictions: "This ... was what she had been chosen for: to bring God's word to a pagan world, if necessary with a sword" (294). Bega fiercely judges Reggiani when she sacrifices a cockerel to avoid the plague, but there are moments when she lapses into pagan customs herself. When Bega and Colman arrive at the coast facing Ireland, we read: "Had Colman not been with her she would have kneeled down and worshipped – the sea? The invisible land beyond it? The spirit and the ghost of her father" (1996: 408). Her bravery and moments of reflection on traditional pagan customs confirm Bega's character within the historical setting of the novel, clearly illustrating the clash and intermingling of customs and motifs between mythologies in a process of transition. Although Bega reveals moments of inconsistency in her act of 'worship', one should not fail to comprehend the enormity of her decision or the sacrifices of nuns who chose chastity out of religious conviction. One can only assume that then, as now, the denial of natural sexuality was a difficult undertaking. Yet, in spite of sympathy for Bega's struggle against her attraction for Padric and her victory in not succumbing to her desire, her denial and religious fanaticism invalidate complete

understanding of her inner conflict. Bega therefore obtains the contemporary audience's sympathy, but not necessarily our understanding of her internal struggle between her worldly and physical desires and spiritual quest. The novel seems to be less concerned with the reader's interpretation and more concerned with the historically acceptable reactions of the time. It is therefore functional, not in that it fulfils the reader's expectations, but in the fact that it keeps the historical context surrounding a mythology alive. In defence of Bega, and in terms of the theological and social concerns of the time, it could be argued that Bega refuses to marry Padric, because "If the wife was totally submissive body, obedient to the male as her 'head', an instrument of procreation and deriving no personal pleasure or recognition as 'other' in the relationship, then it becomes clear why the role of virgin would seem far more desirable" (Viljoen 2002: 21-22). Padric indeed admits to Bega's procreative function, "with me you could provide heirs to two kingdoms" (233), but he also offers:

'I will not stand in your way. Serve God, but be with me. Do His will, but help me too. Help me build up His Kingdom. Help me rebuild this kingdom. There are souls to whom you can give an example. There will be the work of teaching – no other woman in Rheged is as learned as you....'

(1996: 233)

He seems prepared to allow her to live outside the constraints imposed on women by their society. Bega's decision to remain devout is not a victory for female independence, but rather confirms her submission to patriarchy. Through her choice she exchanges her father's control (earthly patriarchy) for spiritual patriarchy.

The sub-plots in the context of mythification

As he stood full in the power of the boat's speed,
he could imagine again – as so often haunted him –

those pagan warriors skim from the eastern seas on to the long white strands of Northumbria which now they called their own and on across to Rheged on the Western shore where the last of the Britons, his father's people, Arthur's people, were now threatened with extinction.

Padric dreamed of defeating them, and of claiming back the whole of the island for those to whom it rightfully belonged.

(Bragg 1996: 10)

A large part of the novel's fascination lies in the various sub-plots and the colourful descriptions of the customs and historical events of the time. The sub-plots are essential in that they reveal and contrast the deep moral conflicts and struggles of the main protagonists. The narration contains a multitude of integrated fictional and historical characters.

The sub-plot surrounding Ecfrieth, who is married to Aetheldreda but is pursuing Penraddinn as concubine, reflects on the possible implications a relationship of similar qualities could have for Padric and Bega. Ecfrieth, who looks like Padric, represents Padric's dark side. We read: "Padric found himself face to face with a man whose looks were disturbingly like his own.... Only the eyes marked a difference; the eyes of Ecfrieth were narrower..." (1996: 165).

The struggle for Rheged's independence from Ecfrieth's rule is mainly illustrated through the experiences of Padric's immediate group. The group consists of four men: himself, his two brothers Urien and Riderch and a soldier and friend, Owain. Together their ideals, battles and bravery recall the quest tales. As is often the case not only in Celtic sagas, but also in Arthurian legends, the hero is accompanied or supported by devoted kings, warriors or/and brothers. In the Cu Chulainn sagas there are characters such as Fergus Mac Roth, Fiacha, Ferdia and Laoghaire Buadhach. In the Arthurian legends there are Galahad, Lancelot and Percival. These groups are reminiscent of the old Germanic *comitatus* ethic, where

loyalty to the leader, to the death, was the highest value; they seem to represent a metaphor of that older legendary-historical-mythical code of behaviour. It is through Padric's group that the reader learns more about the customs and traditions of the time.

The relationship between Urien and Reggiani serves as a foil for Bega and Padric's relationship. There is a tolerance between them towards their individual convictions that is not noticeable in many of the other relationships of people from the same faith. Urien reveals some chauvinistic qualities and remarks that women can be admired for certain aspects, but that they are "...not better than wine *and* a fire. And not in the same breath as wine and a fire and a comrade" (458). In spite of this, he respects Reggiani for the head-strong and independent woman she is. He is a symbolic bridge between paganism and Christianity. There is freedom in his own religious convictions, which allows for the existence of Reggiani's perspective. In a sense, he seems to manage that synthesis in a new pantheistic mythology of "the sensuality of ancient paganism and the spirituality of Christianity" referred to by Meletinsky in relation to German Romantics such as Schlegel and Schleiermacher (2000: 266).

There is a beautiful passage in Chapter Forty-eight where Urien contemplates his Christian faith against Reggiani's pagan belief in spirits and multiple gods. Urien claims to experience a deep spiritual feeling when he stands in the rain or sails on water:

He would look up and see the clouds untroubled
by the deluge they had let loose and his mind and spirit
would become numbed in a trance of understanding.
Understanding what, he could not hope to explain. But
there was a sense of rightness about the way of the
water, a sense which he never drew from Christianity.
(1996: 460)

This response is similar to Bega's reaction upon reaching the Irish coast and could likewise be symbolic of a deep-seated pagan pantheism; a profound reverence for the natural elements not yet replaced by Christianity. Urien's contemplation gives his character a deeper psychological shade than what we see in Padric. He is someone who does not over-analyse. He trusts his instincts and this makes him a contented man, as is evident in the following thought:

He let the restless, unloosed spirits, pagan and Christian alike, come to him out of the darkness. Soon he would be with them, he thought, smiling to himself contentedly, striding soon enough towards a glorious death in battle.

(1996: 460)

If Bragg developed Urien's character any further, one could speculate that he would have been like Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, a threat to the main protagonist's importance. Urien is sensitive but not melancholic, he is wise but not forceful, and he is attractive and fun. He loves Padric dearly and he follows him because of his loyalty and bravery, not for power or fame.

Riderch, Padric's other brother, also reveals warrior qualities evident in sagas and legends. He is steadfast and solid. His family matters greatly to him. In Chapter Fifty there is a section where Riderch catches and tames a wild horse. His tender, yet forceful approach yields the horse to his power without any great struggle, "Riderch simply stood there, making no attempt to touch the nervously trembling beast. Talking, seeking to breathe his breath into the horse. Waiting..." (472) Finally he proclaims: "That will be my horse now" (473). This incident evokes the intimate and interdependent relationship between the warrior and his horse so prevalent in Celtic sagas. Owain represents the committed fighter present in all the quest sagas. He is convinced of the righteousness of Padric's cause. The group illustrates true Celts, brave warriors who love their women, their horses, their hounds and their feasts.

Conclusion

The above discussion of *Credo* reveals the customs and traditions surrounding the transformation of myth from pagan to Christian belief systems during the late seventh century. The historical events the novel deals with, the contemporary issues of the time and the shift from ancient Celtic mythology to Christian mythology illustrate that myth is central, not only to a specific era and its *zeitgeist*, but also to the creative recreation, in literature, of that particular time. My exploration has contextualised the novel historically and either placed the characters historically or discussed them as inventions relevant in reflecting the process of mythical transformation. I have not only illustrated the similarities in the two relevant mythologies, but also positioned *Credo* as a novel which clearly illuminates the complications and conflicts surrounding the intermingling of the mythologies and the process of transformation and remythification.

Specific mythical elements have been identified which are present in both mythologies and the discussion dwells on how these elements were incorporated into the respective mythologies; either by continued mythification or remythification. Parallels have been drawn between the two relevant mythologies and are supported by examples from both. The differences that have been identified and discussed contribute to an understanding of the value and meaning attached to the belief systems followed by the individual characters in the novel, especially Bega's position as a female in a patriarchal hegemony. The discussion evaluated Bega's motivation to move away from Irish customs, matriarchal values with emphasis on fertility and a relationship with Padric to a life of Christian devotion and chastity. The concept of sin and guilt presented in the discourse of Christianity has been the focus of a significant part of my examination of Bega and the forces that animate her. I have also shown to what extent sub-plots support the main action or reinforce mythical qualities, how the contrasts and conflicts between the characters represent the different segments of the mythologies, and how the interactions embody the clash of cultures embroiled in the process of transition.

I have alluded to what Stephen Greenblatt terms “conscious[ness] of [the reader’s] own status as interpret[er] ... upon understanding literature as part of a system of signs that constitutes a given culture” (www.cumber.edu/litcritweb/theory/newhistoricism.htm). The reader brings her own biases and preconceived ideas to a text, but *Credo* does not anticipate these and rather focuses on the historical reactions of people in the novel in the process of coming to terms with their desire or repugnance towards belief systems which give meaning to their existence and are in the process of transformation. It is this approach which facilitates insight into the anxieties of the time and permits interpretation of issues in past societies. A contemporary novel such as *Credo* is therefore functional in fulfilling a formative and informative role in its representation of myth in transformation and creating awareness about similar issues in present society. In addition, the discussion has demonstrated that mythology is a valuable, eternal and infinite source of information for thematic material and is an essential element in contemporary literature.

The process of transformation discussed in this chapter is the starting-point and forms the foundation for the exploration of the significance of myth in contemporary literature which will be elaborated on in the following chapters. It introduces the concept of myth renewal and confirms Frye’s observation that “Mythology ... keeps constantly transforming itself...” (1976: 96). Greenblatt explains this process as follows: “...individual objects, including bodies, always pass away but ... things come together again. Things that disperse have a way of hooking back into each other and returning to the world The endless redistribution of material...” (<http://www.bookwire.com/bookwire/bbr/reviews/june2001/GREENBLATTInterview.htm>). The novel further reveals the discord, disagreements and inner conflicts which accompany the process of transition. In this respect the title of the novel, ‘credo’, a declaration of a person’s beliefs or an article of faith, is multifaceted. It does not only illustrate Bega’s personal credo,

but illuminates the tensions contained in the conflicting credos of the different representatives of the relevant mythologies embodied in the novel. Chapter Three, which deals with Ronan Bennett's novel *The Catastrophist*, will build on the concept of remythification with particular focus on the revolutionary qualities contained in political myths.

CHAPTER THREE

MYTH AND THE CLASH OF CULTURES

Political Myth in Ronan Bennett's *The Catastrophist*

'I'm saying that politics stinks. I'm saying that it's not important. I'm saying it's a spectacle, a farce we've seen a thousand times. The set varies, the actors change, the plot twists in different ways, but it's always the same story and you always know the ending. And who cares anymore? Politics is boring. Who cares?'

(Bennett 1999: 105)

In my discussion of Ronan Bennett's novel *The Catastrophist* (1999) I explore the truth of my argument that political ideologies can in retrospect be seen as containing elements of ancient myth transformed into political myth and that these elements are functional in literature. In addition, the discussion focuses on what Johan Degenaar describes as postmodernity's dispassionate stance and "eternal vigilance" (1995: 48) or a perpetual critical approach towards myth. James Gillespie's attitude towards political events in the novel is evaluated according to Degenaar's (1995) remark that "Postmodernism emphasises the fact that myth is an ambiguous phenomenon and that the individual must decide what the meaning of a myth is and whether it functions in terms of domination or emancipation, and then evaluate and act accordingly" (48). Inès's ardent acceptance of the political myth and James's critical stance are juxtaposed and assessed in the discussion. James is a writer; hence storytelling is central to events in the novel. Inevitably, therefore, the writer's role in mythification has to be considered.

I have selected this particular novel because autobiographical nuances are an intriguing possibility. Ronan Bennett is an Irish author now living in London and the novel includes sections in which the narrator James Gillespie recalls his own past in Ireland and England. The suggestion of an autobiographical link has been made by several commentators on the novel, the most telling for my purpose being Tony Mastrogiorgio:

Less obvious to some readers are the similarities between the turmoil in the Congo and the conflict in Gillespie's (and Belfast-born Bennett's) native Northern Ireland. Those similarities are made explicit when the official report exonerating the soldiers in the shootings outside Houthoofd's estate claims that the dead had rocks in their pockets, proving that they were rioters. No Irish nationalist could fail to recognize the echo of Bloody Sunday in 1972 and the similar justification – later proved false – for the shooting deaths of 13 civil rights marchers. The realization that Bennett is navigating contemporary political waters adds even greater urgency to his prose.

(San Francisco Chronicle, 7 November 1999)

The similarities between the political histories of the author and the protagonist further support my choice. Gillespie can be seen as an autobiographical figure. Ronan Bennett, who has both practical and academic experience of revolutions, spent two years of his life in prison for participating in the Belfast uprisings in the 1970s. Like his fictional character, Bennett has a degree in history and writes political commentary for *The Guardian* and reviews for other newspapers. His novels are historical in nature; *Overthrown by Strangers* (1992) deals with the revolution in Guatemala and his most recent novel, *Havoc in its Third Year* (2004), which was long-listed for the Booker Prize, deals with the uprisings during the Reformation.

The Catastrophist is not a truly mythical novel in the sense that works by Frans Kafka, James Joyce, Thomas Mann and Gabriel Garcia Márques, for example, are considered to be; it is not of great epic proportions, employing mythical motifs to create what Palencia-Roth terms in his thesis on mythical novels “an entire, unified world” (1987: 12). The main protagonist is not a heroic figure. The novel is romantic in nature, but this is not the main focus of this discussion. It is the historical setting and political proceedings presented in the book that contain mythical elements which warrant reflection on the functionality of myth and

particularly political myth as a valuable source of information for thematic material in contemporary literature. I draw extensively on the principles of political myth as discussed by Christopher Flood in *Political Myth* (2002).

The factual, historical events that are described in the novel contain elements of the myth of eternal or cyclical return or recurrence. Each political myth that emerges in the novel, which is mainly set in the Congo, has its own leader, hero, or king that replaces a previous one. It starts with colonialism and King Baudouin (continued under King Léopold II), followed by the liberation party of the MNC under Patrice Lumumba. It finally touches on the dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko. In order to illustrate the significance of the historical events in the process of myth transformation and creation in the novel, a short summary of the relevant history of the Congo is appropriate. In my discussion of mythological parallels which reveal, to a lesser or greater extent, aspects of mythification, de-mythification and re-mythification, I draw upon an eclectic range of intellectual traditions. I rely greatly on the works of Christopher Flood and Eleazar Meletinsky, but have selected other appropriate theorists to support my argument. These range from James Frazer, who is regarded as the founder of the school of ritualism, Georges Sorel with his ideas on revolution and myth, structuralists like Roland Barthes and more recent critics including New Historicists like Stephen Greenblatt. Many other theorists have studied political myth, such as Ernst Cassirer, Thomas Mann, Mircea Eliade, Henry Hatfield, John T. Marcus, Reinhold Niebuhr, and André Sauvy; and I draw on some of these ideas where appropriate. Views from the schools of psychology, anthropology and philosophy are also taken into consideration, especially those of Johan DeGenaar expressed in *Myth & Symbol* (1995).²³

²³ Sean Wilentz remarked, as early as 1985, that there had been an increase in the interest in political symbols and ritual, mentioning several contributing factors: “the recurrent and shifting influences of Freud, Jung and their followers’ awareness; the abiding shock and curiosity attached to seemingly irrational political movements and official acts....”. His assertion that anthropology “... has given historians a way of seeing politics as a form of cultural interaction, a relationship tied to broader moral and social systems” and that “political symbols and acts of persuasion, in this view, carry with them complex networks of social customs, aspirations and fears” is useful also for the literary analysis

Essentially they share one characteristic: the theme of the recurrence of eternal patterns. These ways of thinking about myth open up my identification of the types of political myths and to what extent the mingled elements of creation, destruction and recreation are present and functional in each identified myth. The three political myths in the novel can be categorized as: Belgian colonialism/imperialism (past), the heroic figure of Patrice Lumumba (present) and the rising dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko (future). I analyse various classifying aspects and symbols to indicate their contribution in the development of these political myths. For historical information about the events in the Congo, I consulted the works of A.P.J. van Rensburg “*Aspekte van die Geskiedenis van Afrika*” (1974) and “*Afrika-Verskeidenheid*” (1976), Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost* (1998) and Ludo de Witte’s *The Assassination of Lumumba* (2001). Although De Witte’s book received a rather negative review from an unnamed critic at the Literary Saloon (<http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/congo/lumumbal.htm>), mainly because of the translation from French to English (and not from Dutch) and De Witte’s apparent failure to indicate the real extent of U.S.A. involvement in Lumumba’s assassination, other reviewers including Ronan Bennett (*Los Angeles Times*)²⁴ regard it as valuable in conveying the dreadful facts of Lumumba’s short career and elimination. The book has proved helpful for my purposes precisely because De Witte contributes to an understanding of the mythification of Lumumba.

James Gillespie is the main protagonist and first-person narrator in *The Catastrophist*. His psychological struggle and the outcome of his inner confrontation call for analysis in relation to his personal political history and his postmodernist approach towards myth and mythification. Through Gillespie,

of this particular novel, in which political ceremonies and symbols represent “the tacit assumptions that either legitimize political order or hasten its disintegration” (Wilentz 1985: 2-3).

²⁴ Bennett remarks: “De Witte writes without stylish frills or narrative tricks, but this is a vivid and utterly compelling account of a nation strangled at birth by the West. (...) [sic] Big business, foreign armies and an array of stooges are still trampling over the unfortunate population to be first in line to plunder and enrich themselves. If you want to know who to thank for this, look no further than De Witte’s *The Assassination of Lumumba*” (<http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/congo/lumumba1.htm>).

Bennett comments on the role of the writer and the function of the written word in myth creation. In the next chapter, where I discuss the writer as myth creator, I focus more sharply on this aspect of mythification in contemporary literature. Bennett's reflections in *The Catastrophist* provide a useful link to my analysis of Kennedy's *Everything You Need* in Chapter Four.

In order to clarify certain key points in relation to the direction of the discussion in this chapter, a short explanation of the concepts of myth, political myth and ideology is called for. As Flood remarks in *Political Myth*, very little theoretical work has been done in this field. He distinguishes between what he calls "sacred myth"²⁵ (2002: 3) and "the theory of ideology, both of which are intimately related to the theory of political myth" (3). In fact, Flood sees political myth as being at the juncture between the theory of sacred myth (referring to the enormous amount of work dealing with universal or ancient myth) and the theory of ideology (5). For the sake of clarity I shall adhere to Flood's definitions of the terms *ideology* and *political* as these are particularly instructive and descriptive. He explains that the phrase *political*

can be defined as referring to either (a) the spheres of social organization and action covered by the principal fields of political science as an academic discipline – namely, government, public administration, political behaviour, political theory, and international relations; or (b) other spheres of social organization and action, such as the economic, the juridical, the religious, the educational, the ethnic, matters of gender, and the artistic, insofar as they are pertinent to the political as defined under (a); or (c) the historical dimension of any of the areas figuring in (a) or (b).

(Flood 2002: 5)

²⁵ Unless otherwise indicated all italics and emphases in quotations are devices employed by the cited authors.

Options (a) and (c) are particularly relevant in relation to events in *The Catastrophist* and meaningful to illustrate the definition of political myth(s) in this discussion. The concept of *ideology* refers “either to a particular political belief system (anarchism or fascism, for example) or to the generic characteristics common to different political belief systems” (5). The spheres of action in (a) and the belief systems inherent in imperialism, colonialism, nationalism and fascism are therefore indications of the political ideologies embodied in *The Catastrophist*. It is essential to view political myths in relation to the manner in which they come into existence, the manner in which they are received, and the influence propaganda has on their origin. Thus, although this study does not allow for a detailed discussion of the authenticity of the discourse of the political figures referred to in the novel, the interpretation of their discourse by various receivers is sporadically considered, when appropriate.

The political myths alluded to in *The Catastrophist* need to be viewed in relation to the social and historical circumstances of the time. In the next section, I briefly survey the political and ideological history of the Congo in relation to this discussion of myth transformation and especially political mythification.

History of the Congo – Contextualising *The Catastrophist*

‘...What was King Baudouin thinking of trying to tell the Congolese that Léopold had established the colony by treaties and peaceful methods! Rather a load of twaddle, frankly. Gave the natives a few bits of cloth and a crateload of gin in return for their land. The chiefs had no idea what they were agreeing to. In some cases they weren’t given the chance to say no.’

(Bennett 1999: 218)

The political myth of colonialism, described by Degenaar (1995: 46) as “the myth of Eurocentric reason which views itself in universal terms” where “[h]istory is not seen merely as the course of human events but ... in terms of the myth of inevitable

progress...” is in a phase of transition in *The Catastrophist*. It seems to have come to an end, but European and American powers are secretly planning remythification in the form of neo-colonialism. In this process, several local leaders in various African countries were strategically placed in power to maintain the Western world’s presence and claim to profit in newly independent countries. As Degenaar contends, in these political myths, gods are resurrected “as impersonal forces, diminishing the freedom of the citizens and their democratic involvement in decision making processes” (46).

The process of colonization in Africa and the Congo started during the age of discovery, that is, the early modern age. According to Hochschild the first European country to send an expedition²⁶ into the “Kingdom of the Kongo”²⁷ (1998: 8) was Portugal in 1491. Centuries of slave trade followed. Many countries were interested in the wealth of the Congo, but none as much as King Léopold II of Belgium, who started his colonization process in the early 1880s with the help of the explorer Henry Morton Stanley (Van Rensburg 1974: 162). On 19 July 1885 Léopold was declared the ruler of the Independent Congo (165) and in 1908, after Léopold’s death, the country was annexed and renamed the Belgian Congo (180). Like all the other European colonizers (Britain, France, Italy, Portugal and Germany), Belgium pretended that the aim was to ‘civilize’ the ‘dark continent’, but the introduction of western civilization to colonised nations invariably resulted in economic gain and the expansion of political power for the colonisers and disempowerment for the colonised. Hochschild (1998) explains that the wealth of the Congolese soil (a country eighty times the size of Belgium) was the main motivation for Léopold’s obsessive occupation. It is rich in copper, cobalt, diamonds, silver, gold, ivory and has vast rubber plantations. For thirty years the

²⁶ The group consisted mainly of priests who were, according to Hochschild, “driven by one of the most enduring of medieval myths, the legend of Prester John, a Christian king who was said to rule a vast empire in the interior of Africa” (1998: 7).

²⁷ Hochschild spells Congo here with a ‘K’ and the kingdom was at least a hundred years old in 1491. A monarch named “ManiKongo” ruled the area; he resided in a capital town called “Mbanza Kongo – *mbanza* means ‘court’” (1998: 8).

Belgian king subjected the Congolese people to an exploitative situation that was nothing more than genocide in order to quench his thirst for riches and to portray himself to the world and his nation as a powerful and just monarch. He disguised his atrocities slyly and strategically, presenting himself as the agent of inevitable progress. He claimed all profits from the rubber industry for himself and not for the country. Thousands of people were murdered and mutilated by having their hands chopped off. This brutal exploitation of people remained one of the best-kept secrets until the shipping clerk E. D. Morel and the Irishman Roger Casement became suspicious and spent more than a decade to reveal the embezzlement and cruelties surrounding Léopold's reign. Ironically, Léopold never set foot in the Congo. He imposed forced labour and slavery in an age when the rest of the world tried to abolish it. Rogers, the British doctor in *The Catastrophist*, mentions that "they reckon thirty million Congolese were taken off as slaves" (Bennett 1999: 219). Hochschild estimates that at least ten million people died in the Congo under Léopold's reign (1998: 233). The horror of the situation is fictionalised in Joseph Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness* (1902).

The process of occupation in the Congo, which consists of five areas, each with its own traditions, and more than two hundred tribes (Van Rensburg 1976: 130), did not take place without resistance from provincial and tribal chiefs, but was largely achieved by hypocritical trading with a nation that could not read or write. Belgium remained in control until 1959.

In retrospect, Léopold's abusive treatment of the Congolese remains one of the worst crimes in the history of human rights and is harrowingly described in Adam Hochschild's book, *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998). All evidence of the king's and Belgium's misconduct in the Congo was either destroyed or filed away as unavailable data until as recently as the 1970s. The myth of glory and fair involvement would have remained intact if a few inquisitive people such as Jules

Marchal, a retired Belgian diplomat, had not persisted in unearthing the truth (Hochschild 1998: 297). In Hochschild's words:

From the colonial era, the major legacy Europe left to Africa was not democracy as it is practiced today in countries like England, France, and Belgium; it was authoritarian rule and plunder. On the whole continent, perhaps no nation has had a harder time than the Congo in emerging from the shadow of its past.

(1998: 301)

In the 1950s a flood of nationalism started spreading across Africa. Belgium reacted in fear and haste by allowing certain municipal elections to be held. In reality, Belgium had never paid any attention to local political development before. The government hoped to pacify the local people and retain influence in the country without losing their hold on the Congo's resources. Within three years the Congo was independent and Belgium shocked at the loss. The myth of imperialism had abruptly ended as a new political myth started to unfold.

Three major parties led the campaign before the general election in the Congo: the Conakat party (*Confédération des Associations du Katanga*) under Moïse Tshombe, the Abako party (*Association des Bakongo pour le maintien l'Unité et l'Expansion et la Défense de Langue Kikongo*) under Joseph Kasavubu²⁸ and the MNC (*Movement National Congolais*) under Patrice Lumumba (Van Rensburg 1976: 132). The latter was the only party that wanted the Congo to be a unified state and not a federation. This is the setting from which the charismatic²⁹ and heroic figure of Lumumba arises in *The Catastrophist*.

²⁸ Most sources spell the surname as above, but Ludo de Witte, who has made an extensive study of the Congo in his books *Crisis in the Congo* (1996), *The Assassination of Lumumba* (2001) and other articles, sites the surname as Kasa Vubu (2001: xxiii). For the duration of this discussion I shall refer to 'Kasavubu' as Bennett does in the novel.

²⁹ I am indebted to Leonie Viljoen for the following discussion of charisma from a forthcoming article: "charisma", as Clifford Geertz explains it, stresses "the connection between the symbolic value individuals possess and their relation to the active centres of the social order", the "concentrated loci of serious acts.... It is a sign, not of popular appeal or inventive craziness, but of being near the heart of things". We "look for the vast universality of the will of kings in the same place that we look for that

An important element of political myth is power: power to the masses (with the concept of 'freedom' as aim), financial power to the state and egotistical and material power to the leader(s). This phenomenon is often characterized by demagoguery by a leader or party. André Sauvy explains in his essay 'Mythology Today' (discussed by Meletinsky) that an ideology is presented to a nation in which the good days of the past, the so-called "golden age" (2000: 17), are recalled and glorified in order to create a wish that it should be reinstated; the leading figure is presented to the masses as having mythical qualities. Lumumba says in his independence speech (quoted verbatim in the novel) that Africa needs to belong to the Africans again, as it was before European exploitation and colonization. In the novel Lumumba remarks the following about colonialism:

'We have suffered like beasts for a thousand years. Our ashes have been strewn to the wind that roams the desert. They had the right to the whip, we had the right to die, but the hard torch of the sun will shine for us again.'

(1999: 97)

Lumumba's speech can be seen to contain intimations of myth. The future might return to the former glory of the Congo before the conquerors came. Past and future are glorified, romanticised and presented as being a magnificent time without turmoil.

There is a scene in the novel where Gillespie goes with the American Mark Stipe to a local village before the elections. When James asks one of the villagers, a man named Cleophas, whom he will vote for, Cleophas answers: "I will vote for

of gods: in the rites and images through which it is exerted". Geertz's article concludes: "...the charisma of the dominant figures of society and that of those who hurl themselves against the dominance stem from a common source: the inherent sacredness of central authority. It is not, after all, standing outside the social order in some excited state of self-regard that makes the political leader numinous but a deep, intimate involvement ... in the master fictions by which that order lives" (1985: 33).

the MNC because Mr Lumumba is the only leader who tells us we do not have to be poor for ever, that if we unite as one nation we can use the riches of the Congo for the people of the Congo” (165). Lumumba recalls the golden time when the local people lived free from oppression and he puts forth the ideal that the Congo can be like that again. The myth is re-created. Lumumba’s myth is not like Léopold’s myth in which we have the great, just philanthropic king who cares like a father for his subjects. His myth is national-socialistic in nature. Georges Sorel explains that revolutionary myths are based on the same principles on which religion is founded, namely that it will maintain, provide for, and unify the masses (1950: 119). We have no way of knowing whether, had Lumumba survived, he would have stayed true to the rhetoric of hope and nationalism that he offered to the people. What we do know is that “like millions of Congolese before him, he ended up dumped in an unmarked grave” (Hochschild 1998: 302) and that his untimely death and the ideas he presented have established him as a mythical figure, not only in the hearts of the Congolese, but for Africans and everyone interested in African nationalism.

With the election in May 1960 the MNC won the most seats, but Kasavubu’s party dominated the provincial elections. The two parties formed an alliance. The Belgian government made another mistake by ignoring Lumumba’s large support and appointing Kasavubu as President to select a government. Belgium was convinced that Kasavubu could be manipulated, but it soon became clear that Lumumba, who was appointed as prime minister, had other plans. His speech on Independence Day was distinctly anti-colonial and soon he fired the Belgian head of the Defence, General Emile Janssens (1976: 134). Some attacks on white Belgians created havoc and Belgian troops were deployed to protect citizens. The Congolese saw this as a threat that the Belgians might reclaim the country. Tshombe declared the Katanga province independent from the rest of the country. Lumumba approached the UN for protection against the Belgians; UN troops were deployed but no action was taken. He then threatened to call in the help of the Soviet Union. America became increasingly involved and Lumumba was branded as another

communist like Fidel Castro. The country was in chaos. In September 1960 Kasavubu fired Lumumba. He also appointed Mobutu Sese Seko as Head of the Congolese army. The following five months were a time of political mayhem that resulted in the death of Lumumba and two of his colleagues, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito, in controversial circumstances. According to De Witte, Belgium and the United States plotted this assassination for months; it was called “Operation Barracuda” (2001: 24). In effect, the whole process of neo-colonialism was already secretly planned and the big western players had their chess pieces in place for its implementation. Kasavubu and Tshombe were directly involved and evidence has shown that Mobutu was in agreement with the imprisonment of Lumumba.

With the destruction of the Lumumba myth, the political myth of Mobutu Sese Seko started to unfold. Despite the fact that the political myth Lumumba represented has been destroyed, his mythical status has increased over time. De Witte remarks that at the time of Lumumba’s death his “personality had already taken on the mythical proportions it would assume in the decades to come” (2001: 151). Lumumba’s untimely and violent death established him as hero and martyr.

With Mobutu’s appointment in 1965 the Congo was renamed Zaire. Mobutu was in effect a replacement of Léopold, assuming the same ‘protective’ role, but killing thousands and claiming most of the country’s profits for himself in order to live a life of comfort and riches. He referred to himself as “the Guide, the Father of the nation, the Helmsman, and the Messiah” (Hochschild 1998: 303). In doing so he recreated for himself the archetypal image of hero and king. Flood regards “ceremonies ... specific modes of dress, particular locations and settings ... objects such as banners, as well as music and song” (17) as elements of political communication, which reach beyond verbal communication. Mobutu always wore a leopard-skin cap and sash, just like the local candidate in the novel who campaigns for the election. With his many aeroplanes, yachts and decorated thrones, Mobutu enacted the myth that Frazer terms as “between heaven and earth” (1957: 775-95).

