

## Literature and Myth

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### 1

Charles Dickens's words, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," can be applied to the discussion of myth and literature in the twentieth century. Despite the great progress made in myth studies in the last century, we have also witnessed the demise of the living myth. The field of literature faced the same irony: despite the wealth of scholarly works on literature, the readership has thinned except for that of novels. Myth and literature are twins that magnify human imagination and the "forest of symbols and images." However, this forest is withering now. Myth was the charter of the primitive society,<sup>1</sup> but it is no longer a "story of life" to the modern man and is degraded to the fossilized language. Myth had been the best story and the "Word" with supreme power in the primitive society, but its power is lost now.

But before I discuss the tragedy of myth and literature in our times, I want to talk about the bright side. As the title of Martin S. Day's book, *The Many Meanings of Myth*, suggests, scholars have studied myth in various ways. When the branches of myth studies—social anthropology, cultural anthropology, folk studies, sociology, history, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and comparative religion—are considered, it seems that myth has been studied as if it is an archaeology of human thoughts. Furthermore, myth studies branched out to literary criticism and established a distinctive field of myth criticism. As stated earlier, myth and literature are twins. Myth is a sacred narrative. If we consider that *mythos*, the Greek word for myth, means plot, we can see that myth is structurally closer

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<sup>1</sup> B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*, The Free Press, 1948, p.78.

to the novel than poetry. Nevertheless, the mythic imagination and the intuitive form do have a close relationship with poetry. Ernst Cassirer wrote *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (3 vols) based on his proposition, “Myth is the form of thought.” He saw myth and language as the most fundamental symbolic forms that create our world. He interprets myth as an unmediated language of human experience and mythic images as the reality itself rather than the representation of the reality. Such mythic consciousness shows our life’s dynamic nature; in turn, myth provides meaning and wisdom to our life.

If anthropologist Paul Radin reevaluated the primitive man in his *The Primitive Man as a Philosopher*, we may also call the primitive man a poet. The poetic imagination abounds in primitive folk literature and oral historians’ reports. Myth contains human desire to reach cosmos from chaos. According to the ritual school, myth is a linguistic representation of a ritual. In other words, myth is a basis of the play. Myth’s being a linguistic representation of a ritual can be found in the King Kim Sooro myth in *Garakgookgi* and the Dangoon myth in *Samgookyousa*. The spell plays a crucial role in magic ritual. The majority of primitive Korean poetry, such as “Goojiga,” “Seodongyo,” “Cheoyongga,” “Haega,” and “Wonga,” can be understood as the spell. Poetry, as well as myth, originates from the man’s ritual wish to bring light to the darkness. However, this wish is lost in modern poetry. Modern poets do not even feel nostalgic toward the primitive home of poetry. At this point, we should ask, “What is literature?” Literature is not a dot; it is a band that has dimensions. Literature is a comprehensive cognition of human experience and imagination. Literature is a dazzling spectrum between two poles, mimesis and fantasy. From a Chinese perspective, a narrative exists between the grand

narrative (history) and the small narrative (fiction). But we should remember that myth transcends the boundary of the narrative.

Sooner than later, we should realize how foolish it is to tie myth to a rotten post called history. The modern man holds onto the illusion of history. However, as Mercia Eliade tells us in *The Myth of Eternal Return*, myth is the eternal return, unlike the irreversible history. We should throw away the corrupt time (history) and jump into the cosmos (myth). When it breaks the yoke of history, poetry can also share the self-satisfying sympathy. A poem is created by a brave decision to free itself from the tedious routines of everyday life. Therefore, a poet cannot write a real poem when he is swamped in everyday life. Anthropologists helped us see how the primitive man placed the sacred chronotope above the profane chronotope and understood those two in harmony. In contrast, the modern man shut the window of imagination in a mistaken belief that it was rational and scientific. As a result, he became a blind who cannot see through the essence of things, a deaf who cannot hear the secret whispers of things, and a dumb who cannot sing a song from his heart. The modern man became seriously handicapped indeed when he lost the myth. This essay begins with our effort to have our eyes, ears, and mouths back, and the true restoration will come with the restoration of literature and myth in our lives.