Frazer cites, amongst other examples, the custom of the Bakuba tribe in the Congo where “persons of the royal blood were forbidden to touch the ground” (778). The king was elevated higher than everybody else on a device with poles. With these symbols Mobutu re-enacted mythical traditions; Mani-Kongo³⁰ carried similar symbols to illustrate his royal authority: “... zebra-tail whip ... the skins and heads of animals suspended from his belt, and ... a small cap” (Hochschild 1998: 9). In typical postmodern ironical fashion, the local candidate in *The Catastrophist* who campaigns for the election also employs these emblems rather comically. He is dressed in a “black tie and tails”, is transported in “an open-topped limousine”, “wears dark glasses” and is draped with “a leopard skin” (1998: 163).

For over thirty years Mobutu remained what *Time* magazine calls a “kleptocratic” (April 2003: 38) dictator of a one-party state. Desiré Kabila overthrew Mobutu in 1997 and reclaimed the name Congo. He was assassinated by one of his bodyguards in January 2001. His son Joseph Kabila is the current leader. Severe tribal and cultural clashes are still taking place internally and between the Congo and other surrounding countries such as Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. One could only speculate whether Kabila will realize Lumumba’s dream of a united, productive, peaceful Congo. In an interview he stated:

What the people of the Congo need is not food, medicine or some other assistance. What they need is peace ... I believe that the future of Africa really lies in the power of the people of Africa to unite to decide who should lead them and how. The renaissance should not really lie in the powers of one or two leaders.

(Robinson 2001: 38)

This recalls the words of Patrice Lumumba in the farewell letter to his wife:

History will one day have its say. It will not be the history taught in the United Nations, Washington, Paris, or Brussels, however, but the history taught in the

³⁰ Cf. footnote no. 27.

countries that have rid themselves of colonialism and its puppets. Africa will write its own history, and both north and south of the Sahara it will be a history full of glory and dignity.

(De Witte 2001: 185)

Both speeches contain a utopian element in their vision of the future which adds to the mythical qualities invested in leaders and combines with what Flood describes as “myth ... disclos[ing] the meaning of a group’s spatial and temporal sense of itself” (33).

The circular structure of *The Catastrophist*

Men have fantasies of themselves as saviours; we can’t help it. Stories we hear turn into duties we imagine: a damsel in distress, a knight in armour. No matter our shortcomings in reality, we persist in seeing ourselves like this.... And we would be heroic, because we had acted with integrity, with dignity, shunning their falseness; and we would be made more heroic because of the glares and hostility we provoked.

(Bennett 1999: 193)

In this chapter I move away from elements of myth associated with the abbeys and cathedrals of early medieval Britain to mythification in the tropical world of the Belgian Congo. The novel is essentially a romantic thriller with a historical setting and therefore also deals with the disillusionment of love, but this is not the main focus of my analysis. James Gillespie, a disaffected Irish-English novelist, follows his Italian girlfriend, Inès Sabiani, to the Belgian Congo. His concern is with their unsteady relationship. Inès, on the other hand, becomes completely absorbed in the intensifying independence crisis. With the exception of Part Four, the novel covers only one year, unlike *Credo*, which spans decades. The first and third parts, which constitute the bulk of the novel, deal with the crisis in the Congo. Part Two recalls James’s past in Ireland and England, revealing his struggle with his personal history. The final part shows him nine years after the events in the Congo and presents his

conclusion to his historical and alienating dilemma. The novel not only deals with the mythical element of cyclical return or death and renewal, but is cyclical in structure. The main plot of the story starts in November 1959 and ends in November 1960, completing a year in full circle.

The prelude to the novel describes Patrice Lumumba's arrest at the Sankuru River in 1960 and introduces many of the mythical elements as well as the main focus of the novel. The end of Part Three returns to this crucial incident and reinterprets it. In the prelude the approaches of Gillespie and Inès to the Lumumba myth are sharply contrasted, already revealing to the reader why "this is a story of failure" (1999: 5). Inès sees Lumumba's return from across the river as self-sacrifice. In Part Three, when he finally comes to understand fully Inès's reaction to the events in the prelude, James elaborates on her perceptions; in the prelude he presents his own insights. Whereas the sun is setting in the prelude, described as "the bewitching minutes of the red sunball" accompanied by "homeward lines of workers" (1), we read in Part One: "The sun is red in the east" (9). This immediately suggests the cyclical nature of the story, the continuous repetition of sunrise and sunset. Symbolically this is the moment that leads to the destruction of the political myth, yet will eternalise Lumumba (the prophet, hero or king) as mythical figure.

In the prelude James sees the political events as farce and melodrama, but in Part One he reflects on his arrival in the Congo a year previously and he concedes that he is "embarrassed by [his] own melodrama" (9), which is his knowledge "that this is the last chance I have to make love work for me, and I am frightened that I will fail" (9).

James's first impressions of the country as he exits the plane reveal the dualism of Africa: the contrasts and conflicts soon to be described in the remainder of the novel. He observes: "The concrete and glass of the terminal building is

ahead of us, and behind, in a distant screen of banana trees and palms, a small boy stands with his goats” (Bennett 1999: 9) and “[s]omething has been made in a place where it has no place, even I can see this” (12). The description not only indicates that Africa is a continent where the west has superimposed its values on other cultures (as the novel proceeds, the fate of the local Congolese is portrayed in stark contrast to the exotic decadence of the colonialists), but it also reveals James’s and Inès’s contradictory attitudes towards the unfolding political crisis.

The events in the novel disclose how the United States, United Nations and Belgian interests help to put Mobutu in power by undermining Patrice Lumumba’s government because of his alleged Communist sympathies. The process recalls the annual ritual replacement of the priest-king with a new one, which is present in most mythologies and extensively discussed by Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1957 & 2004), and reveals the cyclical and seasonal aspect of nature central to many ancient mythologies. The reader experiences the struggle through the eyes of an initially impartial Gillespie who is confronted internally with his own psychological journey.

Part Four is set in Italy at a place called Bardonecchia, “the lost place” (306), and deals with James’s realization of his delusion and self-imposed isolation. The mountain he climbs is symbolic; an elevated place to obtain insight. He recalls the time in the Congo and reflects on the mythical past. In his recollection he remembers the moment of insight he had into the myth Inès’s believed in and his inability to participate in the dream:

Inès told me once in a letter – I still have it – that she wanted me to know where to find her, and how. It’s taken me a long time to understand what she meant... It’s a place we laugh at, we scorn, and we sometimes say does not exist at all. But I caught sight of it at the Sankuru when Patrice stepped on to the *barque* to recross the river, and again on my last day in Léopoldville when the silent crowds followed Pauline down the boulevard ... [Inès] encouraged me, beckoned

me forward ... I failed to find her and I know this failure will mark the rest of my life.

(1999: 311-12)

The setting and reflections enforce James's separation and loneliness and reinforce his postmodernist stance, which I elaborate on in the following section. The recollection of events at the Sankuru River further enhances the circular structure of the novel.

Mythification and the writer's dilemma: prophets, participants and sceptics

The first article made the Belgians uncomfortable, this one made Lumumba uncomfortable. So what? That's the problem with the truth, Inès, it falls where it will. Not that you would know anything about the truth, how could you when all you do is churn out eulogies for the great leader and nauseating adulation for his party and its programme? All I was doing was reporting the facts.

(Bennett 1999: 176)

My concern in this chapter is with what Meletinsky terms: "political and 'revolutionary' mythification" (2000: 16), the intensity with which supporters and opposition alike approach such a myth and ultimately, the effect it exerts on the collective sub-conscious of society. In the above section on the history of the Congo, three political myths are present in the novel in various stages of creation, destruction and re-creation. These are: Belgian colonialism/imperialism (past), the heroic figure of Patrice Lumumba (present) and the rising dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko (future).

At the outset the reader is introduced to the mythical hero (Patrice Lumumba) and the events surrounding his final incarceration. The discourse is mythical in nature; he is described as standing on the boat with "glasses glinting in the last [bewitching minutes] of the sun" (4) which ominously signifies the

approaching death of the hero, the end of his political career and the end of the political myth he represents. The visual images in the prelude, the imprisonment of the leader and his subsequent murder suggest the ritual killing of the divine king and the motif of the scapegoat, which is extensively discussed by Frazer (2004). The suggested ritual evokes not only sacred myth, but also political myth as presented by Barthes in *Mythologies* (1973). For Barthes any custom, artefact and natural object can become a myth when used as a sign to convey meaning. The sinister images are reflective both of the terrible event that is taking place and its horrific outcome. James mentions “parasites”, “tokens of infection”, “dusty pocked roads”, “twisted silver nails” (1) and an “old boatman” (2) who must escort Lumumba back like the ferryman on the river Styx taking his passenger to the underworld.³¹ He tells of “crows” – birds of prey that scavenge on dead meat – and “boiled eggs”. Eggs are normally regarded as symbols of fertility, but boiled eggs seem to suggest the end of a fertility cycle – an indication that the myth has come full circle; the end of the reign of the divine king. Therefore, in relation to the political and historical context of the novel, the meaning of the signs in the prelude and what they represent can be regarded as mythical.

When Lumumba decides to come back to his pursuers, his followers who had escaped with him, desert him, “Leaving words of farewell to hang in the air behind them, apology for their essential desertion” (4); even the crowd on the riverbank “break from the jetty like the first mourners retiring from a burial” (4). The glorification of Lumumba and his final fate seem to parallel the motif of the scapegoat and I return to a more detailed discussion of scapegoats later in this chapter. At this point it is apt to mention that Frazer cites many examples (too many to recall here) from classical antiquity and other cultures such as African and South American where the human scapegoats were kept, fed, treated and honoured as divine beings and accompanied by selected followers (ranging from two to

³¹ This mythical element is also addressed in relation to Egyptian mythology in the chapter dealing with *American Gods*.

twelve people). Frazer explains that after months of honorary treatment, when the time came to be sacrificed, the followers desert the selected scapegoat (1957: 736-75). As James remarks of Lumumba's fate, "This is not heroic self-sacrifice" (4).

Besides establishing Lumumba as a mythical figure, James's recollection of events at the Sankuru River illustrates the conflict between Inès's passionate, blind acceptance of the myth surrounding Lumumba and James's postmodern "eternal vigilance" (Degenaar 1995: 46) and refusal of closure that lies at the heart of the failure of their relationship. The nature of his interpretation and perceptions sets him apart as the dispassionate, critical observer, a stance which leads to his final isolation. Degenaar explains it as "postmodernity[']s] ... ironic approach to all forms of closure" by "holding off all gods and tyrants who impose a final view on society" (1995: 47). James seems to maintain "... a critical distance to the participatory involvement in myth in premodern culture and to the ideological function of myth in modern politics" (1995: 47). At the end of the novel he upholds this stance as a man without social or moral affiliations when he proclaims: "I am here, safe in my anomie" (312).

Unlike Inès, who is "afraid" of the soldiers and the threat they hold for Lumumba and his family, James regards himself as "the trained observer" (1). His inability to believe in the same way Inès does has driven them apart. Here at the Sankuru River their separate approaches to the myth are at their most prominent. James explains: "she has news of impending tragedy, and again I have not heard" (3-4). While as the intuitive female she experiences the moment as tragic, he sees it as "farce and melodrama" (3) and in his reinterpretation he remarks: "I went along, a bit player in the farce of [Lumumba's] flight" (284). His view is echoed in his contemplations during his own incarceration when he is beaten and tries to hide under Smail's body. He thinks:

But what a bloody farce, what a fucking bloody farce! I
draw myself to the warm corpse. Enter it, hide in it, be

nowhere. The pointlessness of this! The whole thing has been a farce. Everything since independence has been a sick joke ... I start to laugh hysterically. I laugh at the memory of all the things I have seen in this preposterous country ... the candidate ... saturated with cruelty and power ... I laugh at poor Cleophas hanging prickless from the tree, at his big, splayed, dusty, gnarled, cartoon feet. There has been so much to laugh about. I'll say that for the Congo. It might be the death of me but it's been good for a laugh ... [King] Baudouin's silly speech ... Lumumba's vitriolic response ... the Congolese.... If I am to die I might as well die laughing.

(1999: 206-07)

James sees events as farcical because he finds it impossible to be emotionally involved and does not view Lumumba (or any other leader) as the hero Inès perceives him to be. He observes events “as though through a screen” and remarks: “I am thinking of the leprosy of politics, of the banality of this country and the low comedy of its calamities” (2-3). His dilemma is a writer's dilemma; his detachment almost forced. He starts his observation of these historical events with the question “what should I be looking at now?” and he repeats this with “what else should I note here?” and again “what should I be looking at?” (1-2) In his reinterpretation of the events he relates: “Around me, people turn away, unable to watch. I look. Of course I look. It is in the nature of my profession. It is in the nature of me” (283). The imagery he uses to describe what he observes is often full of paradox and ambiguity, echoing his and Inès's feelings: the river has a “dull mud colour” but is filled with “purple or magenta” flowers, “beautiful and malign” (1). Even here when the end is in sight, James still maintains a writer's distance from emotional involvement. For his own justification he recalls Ruskin's words: “Does a man die at your feet, your business is not to help him, but to note the colour of his lips” (5). In the prelude he establishes and emphasises his concern with realism and objectivity and he “move[s] away to stand alone, apart, removed from the people and things of this unnecessary moment” (5).

James insists that his business is not political and that he prefers to be a neutral observer, yet he gets drawn in and becomes involved with Lumumba's fate in spite of himself. Apart from telling his own story about a love that has failed James also conveys the historical story surrounding the novel. Lumumba never speaks directly to James or Inès in the novel, but he is realistically represented as an observed character in the historically accurate reproductions of his speeches and actions. In doing so Bennett "embellish[es], concretise[s], and demonstrate[s]" (Flood 2002: 166) the various political myths and the reception thereof by different audiences. The figure of Lumumba is central to the events in the novel and his arrest and death are probably familiar to the reader. Events surrounding Lumumba's life and death have established him as an iconic figure in the gallery of legendary fighters for independence, together with heroes like Martin Luther King and Steve Biko. "Iconic images"³² (Flood 2002: 167) or figures are essential to political myth: they do not only call to mind a specific story, but "could also evoke the entire class of myths to which that story belonged" (166). In Chapter Two, which deals with *Credo*, I identify the various iconic images of Celtic and Christian mythology. In the same way in which Cu Chulainn or Christ evoke the class of myths they belong to, Léopold, Lumumba and Sese Seko succeed in doing the same in *The Catastrophist*. Flood categorises the process of story-making surrounding iconic portrayals and the following seem to be applicable in this context:

(a) ... depicting particular, identified historical actors in particular, identified situations ... in which case there is direct reference to a specific myth or mythopoeic story (c) ... depicting unidentified persons representative of a group in particular, identified, historical situations represented in a body of myths concerning the particular persons in question....

(2002: 167)

³² Flood explains "iconic images" as "a photograph, a painting, a piece of sculpture, a carving, a cartoon, a poster, a mosaic, a collage, among other things ..." (2002: 167). For the purpose of this study I apply his theory to the manner in which an icon is portrayed through the written word.

Bennett creates a story in which an identified, historical character and situations are central to the theme of the novel. Simultaneously he establishes an awareness of the struggle in Northern Ireland, relaying Gillespie's political past and the ongoing revolution against occupation by another nation in a country on a different continent. Gillespie does not only inform the reader of the political and historical situation in the Congo, but his recollection of his own past in Ireland and England is functional in order to understand him as a cynical expatriate and his resistance to becoming a 'believer' or participant in a particular myth. In his own mind he inhabits a no-man's-land, a place where he is neither labelled nor forced to choose sides. He confirms this when he says Smail, the diamond dealer, has an "ease and style which the English and the Irish – and those like me in between – admire and begrudge" (1999: 11). When Inès cannot understand his disaffected attitude and lack of patriotism towards his own heritage, he explains his detachment as follows:

She thinks me a poor Irishman ... she is forever urging
me to put my pen at the service of this or that cause.
What cause would benefit? And if by chance it did,
what would be the cost? When has involvement with a
cause – any cause – ever been good for a writer?
(1999: 31)

It is his impassiveness towards the Congolese cause that drives Inès away. As a result she starts a relationship with Auguste, one of Lumumba's staunch supporters and the CIA representative Stipe's former houseboy and driver. Gillespie is the "catastrophist", as Inès calls him. She says: "If you are *catastrofista* no problem is small. Nothing can be fixed, it is always the end" (1999: 131). By this she means that he is "... a defeatist, a fatalist who believes all grand plans are doomed" (Murray 1999: 86). In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes defines the lover's catastrophe as "[a] violent crisis during which the subject, experiencing the amorous situation as a definitive impasse, a trap from which he can never escape, sees himself doomed to total destruction" (2002: 48). At the end of the novel James conforms to both Inès's and Barthes's definitions. It seems the crisis in the Congo and James's personal catastrophe are closely intertwined. As a realist James does

not believe the political myth Lumumba represents and does not see him as a saviour and he maintains this position as cynical observer to the end; practising what Degenaar calls the postmodern “strategy of eternal vigilance” (1995: 47). During his incarceration James explains this neutral stance:

I’m not on their side, I’m not on anyone’s side. I see all sides. My craft demands it. I am against things, yes, I admit that ... I am against dogma and certainty and ideology and all the things that close our options. I am against. I am not *for*. I am *for* nothing. I can’t be.
(1999: 254)

The only thing he believes in with sheer conviction is the writer’s right to translate reality. He continues to explain: “I live for words, my life is in words” (254). His beliefs must be revealed in his writing, just as Inès’s are in hers, hence he declares: “but now I see my novel – whatever its merits, however it will be judged on publication – has an importance. It is the proof of what I am, of what I have title to” (1999: 180). I return to this point shortly.

Inès is an idealistic journalist for Italy’s Marxist newspaper *L’Unità*. Writers, and in this case journalists and reporters, can be seen as the modern storytellers of the world. They are like the bards of pagan times who can destroy or build a hero with the information and representations they convey to the readers. A reading of the press makes apparent how many elements of legend and myth are present in reports of war and financial or political dealings. On opening a *Time* magazine the titles of articles read like the titles of sagas: “Mr. Miracle” (February 1993: 36), “Unsplendid Warriors” (June 1999: 27), “Desperate Gambit” (November 1997: 58). Whereas the bard had only the power of oration in pagan times, journalists have many tools with which they can practice the art of storytelling, the craft of mythification or de-mythification. The journalist is what Roland Barthes calls “the producer of myth”; who, with the aid of words and visual effects, turns the reader into a believer in myth, seeing “a story at once true and unreal” (1973: 139).

Inès and Auguste are true believers or partisans in the political myth Lumumba stands for. Auguste believes to such an extent that he re-enacts Lumumba, not only in appearance (by wearing the same spectacles) but also in what Lumumba represents to the people. James observes this phenomenon during a visit to one of the local villages: “As we descend the villagers throng round us, reaching out to touch Auguste’s face, his hair, his back.... He stands among them like a prophet among the faithful, his eyes calm and vatic and kind” (1999: 238). In contrast, James maintains his dispassionate stance.

The difference between Inès’s and James’s approaches to the myth is evident in their articles to their respective newspapers. Her pieces in *L’Unità* are charged with emotional left-wing idealism. James, on the other hand, writes detached and rational reports for the *London Observer*. Ironically he puts his trust in Stipe,³³ who influences his point of view and eventually proves to be a spy and a double-crosser (recalling the mythical shape-shifter).³⁴ Even the titles of their respective newspapers evoke this contrast – his is the impartial observer, whereas hers embodies the identity she feels with Lumumba’s cause. Inès wants James to be active in the political struggle and when he asks her why it is wrong to see all points of view, she says: “there’s nothing wrong with it. But few people have this privilege. When you are on history’s losing side, when you are poor and cursed to eat bread, to accept your enemy’s point of view is to accept starvation and slavery” (1999: 294). Her acceptance of the philosophy is unwavering; it controls her actions and thoughts. She says to James: “I often think I am so fortunate to have had the experience of the Party, to know there is something to support you always, that you aren’t alone in the world. I can’t imagine to be without this” (1999: 45). Gillespie

³³ Stipe’s character is most probably based on the real CIA station head of the time, Laurence Devlin (De Witte 2001: 47). Devlin is widely regarded as the man who saved the Congo for the West. In January 1961 he pleaded against Lumumba’s release and proclaimed: “Refusal to take drastic steps at this time will lead to defeat of [US] policy in the Congo” (2001: 78).

³⁴ According to Lewis Spence (1996: 14-15) shape-shifting refers to “the transformation of persons into forms other than their own”. The transformations can either be “the guises into which a magician can transform himself” or “[the magician’s] transformation of another person into any shape, human, animal or inanimate.”

remarks about her enthusiasm as follows: “Her imagination turns on symbol and myth” (45). Of such mythmaking Flood explains: it “is a communication process which involves reception as well as (re)production” (2002: 43), political narrative can be labelled as “*mythopoeic*” (43) according “*to the extent that it is ideologically marked*” (43). The receivers must accept the interpretation of the ideology, the manner in which it is told and the facts as truth. Seen from this perspective, Gillespie is as much a follower of myth (not necessarily the myth Inès believes in) as Inés; to the extent that his readers believe his objectivity, they will believe the ideology he is presenting. One could then argue that James believes in the writer’s mythology and here I divert briefly to address the issue of the postmodernist narrator’s role in mythification before returning to ideologically marked narrative.

James’s stance reveals the writer’s dilemma. He explains: “... because I’m a writer and I see all sides. I work in words, I am a worker in words and these words cannot be made to work for others, they are not the slaves of party or position” (Bennett 1999: 177). Words are all he believes in. Through James, Bennett remarks on the task of the writer and the nature of writing in mythification. The writer is not directly involved in the historical events, but he commentates. He does not create history, but relays it by telling a story. During his incarceration James remarks:

Three years in the army never brought death so near. I am conscious of my fear, but I am conscious too that if I survive I will have a story to tell. A story for the paper, a good story, and a store of narrative and emotional fat for the book-writer to live off for a long time to come.
(1999: 206)

It is the writer’s perspective James adheres to: “*the writer’s function is to say at once and on every occasion what he thinks*” (Barthes 1972: 148). When James proclaims: “My preference is the writer’s preference, for the margins, for the avoidance of agglomerations and ranks” (1999: 312), Inès retaliates with “truth and

accuracy are not always the point. They can be made to serve particular interests just as lies can” (290). The difference between Inès’s and James’s approaches to writing is captured in the scene where he reads to her and he remarks:

The Realists are not to her taste. She prefers the metaphors of Yeats, prefers extravagances and symbols and terrible beauties, shares his disdain for peering and peeping persons and the hawkers of stolen goods. I should have remembered before choosing Flaubert that language for her is not about precision, it is not about verisimilitude or the perfect description of person, thing, time, but a burning tessellation of images and instincts, of deeply felt, half-real things. In her world reality, imagination and emotion are indivisible – in deed, in thought. She is never detained by detail.

(1999: 127-28)

Realism is the world James prefers and as narrator he tries to convey the facts in a realistic fashion, at the cost of his own happiness as a character in the novel, but also with conscious decision as the writer of the story in the novel. He cannot undo himself from the story he has created; it becomes his story, as he claims in Part Four. Here James’s observation about the nature of writing reveals Bennett’s ponderings on the art of writing and the importance of the role of the writer and his work:

For the first time in a long time, and with sudden precision, I see the consequences of my profession.... I have my book, my words, my distance, my impartial eyes; I have the rights not just to my own story, but to theirs. The written account does endure, it outlasts all participants. Eventually it will define them. It will be the breath on which their memories live, the tongue that summons their names.

(1999: 180 – 81)

James’s stance can be seen as what Barthes describes as “the institutionalization of subjectivity ... joined on the level of language” (1972: 150). His reflection on his divine authority as author is clearly illustrated above and throughout Part Four. By

telling his story and *history* James becomes the mythmaker. He is the creator of his own text, not only observing the action, but creating the characters, and the world of the novel. In this respect the novel is doubly important in revealing the relevance of myth in contemporary literature. The writer becomes the character and mythical figure in his own story, the actor. James explains “I can see myself upon the stage” (1999: 281). He is partaking in the saga and he is the one who establishes it as a farce, an absurd event and a failure. James claims this is his “story” (5) which implies that James Gillespie wrote the story and not Ronan Bennett. James then becomes the creator of his own mythical world. The written word becomes the mythology which gives meaning to (as he claims) the characters’ existence (181). James argues that to remain distant is his self-protection and survival mechanism, but by writing himself into this story of failure, he can never leave. He says: “I have lived disguised from myself, in permanent doubt of my own emotional authenticity; and since I am never alone with myself, since I am always watching the character playing my part in the scene, there is no possibility of spontaneity” (129). The writer’s dilemma is illustrated in his plea: “Will somebody please take me away from this? From where I am now. From what I am doing. From all this hate. From myself. Please [sic]” (215). As divine authority he can never ‘kill’ himself. The self-reflective quality of the author in the novel confirms Barthes’ remark that “few authors renounce writing, for that is literarily to kill themselves, to die to the being they have chosen” (1972: 147). Ironically, James claims at the end of the novel “I thought I might try something historical” (306) and by doing this, his character becomes more autobiographical and self-reflective. He will write a novel about history and this is exactly what *The Catastrophist* is. If we recall Barthes’s statement that “Myth transforms history into ideology” and ideology forms “the basis for a theory that explains the genesis of political myth” then *The Catastrophist* has succeeded in conforming to this definition.

To return to the discussion on the function of the media in ideologically marked narrative and the fashion in which political and cultural ideas are presented

or narrated and believed as truths, I recall Flood's definition of political myth, namely that it is "*an ideologically marked narrative which purports to give a true account of a set of past, present, or predicted political events and which is accepted as valid in its essentials by a social group*" (44). Writers like James and Inès therefore are important contributors to the creation of a political myth, and political myths need heroes. Dictators and other leaders are venerated and followed because the ordinary man desperately wants to believe in heroes, gods and liberators. Inès evidently needs heroes. Stipe sarcastically remarks on her need:

‘She’s a young woman who wants heroes,’ Stipe continues. ‘Her father was a hero, you were probably a hero to her once ...’

...Lumumba’s just the latest in a long line of heroes,’ he goes on. ‘Poor bastard. Having to bear the load of her dreams, her and a million like her. He’ll either collapse under the weight or it’ll drive him to a martyr’s death.’

(1999: 159)

Ironically and ominously, his prediction turns out to be true, but it also reveals the perpetual cyclical nature of Inès's belief system. When the one hero/father/king figure perishes, she will always replace him with another. In bed she tells James about the German officer on a white horse whom she remembers from her childhood. The officer disappeared one night and a few local myths evolved about his destiny. James says, "I see the little girl, big-eyed and hopeful, waiting in the shaded galleries for the day the German soldier's horse will canter riderless into the square looking for her" (1999: 17); "riderless" because she has not yet found her ultimate legendary knight or hero. Her partisan father was the next object of her heroic fantasies. Perhaps her initial involvement with James is subconsciously motivated by these fantasies (of the Irish-Celtic hero) and this is why she later lashes out at him, as he relays:

How weak I am to deny who I am, to deny my nationality, to deny my history, my place, to deny my

own name. Seamus! She screams at me. Seamus!
Your name is not James. You are Seamus. Why do you
talk with an English accent? ...How can you be from
Ireland and not take a side? You look, and look away.
(1999: 177)

Then, just after James's arrival in the Congo, Inès proudly remarks about her close relationship with the Lumumba family: "They have practically adopted me" (1998: 19). Lumumba has obviously replaced the previous heroes. And this is why she talks and writes about him in a "vocabulary of certitude and supererogation and ... [with] limitless commitment" (32). Whereas James sees Auguste as "a clown" (214), Inès "would see in him suffering and struggle, heroism and resistance and self-sacrifice." (214). In Part Four we learn that after the death of Lumumba she has moved on in search of further heroes in Ireland and Vietnam. Her search for a particular hero is always connected with a particular ideology.

James's decision to remain silent about Inès and her lover's whereabouts when he is arrested and tortured confirms his "eternal vigilance" (Degenaar 1995: 46) and his stance to remain separate from any political myth. Even by saving Auguste, he knows that he will never be a hero to Inès again. Perhaps his refusal can be seen as heroism from his side in an attempt to regain Inès's admiration or an effort to establish himself as a victim of circumstances in which he does not believe. He admits: "I cannot decide whether I have been heroic or silly" (280). Instead, it seems that his inability to act, to commit to political ideals or myths, and his distrust in political values establish him as a postmodernist anti-hero (Degenaar 1995: 46). James is a victim of the conflicts embodied in the process of transition from one political myth to the next. He says: "I did not betray Auguste because if I had I would have lost her. And because I kept silent I will lose her forever. I should know better. This is the stuff of farce, not tragedy. I can see myself on the stage, and I am laughing" (281). His attitude confirms Degenaar's view that in postmodernism "the individual must decide the meaning of myth ... and then evaluate and act accordingly" (1995: 48).

Like Inès, James also has a paternal obsession, but of a different kind. His deliberate insistence on keeping an objective, distant approach to any political myth correlates with his outlook on leaders and heroes and kings and his deliberate decision to exorcise his father from his life. By exorcising the father or the traditional patriarchal hero, he consciously disposes of his ability to believe in traditional mythological systems except the writer's mythology – a mythology over which he has absolute control. This coincides with Degenaar's observation that in postmodernism "[w]hatever meaning is ascribed to myth, however, the notion of 'ultimate frame of reference' has fallen away" (1995: 48). James deliberately disposes of the traditional *paterfamilias*:

Like the man who throws away his last packet of cigarettes to prove he is serious about giving up, I stood up my father to announce a final break with the pettiness and dreariness of a previous life. I would be free from Belfast. I would be free from the sadness and pain of my family.

(1999: 190)

But James is aware that in making this choice he is not unlike his father, who left and rejected his own family. He acknowledges, "I was aware of where this was coming from. I could see the face of the man who inspired my actions. The more it went on, the greater my dislike of what I was doing; the greater my dislike of him, and me" (201). It is in his contemplations on the novel he is writing that he reveals his inner struggle with his abandoned relationship with his father and his attempt to create meaning out of his existence. He says: "What do I feel about the novel, if I am honest? It is about a man who has reached a point in his life where, unsure of who or what he is, he becomes convinced that only by finding the father he never knew will he discover the clues to his own identity" (120). Later, after Inès has left him, he realises that, to please her, he had tried to write a book filled with emotions; he admits: "The book mocks the son for thinking he can find anything in his father" (179). He changes back to his old style, "remaking it dry, mordant" so that it is

“cruel, very cruel” (179). He remains consciously apart. Neither James nor Inès can change; he admits that “there is no such thing as change in people ... we are as we are, and not even the greatest of traumas will change us” (201-02). She remains the emotional believer and he the impassive realist; and they both continue telling their stories in their own inimical ways.

To return to the concepts of storytelling, history, ideology and mythification: if journalists like Inès, James and Grant are the storytellers of daily events, history can fundamentally be regarded as a story. We continuously live in history; historical story-making is therefore an ongoing process. Examples of crucial events and eras in history that contributed to story-making are multiple: the rule of the Roman Empire, the French Revolution, Communism, Nazism, to name but a few political ideologies that were accepted as truth by their cultural-historical societies. The symbols, totems, and iconic images that accompany these ideologies recall those of ancient mythologies. Hitler’s emblem was an eagle and Communism had the hammer and sickle. Cu Chulainn’s emblem was a hound; Arthur’s, a bear, his tool of power a sword. Christianity’s main symbol is a man on a cross; its tool, the Bible. Lumumba’s black-rimmed spectacles and Mobutu’s leopard-skin hat are all symbols of identification and association. Auguste, who is a devout supporter of the MNC, wears the same spectacles as Lumumba. Stipe points this out to James Gillespie: “He has twenty-twenty vision, for Christ’s sake. It’s clear glass. He only wears them because he thinks they make him look like Patrice” (1999: 153).

Spectacles are tools that aid sight. The first thing Lumumba’s captors do, is to destroy his spectacles. It is a symbolical violation in order to annihilate his sight and “*insight*” and, in so doing, obliterate his image.

Besides spectacles, imagery related to vision and insight is functional in *The Catastrophist*. The binoculars used at the party at Houthoofd’s house, for instance,

reveal hidden atrocities. James repeatedly asks, “What should I look at?” and finally admits, “I was always too much a watcher.” (312).

Each leader and his organisation in the novel present their own ideas and symbols once the previous ones have been replaced. The process of political remythification in the Congo is also characterized by a continual state of revolution. In Part One of the novel, the rising unrest amongst the local Congolese becomes more and more apparent until a state of revolutionary upheaval exists. In Part Three, independence has been granted, but the revolution continues because of conflict amongst the neo-colonialists, Lumumba’s ruling party and other parties representing the various tribes. Mobutu’s instatement as leader is a classic example of what Flood describes as a “double political mythology” (2002: 51). Mobutu deliberately promotes the independence of the Congo, downplays the historical role of Lumumba and defines himself as the protector of Congolese nationalism. As Flood explains: “One set of myths thereby serve[s] to buttress and validate the other” (51).

In his *Reflections on Violence* Georges Sorel was the first theorist to study political remythification and radical or “revolutionary syndicalism” (1950: 264). He examined the function of political myth in events such as the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, suggesting a disjunction between the myth of a revolution and the reality of events, because it is not the accuracy in political myth that is important, but the motivation and emotion attached to the associated images of the myth. According to Meletinsky, Sorel’s interest foreshadows modern interpretations of ideological phenomena, especially in the West, and he remarks: “Political mythification is in effect one of the aspects of the rebirth of mythology” (1999: 16). Meletinsky explains further that remythification gathered great momentum in the 1920s and involved several aspects, such as

...acknowledging myth as a vital principle that still plays a practical role in modern society; the

accentuation of its links to ritual in the motif of the eternal return; and finally, the bringing together, to the point of identity, of myth and ritual with ideology, psychology, and art.

(2000: 17)

Sorel is of the opinion that strikes and revolutions are functional, not only in their political action, but more so because they revive the desire and emotions of the individual and lead to the unification of the masses under the influence of political myth. As Lévi-Strauss (quoted by Degenaar 1995: 45) states: “Nothing is more similar to the mythic thought than political ideology. In to-day’s society, the latter has in a certain way replaced the former.” Like religion, political myth maintains the moral attitude and fundamental force of the masses and promises to bring “salvation” (Sorel 1950: 278). This is noticeable in *The Catastrophist*. Evidence of revolutionary violence is present in the last two political myths in the novel. The violence associated with colonialism can hardly be labelled as revolutionary. The ideology of colonialism was the expansion of power through colonization, whereas the ideology of the revolutions represented in the novel is independence from oppression and the achievement of national freedom. Meletinsky warns of the danger of “social demagoguery” (2000: 17) when political ideology is interpreted as myth and history is rejected. Barthes, on the other hand, says there is no myth in revolution because of its directness of language. He proceeds to explain at what point revolution becomes myth, and states: “Left-wing myth supervenes precisely at the moment when revolution changes itself into ‘the Left’, when it accepts to wear a mask, to hide its name, to generate an innocent metalanguage and to distort itself into ‘Nature’” (1973: 160). This is exactly what happens with Lumumba and his party and when after his death he is eternalised as martyr and mythical figure. Lumumba’s struggle for nationalism has been depoliticised by his sacrificial death and at this point, according to Barthes, the presence of myth is evident.

Frank Delaney writes in *Legends of the Celts*: “A people’s mythology ... functions on many levels. Myth grows out of a culture needing to identify itself, to

tell itself its own history” (1994: xxx). In my discussion of *Credo* in Chapter Two I established that myth can be based on truth or imagination. Over forty years after Lumumba’s assassination, he has certainly taken his place amongst the historical heroes (mentioned before) such as Martin Luther King and Steve Biko whose ideas of freedom and their untimely and violent deaths have given them mythical qualities. Like a typical, mythical hero, Lumumba had an unimpressive beginning.³⁵ Despite his short but brilliant life and tragic and untimely death, his memory is covered in glory and he is admired long after his death, the actual circumstances of which are shrouded in controversy. His body was never recovered, leading to many speculations about the truth surrounding the event. According to the latest evidence, Lumumba and his associates were murdered, dismembered, their body parts dumped into sulphuric acid and their skulls and teeth ground up and scattered. Frans Verscheure, one of the key figures in the lugubrious eradication of Lumumba’s body, later confessed “that they wanted to destroy the myth of a living Lumumba who could be resuscitated whenever useful.” (De Witte 2001: 144). Regarding this objective, Stephen Greenblatt relays the following in a discussion of Lucretius’s poem *On the Nature of Things*, in which he expresses his view of materialism and the physical universe in relation to the imprisonment and execution of the reformer Jan Hus and his associate Jerome of Prague:

...the executioners tried to leave as little bodily material as possible. They were afraid people would take souvenirs so they burned the bodies “On the Nature of Things,” is a text that says that individual objects, including bodies, always pass away but also that things come together again. Things that disperse have a way of hooking back into each other and returning to the world. Lucretius has the astonishing idea about the physical universe that is at the very core of materialism, which is that matter actually doesn’t die, that what looks like an end is only a redistribution of the material of the world.

³⁵ Patrice Emery Lumumba came from a humble background and worked as a post office clerk. He was prime minister for only ten weeks and died at the age of thirty-six.

(<http://www.bookwire.com/bookwire/bbr/rewies/june2001/GREENBLATTInterview.htm>)

This observation confirms that the physical destruction of a mythical figure cannot prevent mythification or remythification. Jacques Brassinne's remarks in his doctoral dissertation on the mythification of Lumumba and the iconic image represented in the statue erected on the assumed site of his murder authenticates this:

Twenty metres from the road, at the place of executions in the middle of wooded savannah, the stiff hand of the Prophet [Lumumba] rises towards the sky: a last attempt to accuse, to call upon his destructive troops. They still can't kill decently. They do not think of the corpse that remains after the destruction of the human being.

(Quoted in De Witte 2001: 141)

What adds to Lumumba's mythification is the immortality of his ideals. De Witte remarks:

Did Lumumba disappear as quickly as he appeared? Has he really disappeared? In politics time takes on a different meaning. For many Africans, the figure of Lumumba is still a source of political inspiration: in fact, the task which Lumumba saw himself facing forty years ago is for the most part still waiting to be carried out today.

(2001: xxii)

The scapegoat,³⁶ cyclical rituals and mythical parallels

Thus far the examples cited have belonged to the class of direct or immediate expulsion of ills. It remains to illustrate the second class of expulsions, in which the evil influences are either embodied in a visible form or

³⁶ *In The Golden Bough* (1957) James Frazer gives many examples from Africa where a scapegoat is sacrificed annually to ensure fertile renewal: Egypt (748), Uganda (741), West Africa (746) and Central Africa (748). Examples of this ritual can also be found in other mythologies. In Celtic mythology, for example, the festival of Lughnasad or Lughnasa (in August) symbolizes the "passing of the old king and the arrival of the new" (King 1998: 58).

are at least supposed to be loaded upon a material medium, which acts as a vehicle to draw them off from the people, village, or town.

(Frazer 2004: 507)

From a more primitive perspective, Lumumba's death, in reality a hideous act of murder, is like a fertility rite, described by anthropological theories of ritual as a mythical representation of the universal process of creation, death, and re-creation. James Frazer's discussion of the various forms of "scapegoats" that exist in tribal communities (1957: 736–54) is pertinent in this context. The aim of the fertility ritual is to purify the community of evil and to ensure their health and wealth for the following period. A human being or beings from any level of society could be selected to serve as medium to "carry off the sin, guilt, misfortune and death of all" (1957: 747). The scapegoat phenomenon is also present in the Christian myth, where Christ is crucified for the salvation of those who believe in him. People from different cultures are involved in executing this "ritual" with Lumumba and his colleagues in a conflation of pagan and Christian ritual with political 'assassination'.

In comparing the murder of Lumumba with a sacrificial rite and ritual, the intention is not to nullify or diminish the terrors of the historical event or to state that the deed contained a specific religious connection significant within the group concerned. The term ritual is here interpreted (in the context of Bennett's novel) as symbolical from the perspective of sacred myth, because political rituals refer broadly to "important state occasions, such as presidential inaugurations, coronations, state funerals, celebrations of military victories, commemorations of important national anniversaries and the like" (Flood 2002: 182).³⁷ It does not necessarily mean that the rite is successful, just, or the outcome positive. It is the process that is of significance. Lumumba is "king and scapegoat, the incarnation of the dying god" (King 1998: 51). The mutilating murder of Cleophas (a follower of

³⁷ According to Flood, Philip Elliot also regards war as a form of political ritual, which is perhaps more relevant to political events in *The Catastrophist* (2002: 182).

Lumumba) in the novel can be seen as an archetypal symbol, an omen that presages the death of Lumumba.

Frazer's extensive study of myths that are linked to seasonal cycles is important because of the correlation it implies, as Meletinsky puts it, with "the problem of human suffering as a prelude to death and renewal, for the parallel between human life and natural cycles, and for their cyclical themes corresponding to the never-ending circle of life and death in nature and human existence" (2000: 21). In this respect Lumumba can be seen as the scapegoat who has to ensure renewal through his suffering and death.

That the fertility rite has failed could be seen as another contribution to the fact that James calls the story "a story of failure" (5). This is apparent in the various examples of sterility, sexual mutilation and collapse of dreams and ideals in the novel. We learn early on that Inès is sterile and infertile. According to Frye, sexual symbolism in the "apocalyptic world" (world of order and harmony) is often employed in the metaphor of two bodies becoming one (1971: 143). The fact that Inès cannot conceive is an indication that the mythical world in *The Catastrophist* is representative of what Frye terms as the "demonic world" (1971: 147), "the presentation of the world that desire totally rejects: the world of nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion" (Frye 1971: 147). This is also evident in James's sado-masochistic affair with Madeleine, whom he describes as "Madeleine and her maw" (181); a woman who has the jaw or throat of a voracious animal, "a woman of aggressive instincts and these instincts she takes with her to the bedroom" (214). He sees their sexual encounters as the consummation of "our hostile attraction" (181). In Part One, after having intercourse with Inès, James declares, "tonight at least there is no contradiction between heat and sterility" (28). Ironically, *he* seems to be the emotionally sterile one and Inès the heated one.

Further evidence in support of James's observation that it is a story of failure is provided in incidents of physical and sexual mutilation. These mutilations can be seen as an omen that the 'scapegoat' rite will prove to be futile. For example, Cleophas, one of Lumumba's supporters, is murdered and butchered at the end of Part One. James and Stipe find him with his genitalia cut off. Then, Smail is murdered in jail and James is locked up with his tortured and mutilated body. Smail is not only brutally beaten, but James observes that, "his testicles are the size of cricket balls. There is blood at the tip of his stubby penis" (267). These acts of castration symbolize infertility and impotence, ultimately emphasising the futility of the ritual in the demonic world. Lumumba dies, the political myth ends, James and Inès go their separate ways and Mobutu's reign proves to be one of exploitation and failure, not the harbinger of a golden age.

As I have suggested before, the violence associated with these acts of sexual mutilation also pre-empt the brutal death of Lumumba. In the novel the cruelty of the sacrifice scene is briefly captured, but expresses the painful death of the martyred prophet. The sparse description conveys the viciousness of the historical event:

Mobutu stood with folded arms and watched the soldiers slap and abuse their prisoner. They pulled his hair and threw away his glasses. One of the NCOs sarcastically read out Lumumba's declaration in which he had affirmed that Mobutu's coup was illegal and that he was still head of state. When the NCO had finished, he rolled the paper into a ball and rammed it down Lumumba's throat. Lumumba did not flinch. He stood his ground, bearing the indignities and the pain. He was taken away. Grant and the journalists were not able to see what happened next, but they heard the screams.

(1999: 288)

Fertility rites or rituals are seasonal or cyclical in nature. In time, Mobutu becomes the new 'king'. He introduces a new cycle. Everything Lumumba stood for and his followers believed, is replaced by a new ideology. This chimes with what William

McNeill sees as man's continuous search for truth. In *Mythistory and Other Essays* (1986) he asserts that what seems to be the truth to one person or group may not be the case for another. Inès and James are perfect examples of this in *The Catastrophist*. McNeill remarks:

Today the human community remains divided among an enormous number of different groups, each espousing its own version of truth itself, and about those excluded from its fellowship. Everything suggests that this sort of social and ideological fragmentation will continue indefinitely.

(1986: 7-8)

This argument is more indicative of what Meletinsky describes as “the irreversibility of time” (2000: 53) and illustrates the innermost cyclical principle of many mythologies, “the [perpetual] idea of transforming chaos into order” (53). Giambattista Vico discusses the cyclical repetition of history with a new creator in each cycle in Book One of *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (1968). He explains a cycle with reference to ancient heroes such as Achilles, Alexander and Nero and writes: “This ... gives a part of the principles of the ideal eternal history traversed in time by every nation in its rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall” (1968: 79).

McNeill further elucidates that each ideological course contains its own myth, which is easily replaced by another. Nazism, Marxism, Liberalism and Imperialism, to name but a few, are all ideals that are directed and redirected by mythical action (1986: 24). Just like Sorel, he notes that any revolution must invent or revive its own myth in order to replace the preceding one. Society is susceptible to new myths, because of man's desire to find truth and to give meaning to existence. When a current myth becomes unacceptable or redundant it creates a milieu for the development of a new one with its own mythical prescriptions and expectations. The motivations for the demise and rise of the three relevant myths in *The Catastrophist* were addressed earlier in this discussion.

Bennett remarks on the colonial myth in a sardonic way through the various characters. In his conversation with Gillespie, Stipe reflects:

‘When you ask the Belgians why they’re in the Congo they tell you, *dominer pour servir*. Dominate to serve. To serve and civilize. That, they say, is the sole excuse for colonialism, and its complete justification. It’s bullshit of course. The excuse is profit. Once the profits go, so do the excuses.’

(1999: 62-63)

This sentiment is echoed in Madeleine’s words to James: “The blacks are children.... What use have children for elections? They don’t want democracy. They don’t understand it. They need a father, a chief” (79). She seems to forget that the Europeans also need a father; King Léopold or whoever succeeded him, fulfils this role. McNeill calls this the “self-righteousness that all in-groups display (“us” vs. “them)” (1986: 48). History has shown that the ideal does not last. In Gillespie’s words: “The politics of idealism go hand in hand with disillusion.” (1999: 44). Rogers, a British doctor in the novel, seems to echo James’s opinion when he remarks:

‘Dictators always arrive with excuses’, he continues. ‘Mussolini had his and so did Hitler and so did Franco. But the fact is one shouldn’t have any truck with them. It’s quite wrong.’

(1999: 248)

The recurrence of tyrannical leaders is supported by Hochschild when he remarks that the only difference between Mobutu and Léopold was the colour of their skin.

The similarities between Mobutu and Léopold and the myths they represent are based on the concept of power and it is always the more powerful one that selects the scapegoat. According to the theories of Michel Foucault, power is not only a physical force, but also a dynamic determinant in human relationships.

Power can have a negative and positive effect: it can prevent you from killing someone in spite of your personal convictions when told to do so by someone who dominates. The dictator or revolutionary in turn also reacts because of the power other forces exert over him. Stipe is a perfect example of someone who operates from his perspective of power. Murfin and Ray explain it as follows in an adaptation from *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*:

Like Karl Marx, Foucault saw history in terms of power, but unlike Marx, he viewed power not simply as a repressive force or a tool of conspiracy but rather as a complex of forces that produces what happens. Not even a tyrannical aristocrat simply wields power, for the aristocrat is himself empowered by discourses and practices that constitute power.

(<http://www.virtuaLit.htm>)

This explanation does not aim to invalidate or diminish the terrors of history. In fact, it departs from the tendency to look at history from an elevated and disconnected perspective, but opens up the possibility of revealing moments of exploitation and terror.

No analysis of mythology and myth can be made without the views of ethnology and psychology. Carl Jung's ideas are more applicable in this chapter than those of Sigmund Freud, who was exclusively interested in sexual complexes and their repression and I allude to these in Chapter Four. Jung's arguments favour symbolic interpretation of, in particular, the collective subconscious and the idea that "the psyche contains all the images that over time have become raised to the level of myth" (Meletinsky 2000: 45). This approach could aid in the understanding of a group or society's acceptance of a particular ideology in specific cyclical rituals. Joseph Campbell elaborated on Jung's opinion, arguing that "myth contains many different meanings: the erotic ... the thrill of power, and aggression" (50). In the novel, when Lumumba is arrested by Janssens, the head of the Belgian army, shortly before the elections, Stipe remarks:

‘It’s so predictable, but no one ever seems to learn.’ ...‘Half these people weren’t even MNC supporters this morning. The more demonstrators you shoot down, the more leaders you lock up, the more people flock to the cause. But I hardly have to tell you that.’

(1999: 99)

The remark seems to echo Jung’s observation about the collective subconsciousness of a society. Lumumba’s first incarceration was merely an act of desperation by the outgoing colonial regime. Instead of slowing down the decolonisation process, however, it gave it momentum and fuelled the underlying desire of Congolese society. The universal reality of Stipe’s remark is revealed in the continuation of the discussion with Gillespie.

‘Isn’t that what happened in Ireland after your Easter Rising?’

‘It wasn’t my Rising ... and anyway, the situations are hardly comparable.’

‘That’s what every colonial power always says....’

(1999: 99)

The statement illustrates that the Congo is not an isolated case affected by power or the subconscious desires of a society.

The imagery in the novel supports the state of political unease and the effects of power. Images which are normally regarded as fertility images are often employed to indicate chaos. Water-hyacinths are repeatedly mentioned in relation to their beauty. In the context of the novel they are symbols of the destructive and infiltrative qualities of power and unrest. At the party held at Houthoofd’s house, when the guests witness a shooting incident across the river, Stipe draws Gillespie’s attention to bodies that are lowered into the river. James looks through binoculars

and at first only notices the hyacinths and then the bodies, tied to stones that are being submerged.

‘Water-hyacinth,’ Stipe explains. ‘It’s an exotic. Some fool brought it over from South America because he thought it would look pretty in his garden pond. The damn thing spread like a plague.’
‘It does look pretty.’
‘It’s a parasite,’ de Scheut says vaguely. ‘It eats the oxygen and kills the river.’

(1999: 43)

When Lumumba gets on the boat to return for his final arrest, Gillespie describes the flowers in the river as “beautiful and malign, yet more parasites for this over-leached land. The rivers will never flush away these tokens of infection” (1).

In Frye’s discussion on the imagery in the “demonic world” (1971: 147), he describes the imagery of water in this world as: “the water of death, often identifie[d] with spilled blood” (1971: 150). According to Jung, images of water are looked upon as “an archetypal symbol of chaos” (Meletinsky 2000: 47). The history of the Congo as evoked in the imagery of *The Catastrophist* confirms these observations.

Water is generally regarded as the symbol of life, fertility and sometimes of sexuality. In Celtic mythology, as in most ancient mythologies, rivers, wells and springs are respected as sacred places. In myths dealing with the origin of water, water can either be useful – when the water is fresh – or destructive – when it is in flood or contaminated. The rivers in the novel are often described as muddy and “dull” (1999: 1). The river, especially the Sankuru River, could be seen as representative of Lumumba and his ideals. It is being infiltrated and obstructed by other forces to prevent it from reaching its goal. The different forms of obstruction (such as the hyacinths) in the novel again reveal the impotence suggested by similar symbols of infertility.

Although water can be powerful and destructive in its own right, it can also be contained in the same way that a revolution or leader can be contained. The Sankuru is not the only river in the country nor is it the only river in Africa. In response to Auguste's remark that it is not as big as the Congo River or the Volta in Ghana,³⁸ Stipe retorts:

‘Dr Nkrumah³⁹ is building a hydro-electric dam on the Volta River. The dam will transform all Ghana. It will bring electricity to every village. It will give power to factories and to smelters and make many industries possible....’

‘You know who's building the fucking Volta Dam? Do you? I'll tell you. The Kaiser Steel Corporation of America.’

(1999: 152)

If the Volta can be restrained for financial profit then the Sankuru, which might be seen as symbolic of Lumumba's quest, can also be controlled or infected. Stipe's remark evokes the ubiquitous presence of western powers in Africa and the real reasons behind the emergence of neo-colonialism. Greed and power kept the myth of colonialism alive, re-enforcing political remythification and cyclical concepts attributed to political myth. According to Meletinsky, Barthes is of the opinion that “myth transforms history into ideology at the level of the sign” and therefore is functional in the invention of ideologies. Meletinsky explains that “the meaning of the signifieds and the form of the myth perforce change, whereas the repetition of ideas allows the meaning of the myth to be deciphered, and the meaning of the myth is nothing more than the myth itself” (2000: 68). If one substitutes Belgium with

³⁸ Ghana became the first West African state to emerge into sovereign freedom in 1957. The struggle for independence was greatly supported and assisted by Gamal Abdul Nasser from Egypt (Van Rensburg 1974: 293).

³⁹ Kwame Nkrumah was at the time regarded as one of the leaders who successfully brought about independence in Africa. Lumumba considered him as an example to follow. Nkrumah publicly condemned the murder of Lumumba on radio by stating that it was “unique in that it is the first time in history that the legal ruler of a country has been done to death with the open connivance of a world organisation in whom that ruler put his trust” (De Witte 2001: 149).

United States of America then the ‘myth itself’ is a result of political demagoguery with “the aim to furnish [a] particular political ideology with the gloss of naturalness” (69). De Witte explains the situation in the Congo at the time as follows: “While ministers and colonels played out the game, the holding companies doubtless pulled the strings; at the root of the crisis lay their unquenchable thirst for profit ... still their primary motive today” (2001: 187).

Besides the mythical element of scapegoat and the ancient mythological parallel present in Lumumba, who can be seen as a hero, warrior, husband, father and king, a Christian parallel exists with Lumumba as a Christ-like figure. He ‘gives’ his life not only so that his wife Pauline and son Roland can live, but in order to die for his convictions. This is evident in James’s interpretation of Inès’s perception of the arrest. She sees Lumumba as the sacrificial saviour:

See what this man is. See how loved he is. And at the Sankuru River, when he could have made his escape, he gives up his life because he will not leave his wife and child behind. Even though Pauline shakes her head and silently begs him to save himself. He steps on to the barque and commands the old boatman to deliver him to his enemies. How can you say this is a farce? Which of us would have made such a gesture? He gave up his life because he believed in something.

(1999: 288)

My analysis of *Credo* focused on the transformation of Celtic mythology into Christian mythology. I showed how the biblical myth practically removed all connections with nature and instead created an “abstract concept of monotheism” (Meletinsky 2000: 235). Christian mythology differs from Celtic and ancient mythologies in that it draws on sound quantities of history; political myths do the same. Barthes contends that history provides myth with analogies and these symbols or signs can confer new meaning and in so doing change history into ideology. Meletinsky sees Barthes’s view as the beginning of political myth even if he could not explain the “differences between archaic myth and modern political

myths” (69). Nevertheless, Barthes argues that “contemporary societies are much more mythological than those of the past” (121) because of the vast field of sources and the variety of environments in which myths can be reproduced. This confirms that myth (in this case political myth) fulfils a functional role in providing thematic material in contemporary literature such as *The Catastrophist*.

A short comparison between the examples of myth believers in *Credo* and *The Catastrophist* shows that the extent of Bega’s devotion to her cause and Inés’s devotion are in fact very similar. They both cling to the concept of a patriarchal leader. Christ and Lumumba represent to these women the cultural hero. Such “cultural heroes must explain the genesis of the universe and of society, since heroes shape human society” (Meletinsky 2000: 205). Both heroes are killed. Their violent deaths place them in what Northrop Frye calls the “mythos of autumn” (1973: 206). Their myths are therefore tragic in nature because they demonstrate “the fall, the dying god, violent death, and immolation ...” (Meletinsky 2000: 83). In contrast to Bega and Inès, James repeatedly states that he sees events as farcical and therefore he seems to regard myths and heroes as pointless.

Like Bega, Inés loses a man because of her convictions; her belief, in this case, in a political myth. Bega says to Padric: “I must do as God and Cuthbert bid me. My life is different now. I have been changed” (Bragg 1996: 248). In the same manner James recalls the start of Inés’s commitment to Lumumba’s cause:

Others might now acknowledge Lumumba’s importance but she had recognized him first. She came to the Congo for him, for the hopes he inspired and embodied.... She wrote to me afterwards in a thrill of commitment and dedication. *You must understand*, the letter said, *that my life now can never be the same.*
(1999: 18)

Apart from the fact that both the biblical myth in *Credo* and the political myths in *The Catastrophist* contain historical facts, they are patriarchal in nature. With no

female counterpart to the cultural hero, imbalance exists. Bega denies her sexuality and Inès can only express hers in the company of a co-believer. Both characters' bodies reveal physical decline and/or sterility. This implies the rejection of matriarchal or fertility qualities attributed to the archetypal goddess in a patriarchal belief system.⁴⁰ After Lumumba's death, Inès continues on the mythical path by following Auguste and then moves on to the struggle in Ireland and Vietnam. She can never again start a relationship with James. She can only survive in the proximity of a political myth. In the final chapter of the novel we read that she is reporting on the struggle in Vietnam.

James knows that his lack of faith contributed to the failure of the relationship. Like Padric in *Credo* he is prepared to accept her devotion to what she believes, but she cannot continue in a relationship where he does not completely feel the way she does. He says: "Our disagreements are fundamental, our minds dispar, but I live in our differences: my blankness draws on her vitality. She exists me" (74). And he admits that his insistence on remaining detached is what failed him: "She encouraged me, beckoned me forward. She promised that was where I'd find her. But I could never join her there. I was always too much a watcher, too much *l'homme-plume*; I was divided, unbelieving" (312). The end of Part Three contains a crucial moment as it reveals James's brief glimpse of insight into Inès's belief system. Pauline, Lumumba's widow, leads a march of mourners through the streets. James runs into Stipe for the last time and says:

'I'll never be like her [Inès]. I just don't see the things she sees and I never will. But I see what you've been doing, Mark. Inès was right about that all along and I hope she and Auguste succeed in whatever it is they're trying to do. I hope that what they want happens. I hope they kick you and Houthoofd and Dr Joe and all you people out of this country forever.'

⁴⁰ In her review of Meredith Powers's work *The Heroine in Western Literature* (1991), Deirdre Byrne explains that "the archetype of the goddess was actively suppressed in order to foster the creation of a male-dominated society" (1993: 122).

(1999: 300)

When James gets pushed over by some of the marchers he briefly experiences what the believers see, “The crowd lets a sudden deafening roar. *Depanda!* And for a moment – a split second only as the sound breaks over me – I think I glimpse the dreams Inès can see” (301). Despite this moment of insight and because of his inability to participate, James chooses his dispassionate position and in so doing concedes to Degenaar’s opinion that “postmodernity is characterised by an ironic approach to all forms of closure”. He therefore insists on “holding off all gods and tyrants who impose a final view on society” (1995: 47).

Conclusion

The preceding discussion of *The Catastrophist* establishes that political ideas and ideologies embody mythical elements which in retrospect transform them into political myth, and that such political myths perform an important and useful function in providing thematic material for contemporary literature. Furthermore the factual, historical events described in *The Catastrophist* contain elements of the myth of eternal return. These have been illustrated by the three political myths identified in the novel and the mythological parallels which reveal degrees of mythification, de-mythification and remythification.

The discussion identifies elements of the myth of eternal return with reference to appropriate theorists and illustrates that the motif of mythical ritual is of vital importance in the process of remythification in society and the “rebirth of mythology” (Meletinsky 2000: 16) in general, and in literature in particular. The creation, destruction and recreation of the various political myths as presented by James Gillespie correspond with Sauvy’s observation that the prejudices associated with political myth do “not only belong to the past and persist even when confronted with rational discourse but are continually re-created by the social psychology of a culture” (Meletinsky 2000: 17-18). The chapter illustrates that historical events provide political myth with the kinds of heroes, gods and kings identifiable in the

mythologies of classical antiquity and are as important in the creation of literature. History has shown that political ideas are in a continual process of change and that each ideology develops its own set of mythical elements, which is accepted as truth by its followers. The function of literature is to reveal these myths through image and symbol. The chapter further illustrates the postmodernist's quandary in maintaining an observant and detached stance.

The "writer's dilemma" of the main protagonist, James Gillespie, has also been explored in this discussion. His apparent inability to participate in political myth and his repeated claim of remaining distant and detached is exposed as the foundation for his observation that it is "a story of failure" (5). In addition, his position as narrator and writer of this particular story attributes to him divine qualities which place him firmly inside the writer's mythology. At the end he acknowledges that his relationship failed because he could not believe in the myth Inés wanted him to believe in. James observes "I can use all of this – along with my own arrest and beating – for novels, stories, plays" (268). By relaying events in a historical novel in which he is a character, his "written account ... will be the breath on which their memories [and his] live" (180).

The next chapter, which deals with A. L. Kennedy's novel *Everything You Need* (2000), articulates the function of the artist as myth creator and the imaginative process of mythmaking in postmodern literature.

CHAPTER FOUR

MYTH: DESPAIR AND RESTORATION

Creativity and the author in A.L. Kennedy's *Everything You Need*

God does not send us despair in order to kill us; he sends it in order to awaken us to new life.

(Herman Hesse: 1979: 56)

My reading of A.L. Kennedy's novel *Everything You Need* (2000) develops further my argument that myth is functional in the contemporary novel and postmodern literature because of its restorative abilities. In this novel it is instrumental in the repair of psychological damage as a result of the fragmentation that separates the gods from humans in modern existence. The discussion confirms Peter O'Connor's observation that "[t]he 'poet' as writer, painter or musician, sustains the imaginative life, the necessary antidote to materialism and the pervasiveness of banal secularity" (2000: 201). In *Everything You Need*, particularly, writing seems to become the medium in the healing process. This is achieved through the mythical and symbolical qualities of Foal Island, the writers' quests and bizarre rituals, Mary's healing presence, and the manner in which Nathan receives reprieve and his creative impulse is restored. Events in the novel seem to confirm Dabney Townsend's view on the bond that myth creates between artist and audience:

Myth and ritual have both anthropological and psychological forms. Myth is a telling of stories that are culturally significant, and ritual allows those stories to be re-enacted and actualised. Thus they create a place in which artist and audience can meet, a shared set of symbols, and an account of the significance of aesthetic experience. Psychological theories give similar accounts of how we share symbols and significance on an individual level. These theories are based on science

and structural descriptions of cultures and individual psyches. They are most clearly applicable as part of a theory of imitation, but they can also be adapted to theories based on expression or imagination.