## 2

Philip Wheelwright claimed that the biggest misfortune of the modern man is the loss of myth.<sup>2</sup> Loss of the mythical imagination means loss of the interpretational ability. The origin of the word “hermeneutics” is from the Greek god Hermes, the

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Wheelwright, “Poetry, Myth and Reality,” in *The Modern Critical Spectrum*, eds., Gerald Jay and Narmer Goldberg, pp.314-315.

messenger of Zeus. Hermes became a messenger when men could not understand gods' words and gods could not understand men's words. However, even Hermes cannot help the modern man because the man cannot understand his own words. The real "word" is lost in the world where communication is dead and only monologues are repeated. As a result, the real word, myth and poetry, lost its reality and was fossilized.

Generally speaking, myth is a representation of collective human imagination while poetry is a representation of individual imagination. However, in the light of Jung's "collective unconsciousness," both myth and poetry are a representation of collective unconsciousness. Because a profound nostalgia for the lost myth lies in the human heart, poetry of mere individual imagination lacks a far-reaching power. We need to remember that the eighteenth-century Romantic poetry is deeply rooted in nationalism and ancient myths. Unlike our common understanding that Romantic poetry is simply lyrical, it reinterpreted ancient myths and recreated the primitive home of mankind. Sadly, however, Koreans failed to produce a great epic and continue to neglect the mythic dimension of poetry. Did our poets give up mythical life and imagination altogether?

Great epics are originated from myths. The Greek word for myth, *mythos*, means story, plot, and narrative. And story and history were originally used interchangeably, although they are used separately now. Story moved toward fantasy from history; therefore, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* have their roots not in history but in myths. In *The Great Code* (1981), Northrop Frye demonstrated that the Bible is also literature and can be interpreted through myth criticism. Its second chapter, "Myth I,"<sup>3</sup> is a good guide to the reader who is interested in literature and myth. When

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<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, pp.31-52.

mythical images and symbols are used in literature, they are transformed to the eternal life, transcending our mortal life.

Philip Wheelwright describes a fascinating Estonian legend in *The Burning Fountain*:

[T]he god of song Wannemunne once descended onto the Domberg, and there, in a sacred wood, played and sang music of divine beauty. All creatures were invited to listen, and they each learned some fragment of the celestial sound: the forest learned its rustling, the stream its roar; the wind caught and learned to re-echo the shrillest tones, and the birds the prelude of the song. The fish stuck their heads as far as the eyes out of the water, but left their ears below the surface; they saw the movements of the god's mouth, and imitated them, but remained dumb. Man alone grasped it all, and therefore his song pierces into the depths of the heart, and mounts upwards to the dwellings of the gods.<sup>4</sup>

This origin myth highlights that humans were able to create poetry by mimicking god's songs and that the task of interpreting the meaning, images, and symbols of god's songs was assigned to humans. Korean "Goojiga" from *Grakgukgi* is also humans' response to god, and that is why it moves our heart. When poetry is written without echoing god's songs, however, it dries up our sensibility instead of enriching it. To revive poetry, poets should regenerate the lost myths.

Mircea Eliade declared that the West's greatest tragedy is its ignorance of and indifference to the Eastern civilization.<sup>5</sup> Neither the East nor the West can exist wholly if

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain: A Study in the Language of Symbolism*, Indiana Univ. Press, 1972, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, Harper Torchbook, 1960, pp. 8-9.

it refuses to learn about the other. Likewise, history and myth should coexist. The modern man who is preoccupied with the historical time should try to have conversations with myth. The world of myth is a forest of symbols and images. In contrast, the world of history is a wasteland filled with pebbles and grains of sand, which are called “facts.” Myth reflects the human desire to change this wasteland into a fertile land. The legend of a river bigger than the Nile beneath the Sahara Desert had been considered as the desert people’s wish fulfillment. However, a massive aquifer was discovered during an oil drilling process, and this aquifer became an important water supply for the Dong-A Construction’s the Great Man-Made River project in Libya. What is significant here is not so much a myth actualized as the belief that the myth is the reality and beyond.