(1997: 193-94)

This bond is manifested in the novel in the manner in which the author and the writers in the novel draw on and refer to a variety of identifiable and traditional legends and myths. The aim of this discussion is not a thematological⁴¹ attempt at myth-criticism in order to classify *Everything You Need* as a mythical novel nor an implication that Kennedy consciously selected specific myths to be explored in the novel; it is more an investigation into the images, symbolism and transcendental meaning exposed in structures of reality in *Everything You Need* which suggest aspects of myth in transformation. The novel has two central themes: the manifestation of inner pain as a physically destructive force and the ferocious healing quality of love and the effect thereof on the creative drive. The novel is not about romance, but deals with the disturbing world of emotions.

Although at first reading the novel seems completely un-mythical, it reveals a variety of mythical elements (mainly Celtic) in close reading. Furthermore Kennedy, a Scottish author, stems from Celtic roots, as do the two previous authors I have discussed, namely Melvyn Bragg and Ronan Bennett. The novel is set on an island off the coast of Wales, which further validates reference to Celtic mythology since Welsh, Cornish, Scottish and Irish mythologies are closely related. Geddes and Grosset explain that “in the West of England, in Wales, in Scotland, and especially in legend-haunted Ireland, the hills and dales still hold memories of the ancient gods of the ancient race” (1999: 15). These memories of the collective unconscious form the basis of the mythological references and echoes that the author draws on. Various images in the novel have

⁴¹ According to Ruthven, thematology is a division of literary studies that “select[s] the stories associated with one of the more calibrated figures from classical mythology, and then stud[ies] what happens to them when they are retold by a wide variety of European writers from antiquity to the present day” (1976: 72).

their origin in mythological legends and sagas. The novel is not a direct parallel of a specific classical or ancient myth, but rather employs a diversity of identifiable comparisons and mythical motifs.

By identifying mythical elements and mythical parallels from various mythologies, but especially of the Welsh and Celtic traditions, my aim is to examine to what extent the novel reveals and represents myth in transformation. I further discuss the mythopoetic instinct, as it manifests itself in modern life, not necessarily as a mythology that appeals to the masses, but with elements that plead the needs of the modern individual and, in this case, the artist or writer. Appropriate ideas are harnessed in order to substantiate and support my argument. These include Northrop Frye's views on the imagery and structures of myth; Frazer's findings on cyclical *leitmotifs* of myth and rituals with particular focus on the motif of death and resurrection; Roland Barthes's views on love as a state of the imagination⁴² and on the way in which mythmaking, like love is an imaginative process; Eleazar Meletinsky's discussion on mythification in twentieth-century literature, and theorists from the school of psychoanalysis, because the emotional state and dreams of the characters in *Everything You Need* are important in the process of mythification in the novel. Meletinsky's contention that: "Myth is fundamentally about the transformation of chaos into harmony, and primitive man defines harmony in such a way that it includes all the axiological and ethical aspects of life" (2000: 156) is central to my argument. It is not only primitive man that needs to define and establish harmony; the structures of definition might have altered, yet the goal has remained the same.

In this novel the mental and the physical circumstances of the characters on the fictitious Foal Island are often in a state of chaos. As Toby Mundy puts it,

⁴² Love in *Everything You Need* is viewed with both the concept of Eros; the erotic and sexual components (as is relevant to Nathan and Maura's relationship) and Agape or Caritas; "unconditional love" (Uken 1986: 8) as it is manifested between Mary and Nathan, in mind. Furthermore love (Eros or Agape) is a prominent motif in many quest myths from a variety of mythologies.

“Kennedy is terrifyingly alive to the human need to make sense of the recalcitrant world, and to the fallacies, sops and delusions that fleetingly transform chaos into order” (1999: 49). In the discussion which follows, I identify the aspects of mythification that define a state of chaos or harmony for these modern inhabitants. This is not a novel in which we can identify gods and goddesses or heroes and heroines, but one that seems to address the myth that modern man (and specifically the artist, in this case) is on a quest to mould and fashion his own faith – to search and find his own Grail⁴³ – which will be ‘everything you need’ in order to give meaning to the individual’s reality and existence. I identify and discuss quest patterns in order to substantiate this claim.

Furthermore, I explore the significance of several elements and symbols, such as the novel’s title, the names of the characters, and the significance of the number seven, in the processes of mythification which I have identified in the novel. So for instance the title, *Everything You Need*, can be seen as posing several important questions, such as: what is it that each of the characters, especially Nathan Staples and Mary Lamb, needs? Are their needs being fulfilled and in what way?

I have already alluded to the fact that the number seven has a particular significance in the novel and I explain the mythical importance of the number in relation to the structure and meaning of the novel. Thus, for instance, the events of the novel span seven years – from 1990 to 1997. It is mainly set on a fictitious island off the coast of Wales. Significantly, six writers inhabit the island after the suicide of the seventh. There is a superstition amongst the residents and especially the leader of the group, Joe Christopher, that fewer than seven will bring bad luck to the island. In Joe’s words: “I am fond of sevens. There are meant to be seven

⁴³ A great deal of controversy surrounds the probable origin of the grail motif. Spence cites a few options besides the Conte del Graal and Arthurian Romances (Welsh and Irish mythology), namely an Eastern, Arabic or Persian origin. He further explains that the quest legends “may be divided into two classes: those which are connected with the quest for certain talismans, of which the *Grail* is only one, and which deal with the personality of the hero who achieved the quest; and secondly those which deal with the nature and history of the talismans” (2003: 187).

heavens, if you believe a certain brand of mystical thought” (290). The seventh writer, Arthur Llangattock, committed suicide with a circular saw and is subsequently replaced by Mary Lamb, whom I will show to be the restorative, regenerative force that works powerfully towards the restoration of order and recreation out of the initial chaos and sterility of Foal Island. The number seven has further significance; the inhabitants are allowed seven suicide attempts after which they are expected to reach a higher level of insight.

After the death of Arthur Llangattock, the seventh writer on the island, Mary Lamb is the first recipient of the Llangattock Bursary, which was established in his honour. She goes to Foal Island to receive training as a writer. Nathan Staples is her mentor, but she is unaware that he is the father she believes to be dead. I explore the themes of rebirth and resurrection present in various mythologies and also suggested by Mary’s arrival and in particular in Nathan’s survival. Everybody on the island is aware of Mary’s true identity and is in collusion to keep it secret until Nathan decides to tell her. The notion of mistaken identity, encountered in most of the Celtic myths, often in relation to shape-shifting,⁴⁴ is also present here. The metaphorical significance of the island intensifies when Louis, the historian, explains to Mary why it is called Foal Island. His story is, as far as I could establish, a legend created by Kennedy based on elements of verifiable Welsh myths. Various references are made to ancient myths and in the course of the novel legends are told which add layers of mythical resonance to it. In my discussion I trace their authenticity to relevant sources or identify them as the author’s imaginary creation. Either way, their significance in the process of mythmaking becomes evident.

⁴⁴Lewis Spence identifies two forms of “magical interference” namely: “shape-shifting and the transformation of persons into forms other than their own.... The first is, of course, descriptive of the guises into which a magician can transform himself. The second implies his transformation of another person into any shape, human, animal or inanimate” (1996: 14-15).

My analysis includes an examination of the narrative style of the novel, which employs first- and third-person narration. For instance, the first-person narration is mostly from the perspectives of Mary and Nathan. Furthermore, there are often one or more tales within the tale as mainly Nathan and then Mary write their stories, which reveal more about the situations of the novel from different perspectives. It is a curious style where the different narratives are alternating, often from one line to the next. With these different forms of narration (alternating between autodiegetic, homodiegetic and heterodiegetic)⁴⁵ Kennedy seems to suggest that the act of writing is the ego's attempt at breaking out, at verification and self-transcendence, and at giving meaning to its surroundings and existence. Moreover, the stories within a story make mythification doubly important in the novel. I have established in the previous chapters that myth creation is a result of humankind's desire to give meaning to its world and the novel's meta-narrative seems to illustrate the characters' needs.

Ultimately Kennedy seems to imply that pain (mental or physical) can realise purification and that resurrection, rebirth and salvation are obtainable through love. Pain seems to be an element present in the demonic or chaotic world, previously referred to and identified by Frye, and love seems to be present in the apocalyptic world or the world of order and harmony. As Nathan comes to realize, "Love. He'd quite forgotten that it was, beyond all the gloss and brimstone, a kind of very wonderful sleepiness.... My God, love could make simply breathing a splendid thing" (2000: 317). Nathan's loneliness, confusion, angst and salvation through love are explored with the help of Roland Barthes's ideas in *A Lover's Discourse* (2002).

⁴⁵ Eagleton summarises Gérard Genette's categories of narration as follows: "A narrator may be 'heterodiegetic' (i.e. absent from his own narrative), 'homodiegetic' (inside his narrative as in first-person stories), or 'autodiegetic' (where he is not only inside the narrative but figures as its principal character)." (1983: 106)

Chaos versus Order⁴⁶

Lonely people, dry people, people who would prefer to be untroubled by any more hope: they really ought to fit.

(Kennedy 2000: 247)

The chaotic world of the novel is immediately established in the first few pages with an attempted suicide by the protagonist Nathan Staples, introducing the reader to the bizarre philosophy of what Jung terms “bodily injury with premeditation” (Storr 1983: 311) that endures on Foal Island. The aim of the process is not to succeed, but to come as close to death as possible in order to experience “unwilling life” (Kennedy 2000: 42).

Nathan has a strong inclination to self-mutilation and depression. The first line of the novel is, “*Things could be worse*”⁴⁷ (2000: 3). Throughout this section, while he is meticulously preparing for the attempted suicide, he thinks of physical tortures that could be worse than his own mental suffering. He says: “So we part the mind wide open, spread the thinking till it cracks” (5) and the whole episode creates more and more suspense as to why his mental suffering is so unbearable. In spite of all the physically painful examples that he tries to imagine, nothing seems to match his agonizing memories and loss. We read: “His own imagination was performing a type of well-informed rape: penetrating him painstakingly with a ghost, with a time past restoring, an unreachable skin” (5). Kennedy’s imagery is often of a sexual nature, filled with “unremitting scatology” (Mundy 1999: 49), whether it is in relation to suicide, the act of writing, or food, and suggests obsession with pain, fertility or the lack thereof (sterility). The elements of fertility and sterility in mythification will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. The negative emotions and imagery evoked by Nathan’s proceedings reveal the chaotic

⁴⁶ This refers to Northrop Frye’s theory about the “demonic” and “apocalyptic world” in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1971).

⁴⁷ Unless otherwise indicated all italics and emphases in quotations are those of the cited authors.

atmosphere on Foal Island and prefigure the mental state of the other islanders soon to become apparent to the reader.

The reader also soon realises that the “ghost” Nathan is referring to is a woman he has lost and “he didn’t have the heart to look too long or closely at the picture, at its figure, at her” (5). The ritual of self-inflicted physical pain is a cathartic process to alleviate emotional distress. Suicide functions as what Barthes describes as the “solution to the amorous crisis” (2002: 142), namely the “idea of suicide; the idea of separation; idea of withdrawal; idea of travel; idea of sacrifice” (142). Nathan is trying to escape the agony he is suffering from in his unrequited love. This explains the self-inflicted isolation on the island. The situation reveals a catastrophic character, a desire to be separated from the suffering. Contrary to what is expected from suicides, Nathan’s overt realism in the preparation for the deed makes the attempt seem like a scientific experiment or a ritual. He expects to survive. It is explained that, “He thought, extremely cautiously, of fixing in his mind the important points to establish, the ones that would make sure that this evening’s proceedings wouldn’t be focused on killing, or dying, or any kind of suicide” (19). This hints at the philosophy of the inhabitants of the island. The language conveys images of torture and rape. The physical pain he will experience will be a kind of purifying rite; will allow him to feel something other than dejection. To fail at dying will be his punishment. In the act of hanging himself, we read, “He is being washed. Everything but the closing of death and his own tiny nature has gone” (24) and then “... it hurts. I am able to hurt.... That’s fucking lovely” (25). Nathan knows that the deed will only provide temporary relief and that “in hours, or days, or moments, the petty considerations that framed his life, his griefs and preoccupations and very personal cycles of hate would rain down predictably and stick” (26). For a short while after his attempt he will feel reborn. He has even prepared some refreshments to eat after the rite, echoing ancient customs of leaving food for the deceased to sustain them in the new world they pass over into. The entire procedure recalls the myth of eternal return so evident in

Celtic mythology and other mythologies – death and rebirth or transformation into a different shape. So for instance, according to O'Connor, the transformation in heroes like Cu Chulainn was called “*riastradh*” (2000: 161) and was a “magical-religious experience” (161). Likewise, Nathan’s transformation or rebirth is not a physical one, but a psychological event and Joseph Campbell supports this view in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968). Death and rebirth or resurrection are present in most mythologies and, as I have mentioned in previous chapters, often involve a god on a tree or a piece of wood. Ironically, Nathan tries to hang himself, and in his final suicide attempt he tries to do so from a tree. This does not necessarily imply that Nathan is a god, king or hero; in fact, he seems to be the typical anti-hero who, in modern fiction, is representative of the alienation of man in society. Nathan’s act does, however, establish mythical resonances of suffering and purification.

Towards the end of the novel Nathan’s preparations for his final, seventh, suicide attempt rebound when his dog Eckless falls victim to the contraption he has devised in the woods. The injured dog, Joe’s instruction to abandon his endeavours and his paternal love for Mary put an end to his destructive path. His ruinous ‘need’ for the woman in the picture is replaced by his ‘need’ for Mary. Nathan proceeds through the rites of passage present in most myths, namely: isolation from society (separation), the realisation of some source of power (initiation) and a life-enhancing acceptance of the importance of love (return) (Ruthven 1976: 76).

The description of Nathan’s attempt is interrupted by a section that introduces to us the apocalyptic world of Morgan, Bryn, Mary and Jonathan in the little imaginary town of Capel Gofeg. Morgan and Bryn – “the Uncles” (15) – brought up Mary after her mother left her with them at the age of five. This background is resonant in terms of Celtic mythology: all the mythical heroes or heroines like Cu Chulainn, Fionn and Derdriu were reared by foster parents. According to O'Connor “the bond created by fostering was regarded more sacred

and binding than the natural parent” (2000: 155). In the Celtic tradition, as in other mythologies from many regions, the hero’s or heroine’s youth usually includes some form of exile or separation from the natural mother. Thus Cu Chulainn had six foster-parents, each having to instruct and teach him something specific such as poetry and eloquence or warrior skills. Derdriu, in the story *The Exile of the Sons of Uisnech*, is reared by Lebarcham, King Conchobhar’s “satirist and poetess” (O’Connor 2000: 140). She teaches Derdriu the arts of divination and prophecy. In *Everything You Need* Bryn teaches Mary Latin. Then, when she goes to Foal Island to take up the Llangattock Bursary, the other islanders (to a lesser or greater extent) fulfil the function of instructors and teachers, especially Nathan (the art of writing), Joe (mysticism) and Louis (history). Thus both the chaotic and apocalyptic worlds of the novel contain the aspect of instruction which contributes to the restorative function invested in Mary.

In the section that introduces the reader to the characters in Capel Gofeg, it soon becomes apparent that an atmosphere of impending change is present. Mary is “saving things up to be remembered” (2000: 13). She will shortly be leaving for Foal Island to start a seven-year writer’s training programme. Mary and her boyfriend Jonathan want to consummate their relationship before she goes away. This seems to suggest Mary’s fertility and the positive effect she will have on the barren and depressed situation on Foal Island. The loving and tranquil atmosphere in the house at Capel Gofeg is vividly contrasted to the state of emotional turmoil on Foal Island and suggests the themes of order versus chaos I have referred to before and which represent what Frye terms the “apocalyptic” versus the “demonic worlds” (1971: 140). The fulfilment of sexual desires in the town is described in positive imagery, while sexuality on Foal Island is associated with ‘abnormal’ sexual behaviour – impotence, nymphomania, adultery, intercourse with retarded people and sadism. As Frye puts it, the demonic world

is the presentation of the world that desire totally
rejects: the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat,

of bondage and pain and confusion ... the world also of
perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs,
instruments of torture and monuments of folly ... linked
with existential hell.

(1971: 147)

Foal Island initially reveals a sinister and ruthless atmosphere that contradicts the expectation of an idyllic island with pastoral imagery. Contrary to expectations conjured up by its name, Kennedy never describes the island as a place of extreme beauty. When Nathan plans his suicide in the beginning of the novel, we read that “the island’s sky had started to rock and howl ... a full, raw gale was dumping rain in gravelly armfuls against his western window, shuddering round his stovepipe and clattering his roof into corrugated bedlam...” (19). The chaos of the natural world pre-figures the full extent of Nathan’s inner chaos as well as the ‘storm’ he is about to unleash on himself.

In a further elaboration on this concept of the chaotic world, Frye says: “the demonic parody of marriage, or the union of two souls in one flesh, may take the form of hermaphroditism, incest ... or homosexuality” (149). Paradoxically, the loving environment in Capel Gofeg contains the homosexual uncles, but on the writers’ island incest is suggested when Mary falls in love with Nathan. Frye continues by explaining: “The social relation [in the demonic world] is that of the mob, which is essentially human society looking for a *pharmakos* [sacrificial victim]” (149). Because everyone on the island is collaborating in keeping Nathan’s true identity a secret, they represent the mob as defined by Frye. Mary Lamb (as the pun could hint at) personifies the lamb of the romantic innocent world that will be introduced into the chaotic world and will fulfil the function of purification – the sacrificial lamb or the earth goddess who will reintroduce fertility and the healing power of love.

Island “of bondage and pain and confusion”⁴⁸

‘...there was a clot of shadow ahead, pressed in between two different blues.... I knew that shadow would be the island. Eventually it grew, blackened, solidified’

(Kennedy 2000: 77)

I now turn to the geographical details of the fictitious and mysterious Foal Island which Kennedy introduces to us. Apparently it lies somewhere off the coast of Wales, “a four-mile-long island” (61) with seven rocks protruding from the sea. Louis Elcho, one of the islanders, informs Mary about the history, myths and legends associated with the island. He relates the following: “Seven Brothers – they’re the rocks across from Nathan’s bay.... They’re a beautiful case of meaning deepening through time ... during different periods, they have been used to define entirely different things” (124). This echoes the rocks off the coast of the isle of Capri, which are said to resemble the sirens⁴⁹ in the *Odyssey*. Louis continues,

‘At one point they were the Seith Marchawg, the Seven Riders of the Mabinogion,⁵⁰ left behind to steward Britain when the men of the Island of the Mighty sailed to Ireland. This means they all have names: Cradawg,

⁴⁸ Frye, N. (1971) *Anatomy of Criticism* (147).

⁴⁹ The sirens in Greek mythology are sea nymphs who by their singing enchanted those who sailed by the island and then destroyed them. According to myth, anyone who should pass by them unmoved by their voices would cause the sirens to throw themselves into the sea and become impressive rocks. (Geddes & Grosset 1997: 459)

⁵⁰ Some sources refer to it as *Mabinogin* and others as *The Mabinogion*. Delaney explains: “The direct meaning of the word *Mabinogion* has continually provoked argument; it appears to derive from *mab*, meaning ‘young’, and in some cases, as in the word *mabinogi*, applied to an apprentice bard. Lady Guest added a suffix to create a plural and made it mean ‘a collection of stories for children’. This seems a misconceived definition: it is much more likely that the original tales either had a function as the curriculum for those sitting bardship examinations, or were given their *mab* root because they tell of young men’s adventures” (1994: 143). *Mabinogion* is one of the most important sources in Welsh Celtic mythology. It is based on two earlier manuscripts, *The White Book of Rhydderch* (1300-1325) and *The Red Book of Hergest* (1375-1425) and contains four tales (Geddes & Grosset 1999: 421). In my research into Welsh mythology and specifically the *Mabinogion*, I could not find reference to any of the above names, except “Caradawc” (Geddes & Grosset 1999: 274) who might or might not relate to Kennedy’s Cradawg. “Caradawc the Strong-armed ... son not of Bran but of Llyr” (274) is one of Arthur’s warriors who fought in the “Battle of Mount Badon” (274).

Hefeydd the Tall, Unig Strong-shoulder, Iddig, Ffodor,
Wlch Bone-Lip and Llashar.’

(2000: 124)

There is a sense of mystery and enchantment in relation to Foal Island in these mythical connotations.

As Louis continues with the history of the island, the impact of Christian mythology on pagan mythology becomes more evident. He says,

‘Of course, later, the seven rocks are the seven deadly sins, cast out of the island by Joseph of Arimathea and petrified as a memorial. That would mean that we are living on an island without sin. Quite a consideration. The Seven Brothers – well, I suppose they would be much the same thing – a memorial to sin.’

(2000: 125)

The reference to Joseph of Arimathea⁵¹ can be connected to the Grail motif repeatedly referred to in the novel and on which I shall elaborate further on in the course of my discussion. The seven deadly sins and seven brothers tie in with the significance of the number seven in the novel’s philosophical mythification. The idea that Foal Island could be a place ‘without sin’ is rather ironic when the group’s practices are taken into account.

In the next section of Louis’s narration, political onslaught is suggested and the magical power of the supernatural over human desires is hinted at. We read:

⁵¹ “The oldest surviving reference to the Grail as the name for the cup of Christ was by the Burgundian poet Robert de Boron, in his *Joseph d’Armathie*, composed around the year 1200. The Bible relates how Joseph, a rich merchant of Arimathea, laid the body of Christ in the tomb after Crucifixion. According to Robert, Joseph of Arimathea obtained the cup of the Last Supper from Pilate and used it to collect drops of blood from Jesus’ crucified body. In the poem, Joseph eventually embarks on a series of adventures, leading ultimately to the Grail being brought to Britain, to the ‘Vales of Avalon’” (Phillips 1995: 3). Cf. footnote no. 43.

‘A planted Tudor lord sacked and burned the monastery that was said to have been founded on this island. Then he drove off the monks and the other islanders and had his men row all of his very finest horses out here to graze.... The horses turned barren and sick the lord sent his youngest son to tend the horses, but before he could reach the island a thick, white mist rose up and hid him from sight. By nightfall the mist had cleared ... the son’s boat had drifted back into harbour, carrying all his supplies and even the clothes he had been wearing ... but there was never any sign of him alive again and his body was never found.’

(2000: 125)

The magical aspect in Celtic mythology is here interwoven with history. There are too many Irish, Welsh and Scottish myths to recite here in which the sudden appearance and disappearance of mist has changed the fate of characters involved.⁵² The horse is another mythological symbol interwoven into the novel’s fabric. In Celtic mythology, the horse is honoured for many reasons: it is associated with “speed, beauty, sexual potency and fertility” (Geddes & Grosset 1999: 397). The gods and heroes often have strong associations with a horse or steed. The bravest of Cu Chulainn’s horses was called “Grey of Macha” (O’Connor 2001: 182) and he fought and died with his master in the central tale, *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, originally preserved in *The Book of Leinster*. Many effigies and carvings were discovered at Celtic sites and some of the burial sites contained horses and chariots. These have been interpreted as aids to the journey into the next world. Geddes & Grosset explain: “The Celts in Gaul worshipped the horse goddess, Epona, who may be identified with Edain Echraidhe in Ireland and Rhiannon in Wales” (1999: 397).⁵³

⁵² Foal Island is what Nathan calls a “rain-asphyxiated Welsh island” (43) and I have already mentioned the importance of *The Mabinogion* in Welsh literature and the echoes of it in the description of Foal Island. It is therefore appropriate to isolate one of *The Mabinogion*’s legends: *Manawyddan, the Son of Llyr*, as an example in which mist plays an important transformative role (Delaney 1994: 158-64).

⁵³ Lewis Spence confirms this in *The Magic Arts in Celtic Britain* and elaborates: “The horse is also an arcane animal in Neo-Druidic lore, as continual allusion to it in the Welsh poems makes clear. There was a mare-goddess in Gaul, known as Epona, who presided over the breeding of steeds, and horses were sacrificed by both Continental and insular Celts. The appearance of the horse so very frequently on ancient British coins is eloquent of its mythical popularity among our ancestors. ...*The horse was a notable symbol of the Gnostic brotherhood* (my emphasis). The effigy of the white horse is carved

Jung also identifies the horse as one of the archetypes and I would like to quote at length from his explanation:

As an animal it represents the non-human psyche, the subhuman, animal side, the unconscious. That is why horses in folklore sometimes see visions, hear voices, and speak. As a beast of burden it is closely related to the mother-archetype (witness the Valkyries that bear the dead hero to Valhalla, the Trojan horse, etc.). As an animal lower than man it represents the lower part of the body and the animal impulses that rise from there. The horse is dynamic and vehicular power: it carries one away like a surge of instinct. It is subject to panics like all instinctive creatures who lack higher consciousness. Also it has to do with sorcery and magical spells – especially the black night-horses which herald death ... the horse [stands] for the merely animal life of the body.

(Quoted in Storr 1983: 188)

The fact that in Louis's story the horses became barren on Foal Island and died could point towards disaster, with the animal life of both the mythical and actual Foal Island destroying itself. The introduction of Mary as a suggested fertility goddess or earth mother is therefore significant. It is on this infertile island that we find the group of dislocated and de-socialised writers. Louis continues,

Each day the lord would send another son and each night the boat would be back in Ancw, and the son would be gone. In the end, of course, he had sent all seven of his sons and lost each one. So he had to row out to the island himself ... then killed every one of his horses with his bare hands, each animal coming to him with love, lying down and offering him its neck. Then the lord came back ashore, went to his great house and hanged himself. The night he died, cries were heard out at sea, like the noises made by injured birds, and there was a great sound of waves breaking, although the sea

gigantically on the hills of Bratton and Uffington. In all likelihood these represent the sun in his swiftness and luminosity" (1996: 160).

was still. In the morning, the seven rocks had grown out of the waters beside the island and were named for the seven dead brothers, killed by their father's pride.
(2000: 125-26)

The seven brothers seem to recall the seven soldiers who carried the king Bran's head from Ireland to London in another tale from *The Mabinogion* called *Branwen, the Daughter of Llyr* (Delaney 1994: 149-57). The lord in Louis's narrative commits suicide; the myth pre-figures the reality on Foal Island, namely the prevailing sense of depression and self-destruction. Llangattock committed suicide; Nathan, Ruth and Louis have practised their "effort towards exposure to absolute risk" (42) so many times that one expects them to follow suit. The 'Christopher myth', on which I shall elaborate in a later section, seems to have replaced the older myths pertaining to the island.

Pride is regarded as one of the seven deadly sins and the fact that it caused the lord's downfall combines pagan myth with Christian myth. In the next part of the story, mystery returns and the music of the flutes again recalls the beautiful and ominous singing of the sirens in the *Odyssey*. This music is always sad, recalling and echoing the emotional state of the recent inhabitants and the lack of higher creativity emerging from the island.

Music is often mentioned in the novel. Nathan listens to Glenn Gould's rendering of Bach when he makes his suicide attempt at the beginning of the novel and at various other stages we read that he listens to an assortment of music on his hi-fi or walkman. The repeated reference to music ties in with the intertextual references to other texts, the stories within stories and mythical resonances, and aids the novel's meta-fictional quality and reference to the immortality of art. Louis observes: "We always have the stories we make of ourselves, of our topography, our music. That kind of voice, the true kind, will never die entirely, even if it's turned to stone" (126).

Louis continues with his tale, emphasising the presence of infertility and death:

Later someone rowed out to the island and took away the horses' bones and made them into flutes. They had a beautiful tone, but would only play sad tunes... Which, apart from anything else, is why this is called Foal Island. As a memorial to a great injustice, the island gave up its old name and took on a new one – as a reminder of the foals that were never born and of the impossibility of creation without love.

(2000: 126)

This last remark is a significant key to the development of the novel. The love that develops between Nathan and Mary brings healing and creativity for both. The mythification in Louis's tale and Kennedy's tale seems to suggest the same element as a key to renewal, namely the healing power of love. Louis's information is of further importance: it provides the reader with a fictitious mytho-historical background and enhances the mysterious atmosphere that surrounds the writers' colony on the island.

The "Mob"⁵⁴ and the 'Christopher Myth'

... neurotic birds bickering thickly on the tiny central islet, like a huge, soprano, dysfunctional family.

(Kennedy 2000: 342)

This section focuses on the other inhabitants of the island and the manner in which they represent and contribute to the chaotic setting of the novel. I would like to elaborate on their function as members of this de-socialised and 'dysfunctional family' and how their actions and individual despair contribute to mythification in the novel.

The unofficial, elected leader of the writers' colony is Joseph Christopher. In his own words to Mary on her arrival, he claims: "I am the Keeper of the Foal Island

⁵⁴ This refers to Northrop Frye's remark "the social relation [in the demonic world] is that of the mob" (1971: 149).

Light” (73). This immediately gives him a messianic or shamanistic quality. He was a travel writer, is in love with the desert and is generally believed by everybody on the island to be slightly insane. Joe, as he is called, is also the custodian of the Lighthouse, where ritual Sunday lunches are held. The Lighthouse is, as Mary puts it, “only a big house and the light’s somewhere else” (77), yet it is from here that Joe guides the group of dislocated and depressed writers on their rocky paths. It is the only house with a bath, suggestive of a house of purification. Here the group practises a sort of therapy and bonding session during the Sunday lunches. In the bizarre context of their sect or, for want of a better word, religion, the Sunday lunches are also suggestive of communion and ritual.

True to the profane nature of the novel, the therapy sessions are seldom more than an opportunity especially for Nathan to hurl insults and slander at his fellow inhabitants. When Louis tries to explain to Mary that “Foil Island was seen as a place of sanctuary”, Nathan remarks that “a leper colony would have been so much more appropriate” (197). Joe is the mediator and confessor and directs the meetings and meditation sessions. As Nathan explains, “Joe [Christopher], of course, really believed in the island cure – he wanted to be a saint” (43). Nathan’s remark brings to mind St Christopher,⁵⁵ the patron saint of travellers (his daughter Sophie, is the only other person to visit the island and Joe indeed resuscitates her after an accidental drowning). It is ironic that an unproductive writer like Joe should lead the fellowship; in spite of the meditation sessions, not much significant art flows from the pens of the other writers. Towards the end of the novel, Joe confesses to Nathan: “...I gave up

⁵⁵ According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia* the translation for “*christos*” from Greek is Christ and “*pherein*” in Latin means to bear, therefore Christopher is the “Christbearer” (<http://www.newadvent.org/athen/03728a.htm>). Legend has it that Christopher was instructed to carry people across a savage stream and “[o]ne day he was carrying a child who continually became heavier, so that it seemed to him as if he had the whole world on his shoulders. The child, on inquiry, made himself known as the Creator and Redeemer of the world”. Ironically it is Mary who seems to fulfill this function in *Everything You Need*; transporting the function of ‘redeemer’ from the male to the female. What is of further significance about St Christopher in relation to the setting of the novel, is the fact that there is a St Christopher’s Island (known as St. Kitts), which “lies 46 miles west of Antigua in the Lesser Antilles” (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03728a/htm>). Events surrounding the legend of St. Christopher seem to be remythified in the characters and setting of the novel.

writing completely.... All of my words die within sight of me, all of them are transient. You *want* to be dead, Nathan? Almost everyone thinks I *am* dead. Because I don't write. And a writer who doesn't write – what's that if it's not dead?" (483). He reveals his unproductiveness at a time when Nathan embarks on his first literary novel in years. We come to understand Joe's insight after he relates the details of his search for truth during his travels into the desert. He tells Mary how he was rescued by the nuns of St Catherine and nurtured back to health after a suicide attempt in the desert. He was then given seven days to read the collection in their library, founded before Alexandria was burned. Seven brothers guarded the library. Joe did not manage to read what he wanted to in the allotted time. As he confesses: "They made my pleasure my punishment" (153). Later, Joe appears in one of Mary's dreams and says: "Cross the desert and you'll be in the forest again" (540). When he says, "We don't ever arrive. We only find our way" (540), he seems to imply that peace and acceptance can be found in realising one's personal limitations and that the expression of inner conflicts does not necessarily result in resolution.

Louis Elcho is a seventy-four-year-old historian. He was obviously in love with Arthur Llangatock, the previous owner of Mary's little hut. He confesses to Mary "Arthur was my best friend here. Yes, I should say that, my best friend" (87) and after he has told her about Arthur's decapitation he says, "a story is never a person, but it can be a record of their love. It can let the dead speak. It can let me speak for them, with them" (88). This in a sense also explains his fascination with history and historical people. As he explains about the predictions the inhabitants put into a jar, "the Dead have a great deal to do with our future" (89). The entire process of putting predictions in a jar, the day on which the event takes place, the time dictated before opening it, is suggestive of a ritual. As Louis clarifies: "Each of us writes a prediction on a card and then we seal the cards in a jar on the first of November, *El Dia de los Muertos*,⁵⁶ The Day of the Dead.... [A]fter seven years, we

⁵⁶ According to King this festival is celebrated by many people: "Christians celebrate it as All Saints and Hallowmass (1 November) and All Souls (2 November) ... Christian and humanist as well as neopagan[s], now celebrate in one form or another on 31 October, or Hallowe'en.... The Irish call

open the jar and see what we said, who was wrong and who was right and then we make up the next one” (89). It is through Louis that we learn most of the myths and history related to Foal Island and other events. He is a true believer in Joe’s philosophy, as is evident in his conversation with Nathan. He says: “I do feel I have limited time in which to make another attempt. And this would still only be my sixth. And seven is the lucky number, isn’t it?” (212) He does admit to Mary: “I’ve lived far too long as it is. And I’ve done enough. I find this continued largesse ... almost embarrassing. Seventy-four, imagine. No boy ever sits and thinks to himself – *I shall grow up one day into a seventy-four-year-old man*” (85).

Ruth Alvey writes plays and poetry. She also makes pottery like the jar into which the predictions are thrown. Ruth was once attacked by a shark and lost two fingers in the process. She seldom talks about anything else but sharks. She is obese, depressed, had various relationships with inmates in the days when she was a social worker, and bites her nails. Nathan lashes out at her during one lunch when she suggests writing about a little boy that was brutally murdered at one of the annual fairs on the mainland. He says:

‘You want to steal his life all over again... This from a woman who fucked her way through the halt, the lame and the hard of thinking until no one would employ her except the sodding prison service – a woman who hangs out with rapists and murderers for a year.... Tell us, do – when did you decide to come here for the good of your art? Before or after the boys from Category A found out how to phone you at home? ...You’re not a writer, you’re a fucking body-snatcher. Jesus Christ.’
(2000: 193)

Her general sexual depravity and physical neglect indicate her lack of self-pride and control. Yet she is set on following Joe’s suggested route for a cure. Her obsession with sharks seems to suggest her determination to confront the archetypal primal

Hallowe’en *Oiche Shamhna*” (1998: 58). It is a festival in which the dead are celebrated and is “thought of as a time of special danger and opportunity, when spirits may be more freely abroad” (59).

predator, the dangerous and destructive part of her inner psyche. Lynda later develops the same obsession and calls sharks “God’s oldest and most beloved ... fish” (37). Where the shark is regarded as an ancient fish, Ruth and Lynda’s fascination could imply their search for knowledge and creativity. One of the Celtic symbols is the salmon, which according to Anderson “brings knowledge and wisdom, expressing them through the creative arts, especially poetry, prose, and singing. Ancient bards were inspired by tasting the salmon of knowledge” (1998: 223). The psychologist Peter O’Connor supports this argument in *Beyond the Mist* (2001: 190).⁵⁷ After one of Ruth’s suicide attempts, Mary and Nathan set out to rescue her. She has tried to swim to the head of the island in the dark. As they bring her ashore, even Nathan with all his intricate attempts thinks, “She’s got more bottle than I have. Or more despair” (283). Both Ruth and Lynda take their fourth “exposed risks” (42) during the course of the novel.

Lynda Dowding and Richard Fisher are married. Lynda is a marvellously sluttish, run-of-the-mill women’s-novel novelist. She is an obvious nymphomaniac, flirts openly with the other males, has pierced labia majora that have become septic and her general perverted sexual tendencies are often hinted at in the novel. She projects no loyalty or consideration towards her husband in her flirtations with Nathan. Her desires and obsessions seem to be representative of what Frye terms the “demonic erotic [with] a fierce destructive passion that works against loyalty” (1971: 149). In the section entitled *1994* (279-361) Lynda leaves the island to travel and it is during this endeavour that she deliberately goes diving with sharks and gets hurt, but survives. Soon after her return it becomes apparent that Ruth and Lynda have exchanged obsessions and Mary observes that, “Ruth talked about sex, while Lynda did not. Lynda talked about sharks, while Ruth did not” (384). They now share similar symbols which illustrate their despair and bind them closer together in the demonic world.

⁵⁷ The salmon of wisdom is present in the Irish tales of The Fenian Cycle and is called “Linn Féic” (O’Connor 2001: 190). In *The Mabinogion* legend *The Tale of Culhwch and Olwen*, we find the salmon “Llyn Llyw” (Delaney 1994: 193).

Lynda's husband, Richard, is a crime writer. He has a withered arm, a "dashing deformity" (81), which gives him a Shakespearean Richard III quality, without the sardonic wit and malevolence. No mention is made of his suicide attempts, yet one can view him as someone who inflicts his own kind of self-punishment by tolerating his wife's infidelities and flirtations. Richard comes across as a rather weak and insipid character, but necessary in illustrating the extent of the dysfunctional and de-socialised group.

The above characters do not develop much in the course of the novel. We do not learn anything about their successes or failures as artists, but their moral dilemmas form part of the larger chaotic world and they are important to the rituals and beliefs of the "sect" (448), as Joe calls them. Both Joe and Louis come across as father figures, whereas the female characters can be seen as representative of the Earth Mother goddess with feminine principles both passive and irrational. Mary represents the innocent and fertile, transformative aspect; Lynda and Ruth are more representative of the erotic and the barren old hag. Ruth seems stalled in limbo and Lynda's vulgar and erotic escapades make her lovers seem like ritual victims. Richard could be seen as being either her slave or her pimp. The presence of the female characters on the island and especially of Mary's restorative qualities is of great significance in the light of Erich Neumann's view on the "transformative character of the Feminine"⁵⁸ (1974: 24). He observes that "The anima is the vehicle par excellence of the transformative character. It is the mover, the instigator of change, whose fascination drives, lures, and encourages the male to all the adventures of the soul and spirit, of action and creation in the inner and outward world" (1974: 33). He continues by saying that "[t]he anima figure has also a positive and negative aspect: it preserves the ambivalent structure of the archetype and, like the Great

⁵⁸ Neumann identifies two characters of the Feminine "which in their interpenetration, coexistence, and antagonism, are an essential part of the Feminine as a whole. These are the elementary and the transformative characters of the Feminine" (1974: 24).

Mother, forms a unity in which positive, negative, and ambivalently balanced constellations stand side by side” (1974: 34).

Jack Case, Nathan’s publisher in London, is the most important character away from the island. This equally deranged alcoholic is Nathan’s best friend. He is not a follower of the island creed, but his self-abusive personality echoes those of the islanders. The foundation of Nathan and Jack’s friendship is based on their love of writing, “they’d both liked words: Jack and Nathan, Nathan and Jack” (579). Case encourages Nathan in two matters: to build a solid relationship with Mary: “be paternal to your daughter” (382), and to write a literary novel again: “how about you writing a novel – I mean a real one. The one you keep promising” (382). Case follows his own destructive path of alcoholism and sadomasochism. He finally commits suicide, because he feels he has failed in his role as publisher. As a last request Nathan is to retrieve his body from a research mortuary. The gory quest forms part of Nathan’s resurrection as a “proper” (351) writer. In this respect Jack becomes the voice of encouragement from beyond and the novel Nathan later produces as a tribute ties in with his own anecdote about how the Aztecs⁵⁹ regarded paper as sacred (274).

Maura and Jonathan are the respective big loves of Nathan’s and Mary’s lives. Their characters are scantily sketched and they are functional only as once and prospective future mates. When first Mary and then Nathan meet Maura, it becomes clear that she regarded herself as nothing more than Nathan’s obsession. At the end of the novel his spurned romantic love for Maura is replaced by his paternal love for Mary.

Nathan is, in the context of the novel, the mob’s most prominent member. It is through him that the restorative power (Mary) is introduced. His actions and thoughts

⁵⁹ According to Spence, the land of the dead in Aztec times was called Mictlan. On arrival the dead offered gifts to Mictlanteculti and his spouse Mictecacuatl. Coloured paper was considered to be one of the sacred gifts to be offered (1994: 211).

are the vehicles which illuminate not only his own, but the other members of the mob's pain and despair.

The Foal Island Creed and the Island Myth

Joe's personal theory was that Technicolor, widescreen contact with the Beyond would infallibly compose itself into clear, metaphysical sense.

(Kennedy 2000: 42)

In this section I focus on the artist as myth creator: the inner struggles of the writers on the island form an integral part of the dilemma addressed by Kennedy in the mythification of the island creed. Kennedy also seems to express her own opinion about the publishing world through remarks and observations made by Jack Case. Through Case, Kennedy seems to satirise the bureaucratic and hypocritical world of publishing. In an interview with Yvonne Nolan, Kennedy proclaims her disillusionment with the publishing world and in particular the process of selecting the Booker Prize winner: "I read the 300 novels and no other bastard [on the panel] did" (2001: 43). In the novel Jack refers to various prizes as the "Crapbutpromising Prize", the "Provincial Underdog's Consolation Award" and the "Shitforbrainsgirlie" award (312). Case says to Mary: "This is what hell will be like, you know? In heaven there are many mansions and in hell there are many houses – all of them publishing" (235). His disillusionment with the publishing world is revealed in the section where he recalls what he terms his "Shorter Catalogue of Hate" (360) and mentions things like "papery people", "new paper and too much print", "bastard agent[s]", "bastard critic[s] in every fucking bastard magazine and paper", "lousy writer[s]", "he hated the lunge and fumble of bad writing in his brain" and finally "he hated himself for not wanting to care any more. He hated the fact that he'd rather not fight for the voices, the proper voices, the new words that still found the old joy and made it articulate" (360-61). The act of writing or the creative impulse and the search for metaphysical insight through near death experiences are thus closely linked in the novel and contained in the island's bizarre suicide credo. Information about this

statement of belief is revealed at various stages in the novel. Nathan sardonically summarizes the creed as follows:

First, the Christopher Credo: we believe, like a number of lunatics before us, that if we have been in a place beyond the reach of all but divine intervention seven times and if, seven times, we have been kicked back into this existence, then we become special. We become holy, blessed, Grail-keeping, generous to nuns, fairly pleasant, unlikely to spit in the street, who the fuck really knows?

(2000: 214)

He then follows it with his personal justification as to why the islanders adhere to this dangerous philosophy:

Second, the Actual Credo: we are tired and we are lonely and we don't want to have to do this any more. If we could, we would chuck it all in today, but we haven't the balls we were born with, so we'll play little terminal games with ourselves and, if we're lucky, they will kill us and, if we're not, they will at least distract us from all this bloody misery.

(2000: 214)

The concept of death as educator certainly constitutes part of Joe's philosophy about the spiritual path a writer needs to follow and forms part of the mythification in the novel. He explains to Mary

When I was moved to begin our Fellowship, my intention was to make a place where writers could stay for as long as they wished in order to find, or to rediscover, their calling. Although I tend to speak about them very little, our foundations are formed in part from a kind of spiritual discipline. We come here to uncover the privileges and the rights which permit our lives to speak. Naturally, we must, therefore, seek to understand our lives and this means that we must also consider our deaths. But we work towards creation, not destruction.

(2000: 448)

The islanders are allowed to attempt suicide seven times, by which time enlightenment should be achieved. The fellowship is focused on the art of writing. As their motto reveals: “In writing, as in love, we die to ourselves and yet still live. We become immortality and less than nothingness. We make ourselves fit to hear truths.... We are words in the mind of God and we are free” (448). Kennedy’s reflection on the function and the role of the writer suggests that the writer as creator has divine qualities. Emotional pain needs to be channelled in a direction from which something creative will flow. In Joe’s words “desperation can create a kind of freedom, a certain strength: acknowledged, accepted, it can lead to almost anything” (484). This ritual enactment of repeated near-death experiences might be Kennedy’s attempt to make explicit the mythical motif of death and resurrection. In Meletinsky’s words: “The same traditional mythologem can have multiple shades of meaning for different authors” (2000: 339). Louis elaborates on the writer’s close relationship with death and the wish to eternalise experiences with these words to Mary: “Death and letters, you see, death and letters. That’s all it’s about” (85). He continues:

Death and language – each is the opposite and complement of the other.... If you aren’t going to die, why bother writing? Why else put all the effort into something that stays behind. How do you understand you’re already dying and that others are already dead? Because there is already writing. Extinction and explanation, the theft and the gift.

(2000: 86)

Mary ultimately does produce good writing and Nathan finally delivers a literary novel. As for the rest, they do not seem to develop or deliver elevated art. They simply provide the tortuous context in which such writing is finally achieved.

The tempting of fate and the flirtation with death that prevail on the island create an extreme situation that favours meditation. We read that the writers go into

meetings in which they practise meditation. It is at one of these sessions that Mary experiences an intense moment of epiphany and inspiration. We read:

She tugged her concentration in and set herself to form and measure her own beat. Her throat seemed to smooth, to open and, in her solar plexus, she started to feel the wordless murmur and shine of something like anticipated sex – almost that ache, that tug, that anxious friction in the blood.

And then the ache broke like a split meniscus, flowed, and she felt, for a blink of her heart, a kind of towering possibility. She recognised it, this terrible expansion of reality. The same monstrous buzz and slap and suck and fluster had surrounded her that night in the wood and had made her really want to go and begin writing.

(2000: 451)

Meditation is a psychic activity like dreaming. In the interview with Nolan I referred to before, Kennedy says that she prefers writing at night, because “this is the time of night when you would naturally dream” (2001: 43). Kennedy seems to suggest that writing is a substitute or alternative for dreaming. Walker observes that “Jungians parallel myths with dreams” (2002: 30), therefore dreaming can be considered a form of mythmaking and if “Mythmaking ... [is] viewed as ... artistic activity” (19) then writing is mythmaking. In both dreaming and writing, images and symbols originate in the subconscious which according to Jung is the seat of mythical archetypes. Walker further explains that “[i]n Jungian theory, dreams are said to play a *compensatory* role in the psychological life of the individual” and function as mechanisms which “maintain a state of psychological homeostasis” (19). One could then argue that the act of writing or the creative process and its effect could therefore fulfil the same restorative function. As Clarissa Pinkola Estés observes: “Stories are medicine” (1998: 14).

All of the characters struggle with metaphysical complexities; they are all in search of an answer or “psychological homeostasis” (Walker 2002: 19). This could be interpreted as their psychological quests. There are repeated references to the grail in the novel, which poses the question: what does the grail symbolise and why are they prepared to undertake these painful and perilous journeys? This is not an attempt to label *Everything You Need* as a quest-myth,⁶⁰ but Kennedy’s repeated reference to the grail justifies a short discussion. Nathan’s personal Grail seems to be a form of salvation; as he puts it: “*Not that everyone on the fucking island doesn’t want a cure for something: loneliness, emptiness, bitterness, illness – any **ness** you care to name*” (43). What he actually wants is “to get some ... loving **back**” (45, author’s emphases).

Mary’s grail on the other hand is well defined. Her pursuit is not marred by ‘demonic’ elements. She enters the island of disillusionment as the symbolical sacrificial lamb and manages to set Nathan free from his mental and emotional entrapment. Her mind is not an emotional pit of depression, although she sacrifices her romantic pleasure for her vocation. Fertility is reintroduced in the form of creative writing. She achieves her goal; the predictions she puts into the jar on her arrival come true. The reasons why and how she escapes the proposed steps on the island are explained by Nathan. He says to Joe:

‘Anyway, you’ve said it yourself – Mary will be all right, whatever happens: she is special. She was in a car crash in the womb and she didn’t die, she was born prematurely and she didn’t die, she choked ... and she didn’t die ... then there was the bee sting in her throat ... she survived everything. You know and I know that she’s already been through all seven of our steps without even thinking about it. Without planning and without any doubt, she has her life absolutely.’

(2000: 482)

⁶⁰ Ruthven explains that the quest-myth as monomyth became very popular after 1951 amongst literary critics and everybody who went looking for almost anything became a participant in such a myth (1976: 77).

This recalls another of Carl Jung's archetypes, namely the miraculous child. Mary's survival through the above recalls the strange births and childhoods of many of the characters in Celtic mythology. The fact that she does not get drawn into the sombre atmosphere and morbid obsessions of the other islanders' creed gives her a quality of endurance. She has some awareness of their fascination with death, as she remarks to Ruth and Lynda: "If you two don't mind, I'm going to sit round the side in the shade for a bit. Sorry for interrupting you – know how you like to obsess about death" (385), yet she has no idea that any of them actually tries to commit suicide. Nathan ponders at one point: "Should he show her the way to the Grail, or the holy bloodshed, the dead or the living word – he'd never been sure of which map would serve her best" (396). Mary's grail is well defined in her own mind and she fulfils her quest without disruptions. She becomes the writer she wishes to be.

Nathan's pursuit is more ominous and cluttered by past and present hurdles. He writes gruesome trashy novels, but desires to write something of higher poetic value. He shares all his hopes and fears with his publisher, J.D. Case, in London. His wish for self-destruction apparently stems from the loss of his wife and child fifteen years previously. He is mentally paralysed, unable to act and to tell Mary who he really is. We learn that Nathan had cancer and that his left lung was removed. There are multiple references to his "left side, his hungry side". It is ironic that he repeatedly tries to commit suicide, yet he goes for regular check-ups on his cancer. His action is almost a duplication of his disease as he remarks: "Cancer – that's not an unreasonable way for a writer to die. We spend our lives trying to be a growing medium, after all" (412). In spite of all his protestations about Joe's rules, he is the most avid follower.

His pain stems from his loss of Maura and his love for her. He tries to explain his need to Mary: "It doesn't seem to be widely understood that being solitary, without other people, can be a very pleasant thing. Being without only one person,

the one person you need ... is well, anyway” (377). When Mary goes to visit Maura, Nathan’s need is described as an obsession. Maura recalls:

‘He started buying underwear for me – the silly, uncomfortable things you might expect. I let him. Why not? But then he wanted to buy it *all*. He only wanted me to wear things that he’d chosen, nothing else. Then he suggested I should change my hair to please him, when – as it happened – the style he was after would never have pleased *me*. I started to get a feeling of suffocation. Ownership.... I lost my name. I’m not saying he *intended* I should disappear, but in the end it seemed that he really didn’t mind if I only existed by way of him.... As if I was someone that he was imagining.’

(2000: 332)

The sections in which Nathan writes about their time together are filled with sexual memories, whereas in reality he is almost impotent except when he writes or thinks about her. It is only after his visit to Maura in which she declares him “harmless, a bit boring” (519) that his illusion is shattered. His need is turned from Maura to Mary. He therefore writes to Mary at the end, “have need of me” (567). When Richard asks him: “You believe that? That we’ll get what we need?” (344), he answers: “I don’t believe anything else” (433). In the process of his transformation, romantic love is replaced by paternal love.

Life, death and art

I’m dressed for work – the writer and the undertakers,
we’re all just dressed for work.

(Kennedy 2000: 257)

Another scene that adds to the enigmatic and mythical quality of the island occurs when Nathan and Mary go to the “Head” on the island and climb to the top of the hill via ancient steps. Nathan speculates that the steps are “probably pre-Christian” (321)

leading to “a path that whorled in and in concentrically to the island’s heart” (321). He continues to relate various possible myths and rituals in relation to the site:

‘If you’re Christian, you step into the spiral there, where the opening lets you in, and you walk until you get to the centre and then back ... perhaps fifty times, perhaps a hundred – some number of times, anyway – and that would be the equivalent of going to Jerusalem.... Or maybe it’s only a model of the alchemical pathway to material transformation. Or maybe it’s Celtic and the path leads to the sun, to life, or through life.’

(2000: 321-22)

Mary responds: “They used to put mazes on tombstones to keep in the dead” (322) and Nathan remarks sardonically: “And here the dead are our speciality” (322). The people on the island are each certainly busy with his or her own crusade and the goal is an arrival at some transformed state of existence. The site establishes the chaotic quality of the island. Frye writes: “... we have in this world [the chaotic world] the labyrinth or maze, the image of lost direction, often with a monster at its heart like the Minotaur” (1971: 150). The morbid obsession with death, lost directions and failed creativity seems to represent the monster in this case. Keeping in mind the profound and dangerous path the islanders choose to travel in order to arrive at enlightenment, the continuation of Nathan’s story is rather ominous:

‘You know, at one time, the sailors in Brittany paid no taxes to the king because of their unusual duties. At night the new dead would come to them and would ask to be borne out of life, would wait to be taken to sea and so, after sunset, the fisherman would sail them northwards to the Island of the Dead’.

‘North? That would take them to Britain.’

‘Yes, they were heading here, for Britain. And people have occasionally said that their proper destination was precisely this point in Britain. Because Ancw is pretty much a Welsh way of spelling the Breton name for the dead.’

(2000: 322)

Foal Island lies off the coast of the fictitious town of Ancw and the above story renders the geological and mythological quality of a slender separation between the living and the dead. As Mary's remark suggests, they are indeed "[w]alking on the gate of the Underworld" (322). Kennedy takes the concept of life and death further in the sculpture Mary and Nathan find midpoint in the maze. It is described as "some seafaring creature, and not a head at all. Its eyes were wide, the pupils deeply pierced, and its mouth full open, brimming with gathered rain" (323). This calls to mind what Rosemarie Anderson calls the "Being between the Worlds" (1998: 226), which includes the Green Man, the Changeling, the Pooka and the Banshee. Nathan views "the opened mouth, for singing, speaking – that's a sign of life" (323), but Mary replies: "Or death. The dead can't close their mouths" (323). This seems to suggest the same thing, that art, once in existence, cannot be stopped or silenced, not even by death. It also recalls the myth of eternal return. Each form of art might be presented differently, but the essence will remain the same. Kennedy brings the scene back to the creative powers of the writer. Nathan tells Mary:

There's supposed to be a library here, buried, cut in the rock: books from Alexandria, from Mistra and Bessarion, the Pythagorean Brotherhood, the Gnostics and the Alchemists; unknown Vedas, Mayan Codices, a new Homer, a more dangerous Bible; things that even Crowley wouldn't read. And the antidote for gunpowder; the constitution of a perfect state – anything you'd like, kept here alive.

(2000: 324)

He is reminding us that books contain wisdom and myths. The written word is magical. Mary sees words as the tools of her profession, the paintbrushes of her art. She explains: "...I've always thought we were like the Masai. You know? Maybe you wouldn't say this, but I would. The way the Masai see it – all of the cows in the world belong to them.... And all of the words in the world belong to us" (324-25). Nathan lashes out at her by saying "You do not own your words" and explains:

‘...the words, you see – you can’t wish them here when they’re not, you can’t stop them when they are: they’ll fill your life, make your life, *eat* your fucking life. They can’t belong to anyone. They’re like land – and it’s not in their nature to be *owned* by anyone and if you try it, they’ll choke you – in the end they will choke and skin and bury you. A writer sells what a writer owns – the skill and the effort and the time – not the words. You don’t own words....’

(2000: 325)

Nathan’s point of view has a Post-Structuralist ring to it. As Eagleton explains: “It is language which speaks in literature, in all its swarming ‘polysemic’ plurality, not the author himself. If there is any place where this seething multiplicity of the text is momentarily focused, it is not the author but the reader” (1983: 138). When Nathan says: “when people like your stuff you think they like you and when they hate it, you think they hate you” (325) he suggests that the reader sees the artist and his work as inseparable. It seems that Mary regards words as signs, but Nathan views them as signifiers. Barthes says the following about the same subject:

We often notice that a writing subject does not have his writing “in his own image”: if you love me “for myself,” you do not love me for my writing.... Doubtless, loving simultaneously two signifiers in the same body is too much! It doesn’t happen every day – and if it should happen, by some exception, that is Coincidence, the Sovereign Good.

(2002: 79)

The isolation and separation the inhabitants enforce on themselves hint at the existential loneliness of the artist. The self-enforced exile seems to suggest that the artists experience a feeling of alienation with which they attempt to come to terms through physical pain and isolation. Barthes says:

I seek to harm myself, I expel myself from my paradise,
busily provoking within myself the images (of jealousy,
abandonment, humiliation) which can injure me; and I
keep the wound open, I feed it with other images, until
another wound appears and produces a diversion.

(2002: 80)

The ongoing confrontation with death through the attempted suicides recalls the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Wagner discussed in Meletinsky, in that they aim to understand the meaning of life when faced with death. Schopenhauer's view of death as the teacher and saviour of mankind is reminiscent of the Nietzschean dionysian-erotic view of death. Meletinsky describes this as "the ecstatic dissolution of the self into the dark, universal basis of being" (2000: 291). It also recalls Freud's "*fort-da*" theory – the desire to recover a lost object. Nathan desires to recover his wife and child. As Eagleton puts it: "...lost objects are a cause of anxiety ... symbolizing certain deeper unconscious losses ... it is a desire to scramble back to a place where we cannot be harmed, the inorganic existence which precedes all conscious life, which keeps us struggling forward: our restless attachments (Eros) are in thrall to the death drive (Thanatos)" (Eagleton 1983: 185). The motifs of death and sickness are repeated in the novel: Nathan had cancer, Ruth is maimed after a shark attack, Richard has a disfigured arm, Louis is old and ill, Joe appears to be crazy, and even Linda's obsessive eroticism alludes to something rotten and unwell. It is only Mary who seems to be fit and healthy and whole, adhering to Neumann's description of the "transformative character of the Feminine" (1983: 33).

The Mystical Seven and the Dream World

'...I am fond of sevens. There are meant to be seven
heavens, if you believe a certain brand of mystical
thought.'

(Kennedy 2000: 290)

Geddes & Grosset write that “odd numbers were particularly important [in Celtic mythology], notably three, five, seven, nine and seventeen” (1999: 437). As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the importance of the number seven is repeatedly stated in the novel. Mary goes to the island for seven years, “they’ll give me seven years, they’ll feed me, house me, keep me and when it’s over I’ll know, I’ll know if I can do it” (37), the total number of people on the island is seven; they are allowed to attempt suicide seven times. As Nathan explains:

That was the deal. Anyone on Foal Island was free to put him- or herself in the way of dying at any time. Their aim should not be suicidal, but should make genuine efforts towards exposure to absolute risk.... And seven tries for eternity are supposed to work the fucking charm.

(2000: 42)

Seven rocks surround the island. We learn that the emphasis on seven is mainly Joe’s idea in relation to his philosophy: “He shall save thee in six troubles. Yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee” (42). Louis informs Mary: “Joe does like his sevens. A great believer in numbers – number, anyway – and seven is the luckiest” (89). Most fitting for Joe’s credo is the Eastern tradition of the seven chakras that need cleansing through meditation in order to achieve enlightenment. The concept of enlightenment certainly gives Joe’s philosophy a quasi-Buddhist feel. The notion of near-death experiences as a means to enlightenment is a more complex combination of philosophies. In *A Lover’s Discourse*, Barthes mentions the following saying by a Buddhist Koan: “...the master holds the disciple’s head underwater for a long, long time; gradually the bubbles become fewer; at the last moment, the master pulls the disciple out and revives him: when you have craved truth as you crave air, then you will know what truth is” (2002: 17). Barthes tells of a Japanese doll, called a “Daruma” – a toy without legs that can be pushed and poked, but always regains its balance. The doll is accompanied by a folk poem:

Such is life
Falling over seven times

And getting up eight
(2002: 141)

The question Barthes asks is “what is my balancing pin? The *force* of love?” (141) Kennedy seems to suggest exactly that – the force that stops Nathan from losing his balance completely is love. Redemption from the demonic world lies in the apocalyptic element of love.

The period of seven years that Mary has to spend on the island also relates to the initial training period for bards (as discussed in the Chapter Two on *Credo*). Writers are the modern bards of society. The fact that Nathan tells Mary not to write anything during the first year, but to convey her perceptions verbally, recalls the oral tradition that existed amongst ancient bards and druids. The psychologist Peter O’Connor elaborates on this in *Beyond the Mist*:

The poet, or *fili*, was one of the most important and honoured figures in ancient Ireland. It was a role that combined several functions: proclaimer of truth, upholder of tradition, seer and possessor of otherworld knowledge. Possibly the *fili* stepped into the vacant role left by the druid, and his role has a certain sacred quality about it. Both druid and poet are characterized throughout Irish mythology as possessors of special knowledge and power derived from the otherworld. Indeed the poet, or wordsmith, still remains the most enduring symbol within the Irish psyche. The Irish exhibit a unique capacity for story-telling, an invaluable asset in contemporary Western culture, with its emphasis on the singularly boring story of economic rationalism. The ‘poet’ as writer, painter or musician, sustains the imaginative life, the necessary antidote to materialism and the pervasiveness of banal secularity.
(2000: 201)

O’Connor’s observation about the purpose of the artist articulates the function of myth in postmodern literature. In addition, myth seems to be instrumental in the repair of psychological damage as the result of the fragmentation that separates the

gods from humans in modern existence. In this novel, particularly, writing seems to become the medium in this healing process.

I remarked on the narrative style of the novel in the introduction to this chapter and would like to elaborate. At intervals we find stories written in the first-person narrative mode from Nathan's perspective. In these sections he is not only the protagonist in Kennedy's novel, but becomes conflated as the author, narrator and protagonist in his autobiographical text. Like James Gillespie in *The Catastrophist*, he writes himself into the story, becoming the creator of his own personal myth. In these stories the reader learns more about his past, his obsession with Maura and his devotion to writing. Barthes informs us that two myths about love have created the perception that love "should be sublimated in aesthetic creation: the Socratic myth (loving serves to "engender a host of beautiful discourses") and the romantic myth (I shall produce an immortal work by writing my passion)" (2002: 97). This novel-within-the-novel is aimed at capturing the delight and decay of his marriage to Maura. Nathan's aim is to immortalise his passion for Maura and to inform Mary, who is his imagined reader as well as the implied reader of the novel. This gives his writing a redemptive quality and it becomes, as O'Connor argues, his "antidote to ... the pervasiveness of banal secularity" (2000: 201). There are seven stories, all with titles dealing with geology, history or mythology. The chronology is as follows: "New Found Land" (64), "Pangaea"⁶¹ (143), "Golgotha"⁶² (216), "Atlantis"⁶³ (263), "Hyperborea"⁶⁴ (397), "Paradise" (495) and "Thinking the World" (567). Nathan is mythifying his own creative world, a new found land with an "island with everything

⁶¹ Pangaea is the name meteorologist Alfred Lothar Wegener gave to the single landmass before the contents drifted apart into Laurasia and Gondwanaland and then into the continents, as we currently know them. Pangaea is Greek for "all land" (*Reader's Digest* 1994: 41).

⁶² The site of Jesus' crucifixion so named in the Bible, "They came to a place called Golgotha, which means, 'The Place of the Skull'" (Matthew 27 verse 33).

⁶³ "Atlantis is a large mythical island which, according to Plato, existed in the Atlantic over against the Pillars of Hercules (Straits of Gibraltar), was the home of a great nation, and was finally swallowed up by the sea in an earthquake nine thousands years before his time, at the end of a long contest with the Athenians" (Geddes & Grosset 1997: 332).

⁶⁴ "...a land [that] was generally supposed to lie in the extreme northern parts of the world, 'beyond (*hyper*) Boreas' or the North Wind, and so were not exposed to its blasts.... an earthly paradise, a bright sky, a perpetual spring, a fruitful land, unbroken peace, and everlasting youth and health" (Geddes & Grosset 1997: 391).

in it. Pangaea – the land of all lands” (145), the mythical city (Atlantis), a place of suffering and death (Golgotha), “the place where everybody’s happy without penalties and guilt.... Hyperborea” (402), an Eden (Paradise) and finally a world which he thinks into existence – a world of need and love. Through writing and mythification Nathan fulfils his seven steps to a cure. By telling the story of his life, Nathan completes the process of self-discovery. Rob Gaylard explains this act of “narrativity” as follows: “...the term ‘life-story’ suggests the role which is played – at an almost unconscious or pre-conscious level – by narrative in shaping the way we see our own lives – and even, arguably, our own identity” (2005: 164).

Nathan’s fulfilment – his love for Mary and the realisation of his artistic aspiration – is closely linked to his dreams in the novel. At one stage we read:

Nathan dreamed of eggs. They were impressively large eggs, above knee height, and sitting up on end together like a huge clutch of accusing Humpty Dumpties. He was pacing round them, mother-hennish, adjusting the warm, blood-soaked towels that they were draped in and trying to figure out just how many of these oddly incalculable objects there were.

(2000: 341)

An egg is generally regarded as the symbol of fertility, productivity and, in this case, creativity. Nathan later acknowledges that “the eggs were his books, they were the number of books that he would write, all swaddled up like threats and promises in a sticky fug of his own blood” (341). Earlier in the novel he admits to Mary,

I do believe in a universal right to truth. And, when I’m out in the world, I know that I am a *passenger*, not a *customer*; a *patient*, not a *client*; a *man*, not a *consumer*. And I don’t want to be *informed*, I want to be *educated*, and I don’t want to be *enabled*, I want to be *helped*, and I don’t want something *new*, I want something *better*, and I don’t want to be *offered choices*, I want to be *free*. I have spent a great deal of my life learning to love what words *mean*.

(2000: 295)

It is the words that set him free when he writes to Mary to inform her about his real identity and his love. He is released from his mental paralysis, which is captured in an earlier dream in which he dreams that Jack Case embalms him alive. The horror of the dream lies not in the bizarre, detailed description of being skinned, disembowelled and stuffed, but in the discovery that “there were no fingers on his hands. Presumably they’d been too troublesome to stuff” (315). Nathan’s ultimate concern is: “How will I write?” (315) It is ironic that he later finds Jack’s body in the mortuary by identifying his hand, “He found Jack by recognising one of his hands. The right hand” (473). Jack is the one who is successful at committing suicide; Jack is the one who loses his hand. As mentioned, there are numerous other references to deformed or maimed limbs in the novel, indicative of an amputated or mangled creativity. It is sadly Eckless (or Reckless), the dog whose paw is mutilated in Nathan’s final suicide attempt, that aids him in his creative release and sets him free from his self-destruction. Near the end of the novel Nathan and Mary end up telling each other about specific dreams. Nathan says: “I don’t remember it all, but it ended with a woman looking up at me as if she was sorry – a woman I loved” (543) and Mary says, “I had an odd dream, too. Joe was in the middle of it – saying that somebody ought to take care of you” (543).

Sporadically throughout the novel, Nathan states what he terms “Rules for writing, or for being a writer, or for staying a human being while being a writer” (258) to Mary. He gives her seven rules: “*Pay Attention*” (75), “*No one can stop you writing*” (138), “*Disregard*” (258), “*You do not own your words*” (325), “*Listen to it*” (379), “*There are no rules*” (449) and “*do it for love*” (567). The sixth rule nullifies the five previous ones and the seventh summarizes his concept of writing. Again we encounter the creative and restorative force of love intertwined with writing or mythmaking. Kennedy seems to say that one should live and write for love. Nathan’s narcissistic self-destruction, his obsessive romantic love, is replaced by familial

love.⁶⁵ The “Sovereign Good”, as Barthes calls it (2002: 101) will be achieved and love will be “sublimated in aesthetic creation” (Barthes 2002: 97) if Mary returns the love. She will then love him as a father and as a writer. Love itself is reborn.

Conclusion

In this discussion of *Everything You Need*, I proceeded cautiously from Ruthven’s statement that “nobody has yet proved that literature is or is not myth” (1976: 58). *Everything You Need* is not a mythical novel and it was not the aim of this discussion to establish the novel as such, but it has what the “affectivists”⁶⁶ (Ruthven 1976: 56) call the same “spell-bounding” qualities as myth. My discussion illustrates the healing function of contemporary literature through the various mythical and symbolic qualities revealed in the novel and the prominent restorative position which the writer (artist) holds in the mythification process in postmodern literature. In spite of the powerful suggestion of the separation-initiation-return element of adventure mythology, the novel does not focus on a specific monomyth but rather employs a variety of myths and implied references. This includes the mythical element of rebirth or renewal as presented in relation to the *leitmotif* of near death experiences, the value attributed to shared symbols and rituals, the curative quality invested in Mary as the archetypal “transformative character” (Neumann 1983: 33) and the re-establishment of “psychological homeostasis” (Walker 2002: 19) through imaginative mythmaking (writing).

There is no specific Celtic myth which deals with the redemptive quality of familial love (between the daughter and the father), but all the myths contain in one form or another the importance of fertility and prosperity presented in the female characters. We do find the principle of salvation through love in the Christian mythology, but not where the daughter heals the father. As previously mentioned, the

⁶⁵ Cf. footnote no. 42.

⁶⁶ Someone “who believe[s] that the way people react to something is a sure guide to its nature ... [affectivists] try to bridge the gap between myth and literature by arguing that both are alike in possessing the same spell-binding powers” (Ruthven 1976: 56-57).

novel deals not with Eros, but rather with Agape. In *Love the Source* Joan Uken writes “Agape or Caritas (charity) is unconditional love and implies the willingness to surrender oneself for the sake of the other being.... Agape is love directed from the independent creature to the dependent, from the advantaged to the disadvantaged, and is also a platonic form of love” (1986: 8). The reciprocated bestowal of love combines with the theme of creativity in the novel, which brings us to the Socratic myth of “beautiful discourses” and “writing my passion” (Barthes 2002: 97). Kennedy seems to suggest that the cost of devoting a life to writing can result simultaneously in exacerbating and curing loneliness. This supports my observation, in the Prologue, that literature is functional in that it continues on the mythical path, giving meaning to a world largely devoid of mythology and that mythopoetic thinking fulfils a basic human need. Ultimately the novel affirms the renewing quality of myth in which the element of love becomes “everything you need”. As Meletinsky remarks: “Modern mythification is based on universal symbolization and expresses the levelling, impersonality, and alienation in modern society. Universal symbolization of eternal metaphysical principles is manifested historically as a cyclical concept of becoming” (2000: 293). The process of writing himself into the world of the novel, which is contained in Nathan Staples’ autobiographical narratives, brings meaning and a sense of ‘becoming’ to the previously de-socialised, alienated and isolated environment of Foal Island.

Meletinsky’s remark about mythification is also applicable to the last novel included for discussion in this thesis, namely *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. In this novel ancient myths are employed to formulate a meta-mythology as illustration of the universal and alternative function of myth in contemporary society and literature.

CHAPTER FIVE

MYTH SYNCRETISM

Meta-mythology and fantasy in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

‘These are gods who have been forgotten, and now might as well be dead. They can be found only in dry histories. They are all gone, all gone, but their names and their images remain with us....’

These are the gods who have passed out of memory. Even their names are lost. The people who worshipped them are as forgotten as their gods. Their totems are long since broken and cast down. Their last priests died without passing on their secrets.’

(Gaiman 2001: 62-63)

Meletinsky is of the opinion that “myth [can be seen] as the basis for artistic creativity and the poetic expression of ... universal sentiments” (2000: 272). My discussion illustrates why *American Gods* can be regarded as a mythical novel which articulates some of the universal concerns of contemporary society, and how the techniques Gaiman employs establish it as such. In addition, I explore how technology is presented as an integral element of the “meta-mythology [or] the tendency of contemporary mythification to combine different mythologies” (Meletinsky 2000: 340) which Gaiman creates in the novel. Meletinsky’s remark about E.T.A. Hoffmann’s literary fantasies seems applicable to Gaiman’s technique. He writes: “He blends the ordinary and the fantastic into an incredible mixture. Behind ordinary people, things, and situations lie fantastic and magical elements ... [that are] treated in such a matter-of-fact way that they become ordinary and even comic” (2000: 270).⁶⁷ It is this synthesis or blending of mythical elements in *American Gods* and its project of putting modern society in touch with ‘the richness of the soul’ (Davis 1998: 5) which validates investigation.

⁶⁷ Hoffmann, a German Romantic, is the author of *The Golden Pot and Other Tales* (Meletinsky 2000: 374).

The novel, which is of epic proportions (628 pages), contains a multitude of characters, symbols and metaphors from various mythologies and folklores. It is set in North America and evolves around the looming battle between ancient deities and legends, brought unknowingly to America by the immigrant believers, and the gods created by modern society. The action centres on the physical and spiritual journey of the mediator Shadow Moon. Gretchen Helfrich describes it as “a dark and kaleidoscopic journey deep into myth and across an America that is at once eerily familiar and utterly alien” (<http://arts.uchicago.edu/gaiman.html>). The ancient deities are easily identifiable and Gaiman introduces us to the modern divinities such as: Fat Kid, Limo Boy, Media, Technology, Stone, Wood and Town and describes them as “gods of credit-card and freeway, of internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and neon. Proud gods, fat and foolish creatures, puffed up with their own newness and importance” (2001: 148). The manner in which ancient myths and legends are represented in a contemporary world warrants a discussion in the context of this thesis. I explore the interaction between the ancient and the modern in an attempt to identify a mythology of popular American culture in the novel and to illustrate how the plot effects a synthesis of the two. I also investigate the relevance of Eric Davis’s observation that, “by submitting ourselves to the ravenous and nihilistic robot of science, technology, and media culture, we have cut ourselves off from the richness of the soul and from the deeply nourishing networks of family, community and the local land” (1998: 8) in relation to the gods of the new age introduced in *American Gods* to establish in what manner Gaiman reflects on American consciousness.

I have selected the novel for four main reasons: its contemporary value as a mythical novel; Gaiman’s unique style in conveying tales that have fashioned the past; the manner in which it deals with the “crossroad of science, myth, and magic”; (Carstens 2003: 24) and because Gaiman, like Bragg, Bennett and Kennedy, has his roots in Britain although he currently lives in Minnesota. He is known for his series

of graphic novels called *Sandman*,⁶⁸ which include other “godlings” (Colton 2003: 1) such as Dream, Desire, Destiny, Destruction, Delirium and Despair. Gaiman interweaves disguised myths from a variety of mythologies with contemporary characters and elements that are more recognisable in popular culture. The spiritual value bestowed on technological development and the mythological qualities it is endowed with by postmodern theorists, ontologists and critics such as Erik Davis and Terence McKenna are considered in the course of my discussion.

In previous chapters I have referred to the elements of ritual and cyclical renewal in the context of myth, as discussed by J.G. Frazer and other ritualists. These qualities are present also in *American Gods* and add to its intricate mythification. An identification of mythical characters and parallels illustrates how mythical elements such as magic, ritual, sacrifice, renewal and eternal return are present in the novel and to what extent these elements and motifs manifest themselves as functional in postmodern literature. In an attempt to explain why Shadow Moon’s experiences and ritual sacrifice establish him as a contemporary (not classical) hero, I introduce to the discussion an examination of the important position of the protagonist in relation to the motif of renewal and his evolvment to a higher plane of understanding. I consider to what extent he meets or falls short of the criteria for being a true hero. Jung’s theories on archetypes and myth are employed to argue the importance of Shadow Moon’s name, actions and destiny.

Shadow Moon seems not only to be functional in identifying the motif of renewal, but his experiences can also be related to various other mythical elements. He is a product of the old and the new presented in the novel and is the child of a god in an age where copulation between gods and humans is not regarded as a possibility or probability; yet this attribute allows him to interact with gods and humans on a

⁶⁸ *Sandman* won twelve Eisner Comic Industry Awards and a World Fantasy Award for best short story, “making it the first comic ever to receive a literary award”. *American Gods* won the 2002 Bram Stoker Award, Hugo Award and Nebula Award for best novel. (<http://arts.uchicago.edu/gaiman.html>). Gaiman also received the Hugo award for his children’s’ book *Coraline* and his most recent novel *Anansi Boys* again deals with myth.

fantastical level in what Meletinsky describes as “the creation of new quasi-mythological personages” (2000: 271). His life, death and ‘resurrection’ as a sensitive demi-god also recall the role of Jesus in Christian Mythology. My discussion elaborates on this comparison. Shadow’s travels and quest through mystery and mythology further recall similar adventures by other mythical heroes such as Hercules, Orpheus and Sir Gawain (Jensen 2001: 75) and this adds to the mythical resonance of the novel. In addition to an examination of the motif of death and renewal, I draw on Mircea Eliade’s theories in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1989) and Terence McKenna’s views in *The Archaic Revival* (1991) and *Food of the Gods* (1992) to reveal that shamanic qualities can be identified in Shadow’s character. Eliade observes that “experiences that determine the future shaman’s vocation involve the traditional schema of an initiation ceremony: suffering, death, resurrection” (1989: 33). This observation ties in with the motifs of ritual, death and eternal return I have identified in the novel. The investigation into shamanism does not only illustrate the restorative function of shamanism as mythical element in the life of Shadow Moon, but conveys to the reader the relevance of shamanism in, as Freke argues, a “modern world ... asphyxiating itself with the toxic by-products of its own ignorance” (1999: 7). Freke further explains:

The experiences of these shamans form a bridge between the ancient and modern worlds, leading us back to forgotten wisdom. They are the whispering voices of the ancestors in the confused cacophony of the modern maelstrom. In this epoch of spiritual sleep, they are our wake-up call – rousing us from muted mundanity and urging us to become more alive.

(1999: 9)

As mentioned before, most of the ancient deities present as characters in the novel are easily recognised from mythology, legend and folklore. In the identification, reference to, and discussion of mythological characters I have relied heavily on Comte’s *Dictionary of Mythology* (1991), Lewis Spence’s *Introduction to Mythology* (1994) and Eliazar Meletinsky’s *The Poetics of Myth* (2000).

A further motif which characterises *American Gods* as a mythical novel is the previously mentioned conflict between chaos and order which it evokes. This theme has been defined and discussed in Chapters Three and Four. In this novel we again encounter chaos, which is a core element of myth and mythification as Meletinsky remarks (as previously stated): “Myth is fundamentally about the transformation of chaos into harmony” (2000: 156). Amongst other appropriate theorists, many of whom have been discussed in earlier chapters, I return to Northrop Frye and his theories on chaos. For further support, I employ the theories of media critics such as Eric Davis, who discusses technology as modern mythology in his book *Techgnosis* (2000) and calls it “the trickster [who will] show how intelligence fares in an unpredictable and chaotic world” (9) and Meletinsky’s views in *Poetics of Myth* (2000) to illustrate elements of myth in transformation as presented in this postmodern novel. The novel resolves this conflict through the intervention of Shadow Moon.

The important position of technology and the belief systems that surround it in contemporary society are issues Gaiman seems to address in the novel. I illustrate how these belief systems and ancient customs are connected and in what manner this interrelationship reflects on American perceptions. As Eric Davis explains, “technomystical concerns are deeply intertwined with the changing sociopolitical conditions of our rapidly globalizing civilization, their spiritual forebears are rooted in the long-ago” (1998: 5). Where mythical characters like Cu Chulainn or Odin, for example, carried a spear, the modern ‘gods’ may use a gun or computer, – or even *be* a computer – another example of the transformation of a mythical element from the ancient to the modern. Davis further describes this as the “links [that] leap between machines and dreams, information and spirit, the dustbin of history and the alembics of the soul” (1998: 5). Gaiman illustrates the links between the diversity of gods in a popular and contemporary fashion. The presence of the industrial ‘gods’ initially alludes to the threat they hold to North America and by extension to all modern

societies where technology occupies a prominent and, to some, a sacred position. As the novel unfolds a more archaic motif is revealed, the theme of renewed existence through sacrifice. The novel seems to suggest a solution to the looming clash between the old and new. The final message of the novel implies a consolidation, where all the gods should attempt to exist in tolerance and harmony. This seems like a rather weak ending, but as Jensen observes “the joy [of the novel] is not in the destination, but in the telling” (2001: 75). It is the journey, the variety of characters shrouded in myth, the threatening apocalyptic battle, and Shadow Moon’s fantastical experiences and discoveries that impel the reader towards the conclusion and endows the novel with a quality both unique and enjoyable.

I have previously remarked that Gaiman employs the device of fantasy rather than science fiction in the novel, but as Mark Bay detects in *Library Journal*, Gaiman further combines “travel writing, along with mystery, horror, philosophy and black humor” (2001: 153) to aid the entertaining plot and to create a modern mythical novel. By combining all these genres and providing historical and mythological information, Gaiman seems to achieve what Meletinsky suggests, namely that “mythification in the twentieth-century” novel employs “historicism and mytho-logic, social realism and folklore traditions – to interact and sometimes to become something new altogether” (2000: 334). The reader is presented with multi-mythological elements through the principal storyline and subplots; the “something new” that emerges.

The realistic and often comical way in which most of the characters and locations are presented establishes the ultimate enthrallment of the novel and allows the reader to relate to the characters. Charles De Lint observes that “the mythic characters are earthy and accessible without losing their godlike nature” (2001: 97). The mundane quality is evident at the onset of the novel when Shadow is released from *prison* a day after his wife died in a car accident. The enigmatic Mr Wednesday – or Norse god Odin – employs him as envoy. It is on their journey across America through twelve cities to recruit the ancient deities for a battle against the modern gods

that the reader meets the multitude of minor divinities and folklore characters as well as Shadow's deceased wife, who acts as his bizarre guardian angel. The title *American Gods* is suggestive of the old and new gods and the novel illustrates how many of the belief systems of the old gods have become dormant. It attempts to revive them or at least lament the fact that many of them have lost their spiritual efficacy. The combination of different mythologies in contemporary mythification produces what Meletinsky identifies as "a meta-mythology". As a result of this amalgamation Gaiman succeeds at "mythification ... not only [as] a structural principle but a means of metaphorically describing modern society by using mythical or historical parallels" (2000: 340).

Mythological Parallels in *American Gods*

The myth of cyclical return and ritual as presented in the protagonist Shadow Moon

He said, 'You called me back.' He said it slowly, as if he had forgotten how to speak English. There was hurt in his voice, and puzzlement.

'I was done. I was judged. It was over. You called me back. You dared.'

'I brought you back because that was what I had to do,' she said. 'What you do now is whatever you have to do. Your call. I did my part.'

(Gaiman 2001: 552-53)

In previous chapters of this thesis the motifs of ritual, sacrifice, scapegoats and cyclical renewal have been discussed extensively in relation to Frazer's findings in *The Golden Bough* (1957 & 2004) and in combination with other ritualists. The cyclical themes of life, death and resurrection are present and identifiable in *American Gods*. The action surrounding the protagonist Shadow Moon seems to contain most of the elements pertaining to ritual and renewal and supports my aim to establish his liminal position as a postmodern anti-hero. His transitional position and the process of redefinition hold value for the contemporary reader because it suggests a spiritual regeneration.

At the start of the novel the reader meets Shadow, a convict about to be released after “three years in prison” (3). He seems to be the typical prisoner we view in contemporary American films, intensely in love with his seemingly faithful wife, and he exercises his body – already “big enough” (3). However, he learns magical coin tricks and studies the *Histories* of the Greek Philosopher Herodotus. Gaiman initially presents Shadow as the traditional hero – tall, attractive, skilled in magic, strong, wise and in love with the beautiful heroine. The irony that the hero is a criminal is annulled by his resolution that “he [is] going to keep his head down and stay out of trouble for the rest of his life” (5). Shadow’s resolve is broken when the gods choose him for higher purposes; the observation that “Shadow was not superstitious”, that [h]e did not believe in anything he could not see” (7) is soon altered when in his dream on his flight home he is told by the buffalo man, ““If you are to survive, you must believe”” (19) and at the end of Chapter Five we read “[t]hen the lights went out, and Shadow saw the gods” (139). By the end of the novel Shadow has seen so much and encountered so many mythical characters, that his belief system has been redefined, hereby illustrating what the process of mythification achieves in the novel. With this blending of the ordinary and the mythical Gaiman confirms Meletinsky’s remark that in mythification in twentieth-century literature “[e]lements are brought together from diverse mythologies to suffuse life into a fantasy world that is purely literary in structure but nonetheless based on myth” (2000: 267).

Shadow’s release from prison symbolically represents the mythical element of renewal – the hero is reborn into a new, liberated life. The second renewal takes place after his sacrificial hanging on the tree, his death and miraculous resurrection. This rite is followed by his experience in the afterlife and the transition into his ‘new’ life. Estés describes this process as the “Life/Death/Life nature ... a cycle of animation, development, decline, and death that is always followed by re-animation” (1998: 127), and she links it to physical and psychological life. Shadow experiences both.

At the end of the novel, he embarks on a different journey across the world, but has also been re-animated mentally. He understands that the gods are “never satisfied” (628). Shadow is the “image of the mysterious stranger endowed with magical powers” (Meletinsky 2000: 329) and his ritual sacrifice contributes to the novel’s mythification. That his heritage and parentage are unclear for the greater part of the novel contributes to the mystery surrounding him. Thus the guard Wilson asks him “[y]ou got nigger blood in you, Shadow?” and then remarks “...you fucking spook me” (12). His ability to perform magic with coins and interact on a magical level with strange gods, beasts and spirits chimes with Meletinsky’s definition above of the mysterious stranger.

The name Shadow Moon evokes a variety of significant connotations. Initially it is appropriate as he seems to be a character with a shady and obscure past. When it becomes apparent that he can be paralleled with multiple heroes and sun gods, his name reflects more complex connotations and allusions. For example, the moon is generally regarded as the feminine opposite to the sun. In this context it is useful to consider Carl Jung’s categories of archetypal images, which he identified with comparable myths such as “the *shadow*,⁶⁹ the *anima* and the *animus*, the *hero*, the *Wise Old Man*, the *Great Mother*, the *self*, and the *puer* and *puella*” (Walker 2002: 31). Jung regarded confrontation with one’s evil side or shadow as something with great psychological importance; “the beginning of self-knowledge” (34). O’Connor elaborates and adds that “[r]epressing the shadow merely relocates it in the unconscious mind, the otherworld of our psyche, which then becomes destructive. If we do not accept the darker aspects of our being then some form of disintegration is inevitable” (2001: 134). In terms of this explanation, the name Shadow seems to be of enormous symbolical significance: the character is forced to confront his inner weaknesses and darker side during his ordeal on the tree and throughout his trial in the afterlife. He witnesses his conception, remembers his childhood, his marriage and the

⁶⁹ Unless otherwise indicated italics and emphases are devices employed by the authors cited.

crime he has committed, and is confronted by gods, ghosts and demons alike. His mental suffering transcends his physical suffering and we read:

Shadow knew that all his faults, all his failings, all his weaknesses were being taken out and weighed and measured; that he was, in some way, being dissected, and sliced, and tasted.... All the things that Shadow had done in his life of which he was not proud, all the things he wished he had done otherwise or left undone, came at him then in a swirling storm of guilt and regret and shame, and he had nowhere to hide from them.

(2001: 515)

In this regard one could look more closely at the significance of his passage through death in mythological and psychological terms. If Shadow's name reflects his inner confrontation, then the influence of the sun as the opposite of his surname, Moon, should be considered. When Horus the Egyptian god visits Shadow during his time on the tree, the god is presented as a madman and it is insinuated that Shadow is Horus's brother Seth. Horus remarks, "I am the sun, as you are. And I know the true name of Ra" (497).⁷⁰ During this encounter Shadow confronts both sides of his nature, which is why Horus remarks: "'You are the shadow. I am the light.... 'Everything that is, casts a shadow.'" (498).

The name Shadow can suggest his liminal role as a mediator between the opposing gods. When the sun or the moon eclipses the other, a shadow moves across the particular planet or star, positioning itself between them. From Jung's psychoanalytical perspective, Shadow's mediating position between the two bodies could suggest that his *anima*, or feminine archetype, and *animus*, or masculine archetype (Walker 2002: 45) are in perfect equilibrium,⁷¹ making him an obvious choice to be the peacemaker. In the end Shadow confirms himself as mediator by

⁷⁰ Comte's *Wordsworth Dictionary of Mythology* explains that Horus and Seth were brothers and that "Horus represented light and Seth, darkness" (1991: 106). Meletinsky identifies Horus as the "son of Isis; successor of Geb; avenger of Osiris. One of the many names for the Egyptian solar deity; merged with Ra, he dominates Egyptian religion under the name Ra-Harakhte. In later periods, he became closely associated with kingship" (2000: 437).

⁷¹ Although Shadow is often described as a tall, strong male, he is sensitive, sensual and passive.

preventing the battle between the deities. This role is commended by the buffalo man: ““You did well.... You made peace”” (587). I discuss his mediating function more extensively in the section below dealing with shamanism. The fact that Shadow’s roles are never clearly identified, but only alluded to, adds to the complexity of the novel’s achievement in terms of mythification and suggests a tantalisingly postmodern refusal of closure.

The sun and moon have always been regarded as representatives of male and female qualities respectively. The moon is also the opposite to the sun, which in return implies Shadow’s position as demi-god because he is the son of the solar deity Odin. Whereas the name Shadow could refer to his role as mediator, as argued above, the surname Moon seems to reflect Shadow’s sensitive and romantic nature, revealed in his tender relationship with his wife Laura Moon, even after her death. However, the moon is also regarded as masculine in some mythologies. Terence McKenna observes in *Food of the Gods* (1992) that some male lunar deities existed among North American Indians and Indo-Europeans and that “the Ninth Mandala of the *Rig Veda*⁷² goes into great detail concerning Soma⁷³ and states that Soma stands above the gods. Soma is the supreme entity. Soma is the moon, Soma is masculine” (114). McKenna further identifies the patron deity of the Babylonian city Harran as a male moon god named “Sin or Nannar”⁷⁴ (114). When these ambiguous probabilities referring to sun and moon gods are considered, the mystery surrounding Shadow

⁷² The *Rig Veda* is “the oldest texts in the Indian tradition, a collection of four texts (*veda* = ‘knowledge’) of songs, poems and meditations from the classic pre-Hindu Vedic period” (Meletinsky 2000: 461).

⁷³ Besides being a deity, soma is also “a plant (sp. *Amantia muscaria*) and its psychotropic juice mentioned in ancient Vedic texts; the nectar of the gods, often represented as the personification of the moon” (Meletinsky 2000: 465). This concept is valuable and I elaborate on psychotropics and hallucinogenic substances in the section on shamanism in this chapter.

⁷⁴ Meletinsky concurs and identifies this moon god as from the Sumerian mythology. He explains that “Nanna is linked to time and is considered the enemy of criminals. In Scandinavian mythological epos, Nanna is the **wife** (my emphasis) of *Baldr* who dies in her husband’s funeral pyre” (2000: 451). The fact that Nanna is male and female in the different mythologies and the opponent of crime reinforces the previously mentioned equilibrium between male and female characteristics in Shadow Moon and his role as mediator.

Moon intensifies, especially since McKenna also identifies shamanic practices in relation to lunar devotion.

The roles of the sun and moon are further alluded to in the gold coins Shadow receives. These coins seem to play an important part in his destiny. The first coin, which Shadow receives from Mad Sweeney (a character based on a leprechaun from Irish folklore) could be seen as representative of the sun – a life-giving and protective force. When, unaware of its significance, Shadow inadvertently throws the coin into Laura’s grave, he metaphorically gives away the sun. Zorya Polunochnaya explains to him, ““You were given protection once. You were given the sun itself. But you lost it already. You gave it away. All I can give you is much weaker protection”” (97-98). Zorya Polunochnaya seems to be a parallel to one of the three virgin norns and destiny goddesses from Norse mythology.⁷⁵ She explains to Shadow, ““I am the youngest. Zorya Utrennyaya was born in the morning, and Zorya Vechernyaya was born in the evening, and I was born at Midnight. I am the midnight sister, Zorya Polunochnaya”” (97). She gives Shadow the moon in the form of a gold coin and explains: ““Just take the moon from me”” (98). Shadow’s future, his sacrificial vigil for Odin, his death and his return are therefore guided by the coins. Zorya Polunochnaya, whose “hair⁷⁶ was pale and colorless in the moon’s thin light” (94) represents the third norn and valkyrie Skuld (future), who is regarded as one of the goddesses who directs the fate of men (Comte 1991: 141). Shadow’s fate is indeed largely directed by the coins he is given and, at the end of the novel,

He tossed the coin into the air with a flick of his
thumb.

⁷⁵ The names of the three norns represent “the three chronological stages of Past (*Urðr*), Present (*Verðandi*) and Future (*Skuld*) in mythic chronology. ...Together, therefore, the norns emblemize the actions that have taken place, those that are in the process of happening, and those that of necessity must occur. ...Whether the norns in general are to be seen as responsible for the unfolding of destiny, the significant feature remains that ... the nornir were conceived as female beings endowed with ultimate wisdom” (Jochens 1996: 40-41).

⁷⁶ According to Clarissa Pinkola Estès “hair” in most fairy tales and myths “is symbolic of thought, that which issues from the head” (1998: 332).

It spun golden at the top of its arc, in the sunlight, and it glittered and glinted and hung there in the midsummer sky as if it was never going to come down. Maybe it never would. Shadow didn't wait to see. He walked away and kept on walking.

(2001: 628)

His action and reaction clearly illustrate his re-animated approach.

The imprints on both sides of the coin that he is given by Zorya Polunochayaya add, in an ironical fashion, to the evocation of Shadow's feminine nature. On the one side is an "eagle" (112) and on the other "the face of Liberty" (112). Sources explain that the valkyries, "bird-like creatures", were "young, blonde, long-haired, blue-eyed maidens" (1991: 217) and therefore the eagle seems to be symbolical of the mythical bird that directs Shadow's destiny. In the course of my discussion I elaborate on the function of the mythical bird in relation to Shadow's shamanic qualities. The depiction of Liberty on the reverse side of the coin implies Shadow's eventual release for the second time (first from jail, then from his sacrificial death and trial in the afterlife). In the pantheon of ancient and 'new' icons in America, the choice of Lady Liberty is ironic. As Wednesday explains, she is, "[l]ike so many of the gods that Americans hold dear, a foreigner. In this case a Frenchwoman, although, in deference to American sensibilities, the French covered up her magnificent bosom on that statue they presented to New York" (112). He continues his explanation by paraphrasing a slogan from the French Revolution: "Liberty ... is a bitch who must be bedded on a mattress of corpses" (113). The remark foreshadows the anticipated battle between the old and the new gods of the novel and is an example of one of the many comic elements in the novel where the mythical is treated in a "matter-of-fact way" (Meletinsky 2000: 270). It is at this final battle that Shadow at last manages to retrieve the first coin from Laura, and thus to take possession of both the sun and the moon, hereby reaffirming his liminal role. It is only when he takes away the sun force from Laura that she is allowed to separate her spirit from her body and die. Shadow releases the sun into its rightful position. We read:

He closed his hand around the golden coin that hung around her neck. He tugged, hard, at the chain, which snapped easily. Then he took the gold coin between his finger and thumb, and blew on it, and opened his hand wide.

The coin was gone.

Her eyes were still open, but they did not move.

(2001: 579)

Not only does he allow Laura's spirit to be released, but he also brings 'liberty' to the gods on the battlefield. I elaborate on this matter in the course of my discussion.

Shadow Moon can of course also be readily compared to Jesus Christ in Christian mythology. We learn that Shadow is thirty-three years old, "he had not changed that much in thirty-three years" (508) – which is the age Jesus was when he was crucified. Shadow's crime could be explained as a temptation by the Devil, although the symbolical meaning of the names of two injured men, "Larry Powers and B.J. West" (505), whom he violated during the theft, reflect more on the control which greed for material possessions has over members of contemporary society in relation to the new gods of the novel – the powers from the west. Like Jesus,⁷⁷ Shadow is voluntarily sacrificed in a ritual on a piece of wood, the ash tree – to fulfil his father Odin's wish.⁷⁸ Odin later says, "There's power in the sacrifice of a son" (567). Shadow suffers similar anguish to that suffered by Jesus during the crucifixion.

The parallel with Christian mythology continues during Shadow's vigil for Odin. According to Christian myth, Jesus asked for something to drink during his ordeal on the cross. In the Gospel according to John it is explained, "Jesus knew that by now everything had been completed; and in order to make the scripture come true,

⁷⁷ Laurence Gardner remarks that in the older translations of the Bible "[i]t is perhaps significant that in Acts 5:30, 10:39 and 13:29, the reference to Jesus' torture all relate to his being 'hanged on a tree'" (1996: 114).

⁷⁸ This could also be a parallel to the death of Odin's son Baldr. His death was "cause for the final cataclysm, *Ragnarøk* (from *ragna røk*, doom of the divine powers)... Not only did all anthropomorphic beings perish and the whole universe disintegrate, but a new and beautiful world emerged...." (Jochens 1996: 55).

he said, 'I am thirsty'" (John 19: 28). Similarly, Shadow's "cracked lips and dry tongue" (492) and "burning" (495) throat are described during his torment on the tree. The Bible further explains that Jesus' side was pierced after his death. According to the Gospel of John it was the custom of the time "to break the legs of the men who had been crucified" (19: 31) "but when they came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead, so they did not break his legs. One of the soldiers, however, plunged his spear into Jesus' side, and at once blood and water poured out" (19: 33-34).⁷⁹ In the novel *Mr World*, alias *Loki*, instructs *Mr Town* to cut a stick⁸⁰ from the tree Shadow is hanging from. *Town's* hatred for Shadow overcomes him: despite the fact that Shadow is already dead "he jabbed the stick in the air toward the hanging man, in a stabbing motion" (532). When *Horus* and *Easter* go to revive Shadow they lay him on the grass once he is cut down from the tree and we read that "there was a patch of dried black blood on [his] side, as if [he] had been stabbed with a spear" (551). *Easter* then breathes into Shadow's mouth and "the wound in his side [begins] to flow with liquid blood once more" (552). According to Christian belief Jesus died in order to bring peace and salvation to mankind. Shadow seems to fulfil a similar mediatory and restorative function in the threatening battle between the gods when he arrives at the battlefield, which promises to be nothing but a "bloodbath" (539). He speaks to the old and new gods, explaining that in order to receive more sacrifices and to ensure their own continued existence *Odin* and *Loki* have contrived the war. He clarifies that *Loki* is "a god of chaos and deceit" (575) and *Odin* is "a god who took his power from sacrifice and death" (575) and "the battle you came here for isn't something that any of you can win or lose. The winning and the losing are unimportant to him, to them. What matters is that enough of you die. Each of you that falls in battle gives him power. Every one of you that dies, feeds him'" (576). By preventing the gods from

⁷⁹ Gardner argues that "the fact that [Jesus] bled (identified as blood and water) was held to indicate that he was dead.... In reality, vascular bleeding indicates that a body is alive, not dead" (1996: 113). This observation is relevant to my discussion on shamanism and I refer to it in the related section.

⁸⁰ The tree Shadow is hanged on is an ash tree (484) and according to *Froud and Lee* (*Larkin* 1978) ash wood is regarded as having healing properties and it is believed that the druids' wands were made out of ash wood.

going to war, Shadow establishes peace and gives life to the entire spectrum of gods, old and new.

Another rather obvious comparison with Christian mythology is the fact that Shadow is resurrected or revived by the female character Easter. The Christian calendar commemorates the death and resurrection of Christ at Easter. However, there are also echoes from older pagan myths: Easter was originally celebrated in Celtic pagan times as a spring festival called Beltane (King 1998: 57). It was a fertility and purification festival, dedicated to the god Bel, “the epitome of the golden sun” (King 1998: 57). In the novel, Easter is a fertility goddess, a giver of new life. No goddess with this exact name exists in any pantheon of ancient mythologies, but fertility goddesses⁸¹ related to spring festivals are present in most of these.

Various other parallels can be drawn to Shadow’s character. He is described as Odin’s son, which makes him half-human and half-god, and this allows him to have intercourse with humans and transformed goddesses alike. Gaiman therefore succeeds in creating what Meletinsky describes as a “quasi-mythological personage” (2000: 271) in the process of mythification. According to King only divine or semi-divine beings are considered to have the right or ability to copulate in the above manner (1998). As the son of a sun god Shadow is permitted to have sexual relations with a sun goddess. His carnal relationship with a catlike woman representing the anthropomorphic Egyptian goddess Bast is sensually described (227-29). Bast is a sun-goddess who, according to Spence, is “represented in early times as a cat pure and simple, [but] was later figured as a woman having a cat’s head” (1994: 110). Shadow’s relations with Bast, Zorya Polunochnaya and Laura’s ghost confirm his liminal position between the divine and human realms and further authenticate his intermediary role.

⁸¹ Examples are Eros (Greek) and Aurora (Roman) in Classical Mythology, both goddesses of the dawn (Geddes & Grosset 1997).

The mythological parallels are not restricted to Norse mythology, but similarities can be identified in Classical and Celtic traditions. Shadow's adventurous travels recall the Greek god Odysseus' journeys described in Homer's *Odyssey*. Like Odysseus Shadow encounters strange and peculiar beings on his travels. Furthermore, his search and struggle to retrieve one of the two significant coins from Laura echo Gawain's search for the Holy Grail and other legends that contain a grail motif.⁸²

Such comparisons can be made with ancient mythologies, but do not restrict Shadow's characterisation to the archaic; his interaction with old and new places him firmly within the technological society as well. Shadow and all the other gods utilise the commodities of the pop culture society represented in the novel. He consumes hamburgers, beer and soft drink; his journeys are often made possible by the use of a car, and of GPS; he watches television and he uses a credit card. This multi-mythological status and multi-faceted quality establishes Shadow as a universal or global modern divinity, but his decision to refrain from further involvement in the affairs of deities at the end, confirms him as a human anti-hero. The fact that he rejects Wednesday or Odin's advances at the end of the novel and that this encounter happens to take place on the fourth of July – Independence Day – is ambiguous. Shadow finally chooses his independence and freedom, but as a Christ-like figure he becomes, in the mythology created in the novel, a “representative of the humanistic principle, the expression of a refined social and human awareness who takes a definite stand against the vulgarity that surrounds him and against hypocrisy, sadism, and depravity” (Meletinsky 2000: 332). This is why Shadow finally declares “I think I would rather be a man than a god. We don't need anyone to believe in us. We just keep going anyhow. It's what we do” (576).

⁸² Cf. footnote no. 43.

Shadow the Shaman

The shaman's adventures in the other world, the ordeals that he undergoes in his ecstatic descents below and ascents to the sky, suggest the adventures of the figures in popular tales and the heroes of epic literature. Probably a large number of epic "subjects" or motifs, as well as many characters, images, and clichés of epic literature, are, finally, of ecstatic origin, in the sense that they were borrowed from the narratives of shamans describing their journeys and adventures in the superhuman worlds.

(Eliade 1989: 510)

In relation to the elements of ritual, death and resurrection Shadow's fantastical experiences in the novel become more realistically acceptable when his function as possible shaman is explored. Mircea Eliade further explains that "[i]t is difficult for us, modern men as we are, to imagine the repercussion of such a [shamanic] *spectacle* ... the shamanic "miracles" ... stimulate and feed the imagination, demolish the barriers between dream and present reality, open windows upon worlds inhabited by the gods, the dead, and the spirits" (1989: 511). In this context I refer to shamanic qualities such as magic and sorcery, ecstatic trancelike experiences, alienation from society, the presence of helping spirits, the interaction with gods, the use of a secret language, special election, initiation, the presence of a mythical bird, and the restorative function of the shaman. The shaman, like the druid (discussed in Chapter Two) is endowed with magical qualities linked to mythical elements such as shape-shifting⁸³ and sorcery.

According to Eliade (1989), certain "magico-religious powers" (3) have been linked to shamanism which describe the shaman as "magician ... sorcerer" and "medicine man" (3-4), but the term shaman reflects on much more than just sorcery, magic and healing. The shaman possesses the ability to transcend the mundane and

⁸³ Cf. footnote no. 44.

interacts with beings and spirits on a higher level “without becoming their instrument” (1989: 4). Shamanic qualities can vary in different cultures. According to Eliade, shamans are “of the elect” (7) and achieve their aims through trance experiences. He explains that the “[shaman’s] ecstatic experiences have exercised, and still exercise, a powerful influence on the stratification of religious ideology, on mythology, on ritualism” (7). It is also significant that, as Dean Edwards remarks, the “shaman lives at the edge of reality as most people would recognize it and most commonly at the edge of society itself. Few indeed have the stamina to adventure into these realms and endure the outer hardships and personal crises that have been reported by or observed of many shamans” (<http://deoxy.org/shaover.htm>). Terence McKenna supports this observation in *The Archaic Revival* (1991) and remarks: “Usually the shaman is an intellectual and is alienated from society.... Shamans speak of “spirit” the way a quantum physicist might speak of “charm”; it is a technical gloss for a very complicated concept” (45). When certain shamanic elements are identified, it becomes clear that Shadow’s interaction with gods and demons and his qualities as saviour or mediator establish him as a shaman in the meta-mythology presented in the novel and reinforce his liminal role in the in-between place he occupies in the world of the novel.

Shamanistic aspects related to the character of Shadow Moon can be identified in the novel. The cyclical nature of myths of eternal return, in particular, is also identifiable in shamanism. Furthermore, Mircea Eliade, who identifies certain qualities pertaining to shamans and shamanic initiation rites, explains that one becomes a shaman either by heritage (he is Odin or Wednesday’s son)⁸⁴ or by election (1989: 13) and “is not recognized as such until after [one] has received two kinds of teaching: (1) ecstatic (dreams, trances, etc.) and (2) traditional (shamanic techniques, names and functions of the spirits, mythology and genealogy of the clan,

⁸⁴According to Meletinsky, Odin is also “[a]ssociated with a shamanic tradition” (2000: 453). In some shamanic traditions (Freke 1999) the call to become a shaman is hereditary; if Shadow is Odin’s son then his position as shaman is reinforced.

secret language, etc.)” (13). The following discussion aims at identifying these elements of myth in *American Gods*.

Shadow often receives messages in his dreams and these dreams are trance-like and metaphysical. This seems to chime with Eliade’s explanation:

...one of the commonest forms of the future shaman’s election is his encountering a divine or semidivine being, who appears to him through a dream, a sickness, or some other circumstance, tells him that he has been “chosen”, and incites him thenceforth to follow a new rule of life.

(1989: 67)

Edwards concurs, stating that “[d]reams, and in particular, lucid dreams, often play a significant role in the life of a shaman or shamanic candidate” (<http://deoxy.org/shaover.htm>).

Another significant element mentioned by Eliade is the fact that the shaman often experiences “the presence of a helping spirit in animal form, [and] dialogue with it is a secret language” (1989: 93). Besides Wednesday or Odin, the divine being who selects Shadow for his own purposes, examples of other semi-divine beings communicating with him in dreams or otherwise are also present. So, for instance, the buffalo man is one of the recurring images in Shadow’s dreams and is first introduced on the flight to Eagle Point. He is the one who urges Shadow to “believe” (264). The need to believe and the question of what to believe recur in the novel. This seems to be pertinent to the process of mythification, if myth is defined as a system of belief that nourishes the life of the spirit. At first encounter, the creature in the dream is described as a “thing staring at him [from] a buffalo’s head, rank and furry with huge wet eyes” (19). Their communication is an intuitive, secret language: “Whatever words were passing between the two of them were not being spoken, not in any way that Shadow understood speech” (264). The buffalo man always has

something prophetic – at times ominous – to say, such as “changes are coming” (19), “the storm is coming” (174); before Shadow addresses the gods, “*You are doing just fine*” (574) and after Shadow’s intervention in the impending war of the gods, “You did well.... You made peace” (587). Shadow’s experiences not only force him to believe in the existence of a variety of myths and gods, but also compel him to make choices, decisions and commitments.

Shadow also experiences dreams, telepathic communication and, as stated, intercourse with a cat-like creature identifiable as the Egyptian goddess Bast. These can be regarded as a few examples of the “helping spirits [who] have animal forms” (Eliade 1989: 89). Because “a shaman is a man who has immediate concrete experiences with gods and spirits” (88), Shadow’s dead wife Laura can also be regarded as one of his guardian spirits in human form. Laura warns him of dangers when she visits him in the hotel room soon after her funeral. She rescues him after he has been abducted by Mr Stone and Mr Wood (envoys of Mr World, or Loki) and kills them. The abduction takes place just after Shadow’s introduction to the various gods at the meeting at the House on the Rock or what could be representative of Odin’s hall “Valaskjalf” (150). He is detained and assaulted by Mr Stone and Mr Wood, but Laura kills them and frees Shadow. One of her numerous visits to him occurs while he is hanging on the tree and she says: “Nothing is gonna hurt you when I’m here” (500). She functions as the “spear-carrier” (560), piercing her own and Loki’s heart to save Shadow.

Besides the aspect of teaching through dreams and trances, Eliade explains the election of the shaman: “the gods choose the future shaman by striking him with lightning or showing him their will through stone” (1989: 19). This seems to be the case with Shadow’s election when the flight to Eagle Point gets redirected because of a storm: “Lightning burst in blinding slashes around the plane.... Shadow wondered, coldly and idly, if he were going to die.... He stared out the window and watched the lightning illuminate the horizon” (19-20). It becomes apparent that Wednesday has

orchestrated the storm in order to force Shadow into a position where he becomes the god's envoy and sacrificial victim. Furthermore, Shadow's actions are often symbolically linked with the weather, especially with lightning, storms or snowstorms. As his initiation into shamanism continues through the instruction by various gods and semi-divine beings, he later manages to mentally create a snowstorm. Wednesday tells him, "Think "snow" for me, will you? ...Concentrate on making those clouds – the ones over there, in the west, – making them bigger and darker. Think grey skies and driving winds coming down from the arctic. Think snow" (115). Shadow proceeds to enter an ecstatic state:

Snow, thought Shadow.... Huge, dizzying, clumps and clusters of snow falling through the air, patches of white against an iron-grey sky, snow that touches your tongue with cold and winter, that kisses your face with its hesitant touch before freezing you to death. Twelve cotton-candy inches of snow, creating a fairy-tale world, making everything unrecognizably beautiful....

(2001: 115)

The trance is associated with physical discomfort: "[his] head had begun to ache, and there was an uncomfortable feeling between his shoulder blades" (115). His state of ecstasy is successful, because "[s]nowflakes began to fall, just as Shadow had imagined them, and he felt strangely proud" (117). His ability to mentally induce a change in the weather in combination with his coin tricks is Shadow's "particular magical speciality" (Eliade 1989: 5). When Shadow later joins the other gods on the battlefield he observes, "This was the moment of the storm" (573). The storm in this case is a metaphorical one; his state trancelike: "It was like pushing through a membrane" (572). McKenna repeatedly describes shamanic trances as a paradigm shift, as passing through a membrane and as a "connect[ion between] the psychedelic dimension [and] the dimension in inspiration and dream" (1991: 166). By being the peacemaker, Shadow seems to fulfil Eliade's suggestion that "[shamans] serve as mediators between [the dead] and their gods ... [the shaman] directs the community's religious life [and] guards its 'soul'" (8). McKenna supports this and says, "[t]hrough

the ability to cure, the shaman can confer psychological wholeness on the people...” (1991: 14). By communicating his insights to the gods and preventing the battle Shadow restores and heals the community. Through Shadow’s experiences the reader also gains insight into the working of myth in literature as Gaiman succeeds in “stimulat[ing] and feed[ing] the imagination, demolish[ing] the barriers between dream and present reality...” (Eliade 1989: 511).

Further characteristics of shamans are that they are often well travelled, need to go through the “isolation and ritual solitude of initiation ceremonies” and experience death (Eliade 1989: 26). Shadow meets these criteria as he travels across America and joins fantastical godly gatherings such as the visit to Czernobog⁸⁵ and his sisters and the meeting at the House on the Rock with all the other deities.⁸⁶ He resides in isolation when he lives in the little village called Lakeside. His death on the tree and travels to the underworld seem to contain most of the shamanic elements identified by Eliade and others. Delphi Carstens summarizes Eliade’s elements as follows in the article *Shamanic Technology: Exploring the Techno-Genetrix*:

[T]he journey of the shaman involves a symbolic death, dismemberment, and a contemplation of the skeleton. Having experienced the death of self/mortality, the shaman descends through the interior landscape of the individual body and ascends/descends into the realism beyond the borders of the self via a spiral ladder or a bridge of swords into the connected realms of minerals, animals, plants, humans, as well as that of the invisible and abstract. This “paradoxical passage” ... brings the shaman into contact with the “suprasensible world ... (and involves) a total transformation of the individual (human) into something other.

(2003: 31)

⁸⁵ Czernobog seems to represent Thor, the god of thunder. According to Comte, Thor had a hammer called “Mjöllnir” (1988: 207) a symbol of protection and safety. Czernobog provides many comic moments in the novel. He also challenges Shadow at a game of checkers; if he wins he gets to smash Shadow’s head with a sledgehammer.

⁸⁶ Shadow meets deities such as Mamma-ji (Kali) and Mr Nancy (Anansi). Gaiman’s latest novel *Anansi Boys* (2005) deals with this mythical character.

Shadow's ordeal and death on the tree seem to contain shamanic initiation and ritual elements. He is visited and tormented by several beings in order to learn wisdom from them: the squirrel he communicates with that brings him water in a walnut-shell (495), the "elephant-headed man" (491) and the god Horus transformed as a madman (497). His pain and mental state are of such a nature that he seems to interact with the realms suggested by Carstens above. We read:

In his delirium, Shadow became the tree. Its roots went deep into the loam of the earth, down into time, into the hidden springs. He felt the spring of the woman Urd,⁸⁷ which is to say, *Past*. She was huge, a giantess, an underground mountain of a woman, and the waters she guarded were the waters of time. Other roots went to other places. Some of them were secret. Now, when he was thirsty, he pulled water from his roots, pulled them up into the body of his being.

He had a hundred arms which broke into a hundred thousand fingers, and all of his fingers reached up into the sky. The weight of the sky was heavy on his shoulders.

(2001: 496)

Eliade explains that "during the trance ... the shaman is believed to understand the language of all nature" (1989: 96) and that the pains the initiate experiences "appear to be animated and sometimes even have a certain personality" (105). During initiation rites shamans are often expected to ascend a tree with a rope, the rope being symbolical of the cord between heaven and earth and the tree symbolic of "the Universal Tree that grows at the 'Centre of the World' and connects the three cosmic zones – underworld, earth, heaven" (Eliade 1989: 37). Meletinsky identifies it as the "cosmic tree (axis mundi, world tree)" and explains that it is "the image of the universe as a tree, found in Scandinavian, Egyptian, Akkadian, Sumerian, and

⁸⁷ In Scandinavian mythology the cosmic tree or "*Yggdrasil* ... [is] the center of the earth and of the cosmos; associated with *Mimir*" (Meletinsky 2002: 476). Mimir (a giant) is "the deity that inhabits the springs of the *hydromel*; located at the spring that surges from the second root of the *cosmic tree* ... Odin gives Mimir one of his eyes in exchange for the hydromel; Mimir, an *Asi* [first race of gods], is sent to the *Vanir* (the second race of gods in the Scandinavian pantheon) as a hostage and is later killed by them; his head is embalmed and consulted by Odin, so that Mimir, like the hydromel itself, represents wisdom" (449). Cf. footnote no. 75.

Chinese mythology, often said to be of ash” (2000: 426). Shadow is similarly bound to the ash tree by a rope.

Eliade’s observation about the initiatory death of the shaman seems germane to a discussion of Shadow’s death during the vigil and his experiences in the afterlife. Eliade explains that the death

includes one or more of the following themes: dismemberment of the body, followed by a renewal of the internal organs and viscera; ascent to the sky and dialogue with the gods or spirits; descent to the underworld and conversation with spirits and the souls of dead shamans; various revelations, both religious and shamanic....

(1989: 34)

Shadow’s descent into the underworld involves the extraction of his soul when Zorya takes his name in the form of a “magnesium-white luminance” (504) from his head. He is in a sense dismembered when his organs are extracted. Bast explains: “‘I’ll take your heart. We’ll need it later,’ and she reached her hand deep inside his chest and she pulled it back out with something ruby and pulsing held between her sharp fingernails” (510). Shadow’s dismemberment continues on a meta-physical level when Anubis, the embalmer god, examines him: “the jackal god was his prosecutor and his prosecutor and his persecutor” (515). The examination is as painful as vivisection:

But the examination did not stop. Every lie he had ever told, every object he had stolen, every hurt he had inflicted on another person, all the little crimes and the tiny murders that make up the day, each of these things and more were extracted and held up to the light by the jackal-headed judge of the dead.

Shadow began to weep, painfully, in the palm of the dark god’s hand.

(2001: 515-16)

The pain represents the symbolic death Eliade refers to (1989: 33). That Shadow later returns in perfect physical health could illustrate that the initiation ceremony is complete; with the “renewal of his organs; ritual death followed by resurrection” (Eliade 1989: 38). He is endowed with shamanic powers, for instance when he takes Mulligan’s memory about the child sacrifices and Hinzemann’s death away:

And at that moment, although he could never tell you how he had done it ... Shadow reached in to Chad Mulligan’s mind, easy as anything, and he plucked the events of that afternoon away from it as precisely and dispassionately as a raven picks an eye from roadkill.
(2001: 612)

According to Eliade, “each shaman has a Bird-of-Prey-Mother.... This mythical bird shows itself only twice; at the shaman’s spiritual birth, and at his death” (36). Shadow encounters his mythical bird twice. The first is in a dream where he climbs a mountain of skulls and is attacked by thunderbirds: “*He reached out and tried to grasp a feather from its wing – for if he returned to his tribe without a thunderbird’s feather he would be disgraced, he would never be a man – but the bird pulled up, so that he could not grasp a feather*” (326). When Easter revives him after his death, he meets the thunderbird again and is given a ride by it. We read:

Shadow nodded. He seemed to be trying to remember something. Then he opened his mouth, and he screeched a cry of welcome and of joy.

The thunderbird opened its cruel beak, and it screeched a welcome back at him.

Superficially, at least, it resembled a condor. Its feathers were black, with a purplish sheen, and its neck was banded with white. Its beak was black and cruel: a raptor’s beak, made for tearing. At rest, on the ground, with its wings folded away, it was the size of a black bear, and its head was on a level with Shadow’s own.

Horus said proudly, ‘I brought him. They live in the mountains.’

Shadow nodded. ‘I had a dream of thunderbirds once,’ he said. ‘Damnedest dream I ever had.’

(2001: 558-59)

In large parts of North Asian mythologies and religions the Thunder Bird or Eagle is a “tutelary spirit” (Eliade 1989: 245). Spence refers to many thunder gods who possess bird-like characteristics and explains that “the thunder-bird among the North American Indians effects [the noise of thunder] by the beating of his wings” (1994: 123). Meletinsky similarly describes the thunderbird as a “legendary eagle-like creature [which ties in with the symbol on the coin Shadow receives] among the North American Indians, especially popular in *Algonquian*⁸⁸ myths, among Northwest Coast peoples, and among tribes of the Great Plains.” In addition to the sound, the bird is “also associated with lightning and rain [and] is a positive force” (2000: 468-69). The thunderbird seems to be only one of the mythical birds connected with Shadow. Sources further explain that Odin had two ravens called Huginn and Munninn who travelled across the world and brought all the information back to Odin (Comte 1988: 143). Various other references are made to eagles, hawks and ravens in the novel. There is also the hitchhiker that Shadow picks up named Samantha Black Crow.⁸⁹ She tells him many stories and fables while they travel together. Samantha Black Crow turns out to be a character from Siouan fables. So Shadow’s mythical bird is present in various forms and fulfils the functions of educator, protector and guide, and underscores the synthesis of mythical elements which is so characteristic of the novel.

Apart from the realms of plants, animals, humans and spirits, the shaman also connects with the realms of mineral and stone (Carstens 2003: 31). The following examples illustrate Shadow’s connection with these elements. The gold coins Shadow is given could be seen as representative of the function of minerals in his destiny. Shadow’s encounter in dreams with the buffalo man, “[i]n the earth and under the earth” represents a penetration of the soil: “The buffalo man said nothing.

⁸⁸ “Algonquians (Algonkians) – a widespread language family of northern, central and northeastern North America that includes Cree, *Ojibwa*, and *Blackfoot*, among others” (Meletinsky 2000: 416).

⁸⁹ According to Meletinsky “Crow [is] a Siouan tribe of North Dakota, neighbors of the *Blackfoot*” (2000: 426).

He pointed up toward the roof of the cave” (265). With a fire flickering in the background, the buffalo man stares at Shadow with “huge eyes, eyes like pools of dark mud” (264). Eliade’s assertion that the cave is of symbolic value in shamanic initiation as a place where wisdom is obtained (1989: 389) and a symbol of a “passage into another world” (51) is significant: Shadow encounters the gods and spirits of the underworld in a cave of rock. Ibis rows him in the boat that “slipped and slid across the mirror-surface of the underground pool” (513) to the “rock walls” of “the Hall of the Dead” (514).

Further aspects that could be related to shamanism are the ascent to the top of the mountain (during the battle) and the various potions Shadow receives from Wednesday during the course of the novel. Eliade does not elaborate much on the use of narcotics in shamanism, yet McKenna, Meletinsky, Freke and others do. There is no evidence that Shadow receives any hallucinogenic narcotic before the hanging, but the squirrel three times brings him water in a “walnut-shell” (495) while he is hanging on the tree. The water has a “muddy-iron taste” and “it eased his fatigue and his madness” (496). Soon afterwards he feels “exhausted” and falls into a “delirium” (496). Eliade explains that the shaman receives “drinks that make the candidate unconscious” and induce “hypnotic sleep” (1989: 64) during the initiation ordeal.⁹⁰ The water Shadow receives could support the shamanic administration of hallucinogenic substances, but McKenna clarifies that “where shamanic techniques are used to the exclusion of hallucinogenic plant ingestion ... it is more like a ritual enactment” (1991: 166) than a psychedelic, substance-induced trance. It is important that the shaman should have experienced a substance-induced trance before and it is

⁹⁰ In *The Bloodline of the Holy Grail* Laurence Gardner argues that Jesus was administered a narcotic described as “vinegar and gall” (Matthew 27: 34) which “hinged upon the use of a comatosing poison and the performance of a physical deception” of death (1996: 106). He further argues that Nicodemus arrived at the tomb or grave with “a mixture of myrrh and aloes” (John 19: 39) and that the “juice of aloes, as modern pharmacopoeias explain, is a strong and fast-acting purgative – precisely what would have been needed ... to expel the poisonous ‘gall’ (venom) from Jesus’s body” (118). As previously mentioned, Gardner further argues that after Jesus’ death his side was pierced, producing blood and water (John 19:34) and that “[i]n reality, vascular bleeding indicates that a body is alive, not dead” (113). From a shamanic and mythological perspective Jesus’ suffering (on a ‘tree’), his death and resurrection are then doubly significant.

clear that Shadow experiences such a trance when he drinks the mead Wednesday gives him in Jack's Crocodile Bar (2001: 39). Mead, which is made from fermented honey, was "the recreational drug of the Indo-European tribes" and honey was considered as "a magical substance – a medicinal substance" (McKenna 1992: 140).

What makes Gaiman's protagonist so likeable is the fact that he is not represented as a cyborg or what Carstens defines as a "human/machine hybrid" with "steel prosthetics and infrared eyes" (2003: 24). These attributes are given to the new gods of the "technoculture" (25), such as the goddess of Media and the god of Technology. Shadow's shamanic characteristics seem based on archaic and mystic traditions and not shamanic technology as described in Carstens's *Techno-Genetrix* (24-31). In the context of the novel Shadow fulfils an important function in bridging the gap between ancient and modern worlds. For the contemporary reader the novel provides the realization of a need to merge contemporary western culture and the sub-conscious desire for the archaic and fantastical. This chimes with what Timothy Freke, in his book on contemporary shamans, observes:

The western world, dominated by scientific materialism and consumerism, has amassed extravagant wealth to conceal a spiritual vacuum. But the profound enigmas of existence have not gone away and ever greater numbers of people yearn for more meaning than the fleeting world of fashion and gimmicks can possibly provide. Shamanism answers this fundamental need. It teaches us to reach below the surface of modern superficialities and reconnect with something old and mysterious within the depths of our soul.

(1999: 6)

At the end of the novel Shadow does not emerge as some super, Rambo-like hero or powerful god, but as a very ordinary, run-of-the-mill human and it is this quality that the reader can identify with. His physical and spiritual journey and death endow him with shamanic qualities, yet he prefers to be just an ordinary "man [not] a god" (576).

His choice re-enforces his shamanic status and echoes the opinions of other contemporary shamans such as Andy Baggott (from Ireland) who remarks,

...because you have a certain amount of power when you work shamanically, that power can corrupt. There are plenty of people who allow that power to corrupt and get tempted all the time. It's a matter of having that clarity of mind. It's so important to be responsible in Shamanism – not using that power to manipulate people to your own ends.

(Freke 1999: 84)

The shamanic concept of death and resurrection and the spiritual insight Shadow obtains therefore seem to combine with the mythical elements of renewal and eternal return and in this way the old and the new are reconciled in *American Gods* to evoke the possibility of reaching a deeper understanding, a renewed spiritual experience.

The Head of the Pantheon of *American Gods*

Religions are, by definition, metaphors, after all: God is a dream, a hope, a woman, an ironist, a father, a city, a house of many rooms, a watchmaker who left his prize chronometer in the desert, someone who loves you – even, perhaps, against all evidence, a celestial being whose only interest is to make sure your football team, army, business, or marriage thrives, prospers and triumphs over all opposition.

Religions are places to stand and look and act, vantage points from which to view the world.

(Gaiman 2001: 543)

The main deity brought back to life in *American Gods* is Wednesday. He is the one-eyed Norse god Odin, also called Woten (or Woden), and Grimner. He is also called Rafnagaud or, as mentioned before, the god with the ravens Huginn and Munninn (Comte 1991: 143). Various characters in the novel refer to him as the all-father. Through the centuries Odin has been given characteristics and areas of activity that had earlier belonged to other gods and this could clarify why Gaiman selected Odin as

the main impetus of the action in *American Gods*. The many names given to Odin show different sides of his character and his variety of action as the god of battle, god of war, magic, the sinister god and the terrifying god, but the names also suggest that he should not be trusted as he could be cunning and capricious. Towards the end of the novel it becomes apparent that Wednesday has betrayed Shadow. He wants Shadow killed and desires sacrifices at the final battle to ensure his own immortality.

According to myth, Odin lost his eye⁹¹ as a sacrifice for a drink from the fountain of Mimir⁹² in order to obtain wisdom and insight (1991: 144). Shadow observes that “[t]here was something strange about [Wednesday’s] eyes.... One of them was a darker grey than the other” (24) and later it is noted he “had a piratical black eyepatch over one eye” (626). Czernobog jokingly refers to him as the “old one-eyed bastard” (134). Myth further explains that Odin drank the mead made of Kvasir’s⁹³ blood and honey in search of further wisdom. This element is embodied in the incident in Jack’s Crocodile Bar when Wednesday gives Shadow a drink and he explains that it is “[h]oney wine. The drink of heroes. The drink of the gods.... I brought you mead to drink because it’s traditional. And right now we need all the tradition we can get. It seals our bargain” (2001: 39). These are amongst the many examples in the novel which establish Wednesday as Odin and successfully contrast the ancient deities with the rather dull modern gods.

The motif of death and resurrection involves the mythical god and the protagonist and it is explained to Shadow in one of his dreams, “*Three days on the tree, three days in the underworld, three days to find my way back*” (466). Odin, like Shadow, hung on a tree for nine days. A spear also pierced his side and he came back to life. Shadow is sacrificed by ‘hanging’ vigil for Wednesday. Odin remarks to

⁹¹ Meletinsky explains that “Odin is a seer and a sorcerer with a single eye, which underlines his ‘blindness’ to daily and banal events but also his penetrating gaze on important events” (2000: 453).

⁹² Cf. footnote no. 87.

⁹³ Kvasir is “a creature of astounding wisdom” that came into existence because the gods spat into a bowl at a banquet celebrating the end of the war between the Aesir and the Vanir. Two dwarves called Fjalar and Galar murdered Kvasir. The dwarves made the mead Odin searches for and drinks. The mead “gave whoever drank it the gifts of the poet and scholar” (Comte 1991: 144).

Shadow, ““You and I, we have walked the same path. I also hung on the tree for nine days, a sacrifice of myself to myself. I am the lord of the Aes. I am the god of the gallows”” (2001: 626).

In the novel Wednesday’s cycle of eternal return is portrayed differently from the myth associated with Odin. Meletinsky remarks that this is characteristic of contemporary mythical novels, “the cyclical pattern attributed to the development of events in modern mythification is not universally found in archaic myths” (2000: 340). Mr World, apparently the leader of the modern gods, murders Wednesday. We later learn that Mr World is Loki⁹⁴ (also Low Key Lyesmith, Shadow’s former cell-mate) in disguise and that he and Odin planned this ‘murder’ together. What is significant about the manner in which Wednesday is executed, is the live television coverage which could be interpreted as Gaiman’s comment on the sensationalism of our modern existence. The fables and stories surrounding mythology are filled with bloody rituals and battles, which are often seen as barbaric, but in reality nothing has changed. Modern man can view the same atrocities from the comfort of his lounge room couch. Wednesday’s murder is described as follows: “The words LIVE FEED became REPLAY. Slowly now the red laser pointer traced its bead onto Wednesday’s glass eye, and once again the side of his face dissolved into a cloud of blood. Freeze frame” (2001: 437). Erik Davis remarks that in “the rituals of popular television ... the private tragedies and tribulations of ordinary people are laid bare for all to see” (1988: 308). In this respect media and technology have become “both a metaphor and a tool for ritual” (183). Contemporary imagery is used in support of rituals which form part of traditional myth.

The clash between the old and new gods at Rock City parallels the Norse day of doom called Ragnarök (or *Ragnarøk*). Lewis Spence explains that Ragnarök is regarded as the terrible day of “dreadful doom” (1994: 261) which the gods will face

⁹⁴ Loki is the Norse god of disorder. Comte explains that Loki had the power to transform himself (1991: 125). He is full of trickery and wickedness.

on the final day of reckoning.⁹⁵ This concept seems to be present in the concluding battle between the gods in the novel. Shadow knows that the battle is orchestrated by Odin and Loki in order to obtain godly sacrifices and Wednesday confesses “[b]ut the battle will bring [Loki] back. As the battle will bring me back for good” (571). Odin’s treacherous and Loki’s devilish characteristics are revealed. As sacrificed scapegoat and resurrected demi-god Shadow sets out to bring order in the world of chaos. As he approaches the battlefield he observes, “The paradigms were shifting. He could feel it. The old world, a world of infinite vastness and illimitable resources and future was being confronted by something else – a web of energy, of opinions, of gulfs” (573). The word “web” is ambiguous. It could refer to a web like a spider’s web or a net that catches and holds everything together, but in the context of the novel’s mythology it also seems to refer to the web of computer interaction and the Internet, which has become so ubiquitous in society. Davis calls this “the electrical grid” (1998: 39) and remarks “electricity feeds modernity; it is our profane illumination” (39). This web of “energy, of opinion, of gulfs” that Shadow observes therefore seems to encapsulate contemporary society.

When Shadow remarks “People believe.... People populate the darkness; with ghosts, with gods, with electrons, with tales” (573), he seems to imply that anything can become a god once it is believed in. In his description of the car gods, he explains they are “recipients of human sacrifice on a scale undreamed-of since the Aztecs” (574). The modern gods are endowed with archaic, mythical and anthropomorphic qualities such as the right to experience emotions and receive sacrifices, confirming Meletinsky’s remarks that “when myths move from one group to another they are reconfigured so that they become, for the assimilating group, ‘our’ myths” (2000: 340).

Fantasy and Mythification

⁹⁵ Cf. footnote no. 78.

Fantasy, though older, is often considered to be the mentally disadvantaged younger sibling of science fiction, which prides itself on being “the fiction of ideas”. But let’s face it, new ideas are far and few between in any sort of fiction these days. The thing that’s important is what the author does with an idea, and in that sense Gaiman has done a superb job....

(Bay 2001: 4)

A discussion of the genre of *American Gods* seems appropriate in order to further identify aspects associated with mythification. Franz Kafka could be regarded as one of the most prominent mythical novelists who employed the device of fantasy. According to Meletinsky, Kafka’s “mythopoetic fantasies ... depict with fine brushstrokes the Modernist ailment of the modern world and of contemporary consciousness: alienation, the levelling of the human personality, and the existential loneliness of the individual” (2000: 317). In this respect, and because he embodies the elements of loneliness and alienation, *Shadow Moon* can be regarded as a representative of the ‘contemporary consciousness of the human personality’ in the context of *American Gods*. This is not an attempt to compare Gaiman with Kafka, but “the transformation of realities of everyday life into another dimension” (318) warrants a reference. Shadow’s encounters, his ordeal on the tree and communication with metaphysical beings before and after his death are bizarre and inconceivable, but seem justified when viewed through the genre of fantasy. The events lack the element of fear, but succeed in commenting on the consciousness of Shadow’s society by reflecting on the transformed realities in it. Wednesday observes:

‘In other countries, over the years, people recognised the places of power. Sometimes it would be a natural formation, sometimes it would just be a place that was, somehow, special. They knew that something important was happening there, that there was some focusing point, some channel, some window to the Immanent. And so they would build temples, or cathedrals, or erect stone circles, or ... well, you get the idea.’

Shadow replies, ““there are churches all across the States”” and Wednesday responds: ““In every town. Sometimes on every block. And about as significant, in this context, as dentists’ offices”” (126-27). With remarks like these and the sardonic selection of a place like The House on the Rock for a godly gathering, Gaiman seems to suggest that roadside attractions “are America’s only remaining holy places” (Jensen 2001: 75) and that traditional sacred spaces have become devoid of meaning. In this respect the novel, in spite of being a fantasy, reflects on the lack of belief in mythical qualities in American society.

The afterlife chapter (518–42) brings to mind a virtual video game where every level Shadow overcomes leads him to a more fantastical encounter. Death seems to be unreal, resembling a series of Playstation encounters. Shadow is not naked as he was on the tree, but he is “fully dressed, in jeans and a white tee shirt” (502). In this “preliminary” ... “world of the dead” (513) Shadow’s physical body seems to be as real as in life. He experiences mental and physical sensations. Mr Ibis the Egyptian god explains, ““You people talk about the living and the dead as if they were two mutually exclusive categories. As if you cannot have a river that is also a road, or a song that is also a colour”” (513).

During this educational session Shadow obtains self-knowledge. He gets to make three choices. Zorya Polunochnaya presents the first choice. He has to choose between lies and truths. When Shadow chooses truth, he has to lose his name. The scene is described in a surreal fashion,

She reached a perfect hand toward his head. He felt her fingers brush his skin, then he felt them penetrate his skin, his skull, felt them push deep into his head. Something tickled, in his skull and all down his spine. She pulled her hand out of his head. A flame, like a

candle-flame but burning with a clear magnesium-white
luminance, was flickering on the tip of her forefinger.
'Is that my name?' he asked.

(2001: 504)

The second option is presented by Bast, the feline Egyptian goddess. ““One way will make you wise. One way will make you whole. And one way will kill you”” (509). The fact that Shadow is apparently already dead makes the option of being killed rather bizarre. During this choice he loses his heart, “the colour of pigeon’s blood ... made of pure light” (510). Before his third choice is presented, he is taken by Mr Ibis, or Thoth,⁹⁶ the Egyptian ferryman, across the river and is presented to Anubis. Shadow’s heart has to be weighed in order to decide whether he should receive ““Heaven? Hell? Purgatory?”” (516) His heart balances with the feather and Shadow gets to “choose his own destination ... one of rest” (516-17). Shadow is revived by Easter and then miraculously arrives at a place where he sits down and drinks Budweiser with Whiskey Jack.⁹⁷ The phenomenal fashion in which he moves from one place to another happens on a physical and mental level. He then joins the gods at the battlefield. He laconically reflects “*I came back from the dead this morning. After that, everything else should be a piece of cake*” (574).

According to Davis, “science-fiction and fantasy writers don’t just tell tales – they build worlds” (1998: 182) and Gaiman succeeds in building a world populated with an entertaining diversity of gods and humans. The aspect that distinguishes *American Gods* from science fiction is the metaphysical quality of events and the religious undertones of Shadow’s experiences. Davis elaborates that in science fiction “writers generally stick closer to scientific plausibility” (182) than fantasy writers. Shadow’s cycle of rebirth and altered consciousness seems to contain shamanic qualities of a paganistic nature. Seen from this perspective, the novel

⁹⁶ Mr Ibis and Mr Jackal are the two Egyptian gods Anubis and Thoth. They are the undertakers Shadow works for. Anubis, the jackal-god and embalmer god, is guide to the souls in the world beyond (Comte 1988: 41). Thoth is the secretary to the gods, “the scribe” (209).

⁹⁷ Meletinsky explains: “Whiskedjak (Whiskey-Jack) – a *trickster* figure found in the mythology of the Algonkian speakers around the Great Lakes....” (2000: 475).

contains what Davis terms “technopagan[ism]” (179). Technopagans “attempt ... to reboot the rituals, myths, and gods of ancient polytheistic cultures” (179) while at the same time they regard “powerful; new technologies [as] magical, because they *function* as magic” (181). When the reconciling nature of the novel between old and new is taken into account, the above observation seems to be relevant. Shadow encounters the spectrum of gods on the mountaintop,

There were old gods in that place: gods with skins the brown of old mushrooms, the pink of chicken-flesh, the yellow autumn leaves. Some were crazy and some were sane.... There were ifrits and piskies, giants and dwarfs....

He recognised the new ones, too.

...a railroad baron ... great grey gods of the airplanes.... Others had faces of smudged phosphors....

There was arrogance to the new ones. Shadow could see that. But there was also a fear.

(2001: 573-74)

It seems that Gaiman as fantasy writer has “overlap[ed] computer culture and the occult fringe” (Davis 1998: 181) and could perhaps stimulate many a reader into investigating further the broad world of mythology to realise the following remark by Davis: “One meeting ground is science fiction and fantasy fandom, a deeply imaginative subculture whose bookworm enthusiasm and geeky humor has bred many a Pagan” (181). Davis further sites an observation by David Porush, “Every time culture succeeds in revolutionizing its cybernetic technologies, in massively widening the bandwidth of its thought-tech, it invites the creation of new gods” (29) and new gods could provide meaning (at least in the imagination) to world largely devoid of it. There are numerous examples in literature where fantasy characters stimulate the reader to enter an imaginary land. One of the most prominent examples is certainly *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien (and its recent cinematic revival). Davis quotes from Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-stories” where he remarks that the author of fantasy “makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe

it, while you are, as it were, inside” (1998: 207). The time and place in *American Gods* allow exactly this creation of a secondary, fictional world into which the reader can escape and experience spiritual enrichment.

In addition to the device of fantasy, the novel’s style also contains stories within the story and sub-plots dealing with mystery and horror. Various stories relating to the arrival of the different deities and folklore characters are told at intervals throughout the novel. These sections have headings such as “Coming to America 813 AD” (72), “Coming to America 1721” (100) or “Somewhere in America” (194). A detailed discussion of the multitude of legends, fables and myths in these chapters will require more space and might divert from the focus of my discussion. Suffice it to say that Gaiman’s inclusion of this vast range of characters adds to the meta-mythology of the novel and that the sections function as prologues or epilogues to provide links between the mythical characters and their lands of origin. Mr Ibis or Thoth records many of these historical sections. Comte explains that Thoth was a god with the head of an ibis; he was skilled in mathematics and recorded history (1991: 209).⁹⁸ Gaiman seems to employ Thoth, transformed as Mr Ibis, in order to tell the history of the gods and folklore characters in the novel and to act as one of Shadow’s prosecutors in the afterlife scene.

One of the more prominent sub-plots in the novel concerns the mysterious disappearance of children in the little town of Lakeside. This part of the story once again deals with the mythical element of renewal. Wednesday finds accommodation for Shadow in Lakeside to keep him hidden and out of the way. The town is eerily beautiful, serene and friendly. Shadow becomes a modern-day Sherlock Holmes guided by a sixth sense when he discovers the last lost child’s body in the trunk of the

⁹⁸ Davis remarks that “writing is a technology [with] ... an utterly technological tale” (23) developing from symbols to signs. It is widely assumed that it was a Semitic people who invented the alphabet in the fifteenth century BC (25-26), but the Egyptians recorded events in hieroglyphs long before this time. This would make Thoth one of the first ‘historical novel writers’. Thoth apparently created Hermes Trismegistus who tells the stories of Egypt in the age of antiquity. Davis observes: “Hermes [Trismegistus] embodies the mythos of the information age not just because he is the lord of communication, but because he is also a mastermind of *techne*, the Greek word that means the art of craft” (1998: 17).

old car on the ice. The elephant man⁹⁹ who appears to Shadow while he is hanging on the tree, tells him ““Yes. In the trunk. You will forget many things. You will give many things away. You will lose many things. But do not lose this”” (491). When Shadow falls through the ice with the old car while investigating, he sees all the drowned children: “This was where they rested: Lemmi Hautala and Jessie Lovat and Sandy Olsen and Jo Ming and Sarah Linquist and all the rest of them” (595). It becomes apparent that the tradition of annually leaving a car on the ice and taking bets on the day it will fall through the ice (indicating the arrival of spring) deals with the ancient ritual of child sacrifices for seasonal renewal. Hinzelmann, the deceptively friendly old man in charge of the ritual or draw, declares ““They were giving their children to me before the Romans came to the Black Forest,’ he said. ‘I was a god before ever I was a kobold’” (605).¹⁰⁰ The children are sacrificed in exchange for serenity and well-being in the village. Hinzelmann explains:

‘I figured, that this country is hell on my kind of folk. It eats us. I didn’t want to be eaten. So I made a deal. I gave them a lake, and I gave them prosperity...’
‘And all it cost them was one child every winter.’

(2001: 602)

Gaiman combines the sacrifice of children with the old and the new by having Hinzelmann hiding the corpses in the car god, “recipient ... of human sacrifices” (574). The manner in which Gaiman combines the old and the new to create a unified world confirms Barthes’s remark that “contemporary society is a field ripe with mythological meanings” (Meletinsky 2000: 67).

⁹⁹ The elephant man seems to be the Indian God Ganesha (Comte 1994: 87). According to myth he was the master of intelligence, had the head of an elephant and traveled on a rat. Shadow perceives him as follows: “an elephant-headed man, pot-bellied, one tusk broken, was riding toward him on the back of a huge mouse” (491).

¹⁰⁰ According to Froud and Lee “kobolds [are] the German version of the knockers [mine dwelling goblins] ... they tend to be troublesome and mischievous....” (1978: no page numbers).

Conclusion

The evidence for establishing mythification in *American Gods* resides in the identification of the elements such as magic, ritual, sacrifice, renewal and eternal return as well as the identification of mythical characters and parallels in the text. These elements and motifs manifest themselves as functional, providing thematic material in a variety of genres such as the contemporary fantasy novel. *American Gods* explores the interaction between the ancient and the modern to present a mythology of popular culture, which also reflects critically on American consciousness and culture. The novel presents a synergy between science (technology), myth and magic.

Given the spectrum of fantastical characters and events in *American Gods*, it seems that the novel provides a commentary on Western society (American society in particular) and its lack of sacred awareness. Wednesday remarks to Shadow, ““This is the only country in the world ... that worries about what it is.... The rest of them know what they are. No-one ever needs to go searching for the heart of Norway. Or looks for the soul of Mozambique”” (125). The novel therefore reflects on the soul of America as it is presented in the culture and belief systems of the characters. At various intervals old and new gods remark that America is not a good country for gods. Whiskey Jack says “It’s not good growing country for gods” (549), Mr Nancy observes it is “a land that has no time for gods” (478); that “this is not a country that tolerates gods for long” (469); Czernobog calls it the place “where gods only walk if they are forced to” (460); Samantha Black Crow reflects sardonically, “White people have some fucked-up gods, Mister Shadow” (183). The old and new gods are repeatedly slandering each other. The old gods regard the new ones as young, materialistic and arrogant. Gaiman certainly describes them like this with “a spattering of acne” dressed in a “long black coat” like Keanu Reeves in the *Matrix* films, driving a “stretch limo” (55) and swearing. Mutual contempt is evident when the fat kid sends a message to Wednesday via Shadow, ““You tell him he is history. He’s forgotten. He’s old. Tell him that we are the future and we don’t give a fuck

about him or anyone like him. He has been consigned to the dumpster of history while people like me ride our limos down the superhighway of tomorrow” (57). After Wednesday’s death the same fat kid tells Shadow that the old gods are “...already dead meat... a fucking illuminated gothic black letter manuscript. You couldn’t be hypertext if you tried. I’m ... I’m synaptic, while, while you’re synoptic ...” (472). When these attributes are considered, it becomes clear that Gaiman has succeeded in creating a novel in which the ancient and modern are merged and presented in a postmodern meta-mythology. The novel illustrates that in postmodern “mythification, irony and the carnivalesque express the unlimited freedom of the contemporary artist vis-à-vis the traditional symbol system, which is no longer a constricting force in modern thought” (Meletinsky 2000: 303). The pantheon of new and old gods contributes to the achievement of the novel as a mythical one.

At various points in the novel Gaiman reflects on American beliefs and convictions. Samantha’s girlfriend Natalie for example reads an article in a paper which asks the question “Is America Changing?” (614) Terence McKenna observes in *Food of the Gods* (1992) that “we [the Western world] have lost the ability to be swayed by the power of myths, and our history should convince us of the fallacy of dogma” (273) and he suggests “that the task of managing a global human population into a state of balance and happiness could involve introducing the experience of an internal horizon of transcendence into people’s lives” (273) and by this he means shamanic experiences. Shadow exits from the meta-mythology presented in the novel, content with who he is and what he has learned and this transcendence gives him the freedom to decide that “[h]e had enough of gods and their ways to last him several lifetimes.... He would keep moving” (627). He decides not to go back to America, because there is “[n]othing to go back for” (627). His freedom and future lie in his inner transformation and his new understanding of the transcendental nature of reality, and not in a watered-down concoction of belief systems which seem to have lost their credibility in a multi-faceted cultural society. Instead of the traditional hero, known for bravery and great deeds, Shadow is presented as the contemporary anti-hero – introspective and content with the world of myth, magic, science and

technology surrounding him. Therefore Shadow's decision to have no more part in the mythical process reflects on the element of cyclical or eternal return in the novel. McKenna explains that the "highest level of the pattern, which does not repeat ... [is] the part that is responsible for the advance into true novelty" (215). It seems that Shadow has reconfigured and assimilated the historical and parallel myths (as the son of a god and a mortal and as sacrificed victim resurrected) in order to live his 'own' myth – not to return to the mythical world found in archaic myths, but rather to turn the motif of death and resurrection upside down by choosing the shaman's life of isolation: "to live at the edge of society" (<http://deoxy.org/shaover.htm>). Shadow's resolutions and acquiescence echo Heidegger's theory on existence in which man's "redemption lies in that freedom which time alone provides, the freedom to make of life what [he] choose[s] it to be, and thereby to change from thrown-ness to resolution" (Scruton 1999: 260). From this perspective *American Gods* validates Meletinsky's remark that "myth is fundamentally about the transformation of chaos into harmony" (2000: 156).

The mythification in the novel represents an attempt to "reach below the surface of modern superficialities and reconnect with something old and mysterious within the depths of our soul" (Freke 1999: 6).

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

[T]he use of myth, the constant parallels between now and Antiquity ... is a way of controlling, regulating and conferring form and meaning to the vast spectacle of the vanity and change of contemporary history.

(Eliot, quoted in Meletinsky 2000: 330).

In the organisation of this thesis the argument has developed with each succeeding chapter and I provided a summary of each chapter at its conclusion. My intention here is not to repeat the argument, but to summarise and reflect on the value of my discussion in a short and concise manner.

As stated in the Prologue and the first chapter of this thesis, the mythopoetic field (which involves a variety of disciplines) is enormous and almost impossible to cover entirely in a specific investigation and engagement with the field proved daunting and at times overwhelming. My research never seemed completely adequate or all encompassing; the field contains enormous scope for further investigation, especially in relation to political ideology and its mythification in contemporary literature. It is also in this area of the thesis that I experienced particular difficulties because of the dearth of theoretical work, and especially in finding appropriate studies in political myth as represented in contemporary literature. By this I distinctly do not mean sources dealing with political myths surrounding the concepts such as nationalism, liberalism and Marxism,¹⁰¹ but the mythification of a political figure and an ideology central to a creative literary work. Yet it is the small handful of available research studies on political myth that presented a challenge; in addition, Bennett's narrative style in *The Catastrophist* made Chapter Three one of my preferred sections of the thesis. My analysis of the relationship between myth (and especially the leitmotif of eternal return in combination with ritual) and ideology

¹⁰¹ Degenaar calls these "The myth that God creates nations (nationalism), the myth that Nature ordains human rights (liberalism), and the myth that History determines the class struggle (Marxism)" (1995: 45).

(and the mythification of a political or revolutionary figure) in *The Catastrophist* makes a significant contribution to the field of mythopoesis in postmodern literature. Gillespie's postmodern distance from the mythical content of the political myths in the novel adds to an understanding of the difference between the pre-modern belief of Bega, for instance where "myth is so fundamental to life ... that one can say that it is a dramatic narrative which constructs a framework for life" (Degenaar 1995: 43) and the postmodern understanding of the meaning of myth as embodied in the experiences of James Gillespie where the meaning of myth "is not only accessible to initiates but open to public scrutiny" (47). This view in the "sphere of literature where myth can give imaginative power to a novel" (47) reflects directly on the relationship between the writer and the reader.

The "tendency of contemporary mythification to combine different mythologies in an attempt to develop a meta-mythology" (Meletinsky 2000: 340) and the research on shamanism in Chapter Five established the section on *American Gods* as another favourite. Although the novel draws more directly and obviously on existing myths, I found the remythification process (intermingling of various myths, legends and fables) and narrative techniques refreshing and informative. Gaiman seems to fulfil the function of the contemporary author as myth transformer not only to inform, but to contribute to the mental 'health' of the reader and society. As Barthes explains:

...the author-writer is an excluded figure integrated by his very exclusion, a remote descendant of the accursed: his function in society as a whole is perhaps related to ... the witch doctor: a function of complementarity, both witch doctor and intellectual in a sense stabilizing a disease which is necessary to the collective economy of health ... on the level of language.

(1972: 150)

American Gods reflects on contemporary American culture and the introduction of Shadow, as possible shaman (or witch doctor) and mediator between the

anthropomorphic gods of technology and ancient mythical characters, is a stimulating change in the creative world of “technopagan[ism]” (Davis 1998: 179). Traditionally the genres of science-fiction and fantasy contain what Blommaert and Verschueren describe as “remarkable creatures”. They explain:

In our description of extraterrestrials we are guided by a human profile to which we add slightly ‘abnormal’ properties.... Usually they are extremely intelligent [*Star Trek* and *Star Wars*], they speak English fluently (or as fluently as is expected of a well-educated non-native speaker), and they have characters, emotions and intentions translatable into ours: they hate, love are wise or aggressive, are homesick, or want to rule the universe. Moreover, they use advanced technology and sophisticated aircraft. They are human beings onto whom we project a number of physical and/or psychical abnormalities. They are what we are not, but what we somehow could or would like to be.

(1998: 18)

Gaiman introduces these “remarkable creatures” but he also focuses on the remodelling or recreation of the ancient mythical characters and a very ‘average’ human protagonist who counteracts confrontation in a completely non-violent way. This technique confirms Degenaar’s view that “Postmodernity has a more relaxed view of myth ... the emphasis is placed on myth as a schema of the imagination which produces meaning in a metaphorical way” (1995: 43). As stated, myth is humankind’s attempt to articulate what is of human concern in a specific society and *American Gods* succeeds in representing the concerns and beliefs not only of contemporary American society, but of developed societies the world over. My research into shamanism and its relation to myth brought me to the conclusion that this avenue contains a vast field of opportunity for mythical research in postmodern fantasy.

The investigation and the structuring of an argument were at times hampered by the intended focus of my study, namely proving that myth is contained in

contemporary literature even if the novel does not seem to be mythical at first reading. It is for this reason that *Everything You Need* proved to be the most difficult. Ironically, it also proved to be demonstrative of the bond which the author achieves with the reader in the process of remythification by creating a common repertoire of symbols, both 'real' (in mythical terms), and an imaginative new mythical content which add satisfying resonance to the meaning-making process. In the same respect my research for *Credo* became tiresome and tedious as so much has been written on the transformation from paganism to Christianity. However, the analysis of the process as it manifests itself in this novel proved to be a useful starting-point for the study because it allowed me to define basic terms as well as my *modus operandi*. As a historical novel it contains a multitude of facts from both pagan and Christian traditions, but *The Catastrophist* seems to achieve much more with so much less.

Despite the above-mentioned difficulties, my enthusiasm and fascination with the topic never faltered or dwindled as my research proved motivational and will encourage me to do further research in this field. My findings underscore Meletinsky's observation that "the elusive goal of finding ... common features in art and myth continues to inspire us" (2000: 340) and acknowledge the vast scope of information contained in the mythopoetic field.

The study confirms my definition that myth is as a culturally significant story about gods or godlike characters and belief systems and that these stories contain basic symbols, images, rituals and values traceable in ancient mythologies. These are transformed in the artistic process to establish a bond between the author and the reader and facilitate spiritual restoration and enrichment. One could therefore argue that these myths evolved from oral storytelling to include modes of narration or written stories (a description of real or imaginary people and events told for entertainment or as fact). Degenaar confirms this with his observation: "The best example of the use of myth in a metamythical way is the sphere of literature where myth can give imaginative power to a novel and endow it with meaning which is not

only accessible to initiates but open to public scrutiny” (1995: 47). With this definition in mind and the illustration that myth is functional and crucial to contemporary literature, I agree with Ruthven who says that “[f]or as long as myth remains the patrimony of the arts, we shall do well to know something about it” (1976: 83). Myth provides thematic material for artistic exploitation and is relevant, functional and informative in contemporary literature. This echoes Schelling’s observation that “Mythology is a necessary condition and the raw material of every art” (Meletinsky 2000: 8)

The study verifies that mankind needs to create gods and goddesses in order to give expression to an inherent spiritual desire to belief and to give meaning to existence. My exploration of the four novels has established that besides functioning as a basis for artistic creativity, myths serve as mediums to facilitate the interpretation of a specific work according to a particular framework such as cultural background, time and historical setting. In addition, my discussion illustrates that a myth or set of myths does not cease to exist but progressively transforms into a new mythology or meta-mythology while simultaneously absorbing and recreating elements in a process of demythification, mythification and remythification. The mythologies identified in the novels are part of the authors’ creative expression and the creation of new myths seems to be a natural extension of mythical thought patterns. A.S. Byatt summarises it aptly in her article on *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye* (1995): “Making up worlds is as natural and as necessary to human beings as breathing and sleeping” and this is of value in “postmodern creation and recreation of old forms” (<http://www.asbyatt.com/fairy.htm>). She further explains: “The fairy-tale [myth or legend] gives form and coherence to formless fears, dreads and desires. Recognising a fairy tale motif, or an ancient myth ... in the mess of a life lived or observed gives both pleasure and security and the sense, – or illusion – of wisdom.” Byatt is not the only one who comments on the importance of myth in contemporary literary recreation. Kazuo Ishiguro¹⁰² observes: “I actually think it is one of the important jobs of the

¹⁰² Kazuo Ishiguro is the winner of the 1989 Booker Prize for *The Remains of the Day*.

novelist to actually tackle and rework myths. I think it's a very ... valid task for the artist to try to figure out what that myth is and if they should actually rework or undermine [the] myth" (Vorda & Herzinger 1991: 140).

My reading of the four novels has shown that myth can be used in various ways in literature: it serves as data or information that is recreated and transformed to develop the style, the plot and the characters; it can be recalled, recreated and transformed in the creative process to establish a common matrix of stories, symbols and motifs which represents a bond between author and reader in terms of the meaning-making process; it can establish a reconnection with the life of the spirit and the discovery of meaning in a demythologised world. In all these ways my discussion shows that myth has an integral part in contemporary literature.

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