## 3

Myth is like Chinese Boxes, which can be seen as one box, or three, five, seven, or even countless boxes. Myth is a condensed product of language in which language exists in its essence. The mythic imagination enables us to participate in the cosmic creation, whether it is through change of seasons, renewal of time, or meaning-making of space. A great poet recreates the very moment when the God created the universe. This is the myth of eternal return. At that moment, the poet as God’s representative names creatures and thus finalizes the creation. The poet’s words (poetry) can make mountains dance joyfully and rivers flow to the sky. In Chul Gyun Lee’s poem, “Young A (The Mountain),” the poet freezes a mountain by wink when it is about to fly to the sky. In a Siberian Shaman epic, the Ob, the Lena, and the Yenisei rivers that flow to the Arctic Ocean are described as the rivers flowing to heaven. Gods in this epic use the kayak in summer and the reindeer sleigh in winter to come down to the earth and go back to

heaven. The poet can bring storms on the sea and still the roaring sea; he can divide this life and the life to come with the bank of a rice paddy. In *Baridegi*, Korean shaman epic, and Eun Gyo Kang's poem with the same title, reduction and enlargement of time and space are performed freely. When a poet expresses his authority as God's representative in words (poetry), his words become the reality. In contrast, when a poet gives up this authority, his poetry and the world will reveal its shabby shape. Orpheus showed real courage of a poet when he descended to the Hades, from where no living man is allowed to come back. That is why Rilke honors this brave poet by dedicating *Sonnet to Orpheus* to him.

The Korean poets, who have not yet written an epic on the legend of Ieo-do, seem to have given up being a real poet. Chung Joon Lee novelized this legend in his novella *Ieo-do*, but that cannot substitute an epic. When a poet is obsessed with realism, his intuition and insight wither. Sadly, however, the modern poet mocks at myths as a make-believe story. He needs to be reminded of what Cassirer wrote in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*: religious fantasies and myths are condensed symbolic forms of meaning and emotion. Myth is not so much a make-believe story as a vivid expression of the dynamic meaning of our life. Therefore, I strongly encourage writers to read Raymond Firth's *Symbols* for a better understanding of myth and poetry. Myth is also important in psychoanalysis. Jung defined myth as a unique revelation of the subconscious and a reluctant statement made by the unconscious. That is why we need to carefully analyze symbols in myths and of individual poets.

A great poet does not simply follow the literary tradition but recreates a new one. He recreates myths that work for his culture and universal values. Since poetry is not a

story or a narrative, the poet recreates the mythic world with his own metaphors and symbols. Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958) and *Images and Symbols* (1961) are helpful in understanding the mythic symbols and images in poetry.

We have confined poems of Yook Sa Lee, Sang Hwa Lee, and Dong Yup Shin in the historical domain by adopting the biographical approach exclusively. I am not suggesting here that we should study poetry like New Critics. The best way to study poetry is to approach it with various critical methods. That is why I find Dr. Yeol Gyu Kim's use of myth criticism in reading Yooksa Lee's "Gwangya (The Wilderness)" and "Jeoljeong (The Climax)" significant. He liberated these poems from the world of history and placed them in the world of myth.<sup>6</sup> In fact, "Gwangya" is a poem that begs for myth criticism. Not only does it end with a mythic prophecy, "I will let him cry out in this wilderness," but also its structure of time and space parallels mythic time and space. This poem is relatively short, consisting of five stanzas and fifteen lines, but it contains the creation and the eternity, the rotation of four seasons, and a dynamic spatial order in which mountains, rivers, and the wilderness rock. This wilderness is not a human time-space but a chronotope of the universal order. The literary topography of "Gwangya" exceeds our imagination and creates awe, the kind of feeling that Amerindians might have felt upon seeing the Grand Canyon or the Iguazu Falls.

A mythic motif of death and regeneration is central in Sang Hwa Lee's "Does Spring Come to the Dispossessed Field?" In fact, this motif plays an important role in both poetry and novels across cultures. The Adonis myth in Greece and Asia Minor, which is discussed in detail in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, is closely related to the

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<sup>6</sup> Yeolgyu Kim, "A Seed in the Wilderness," *Myth and Archetype*, ed. by Dong Wook Shin, Koreaon, 1992, pp.168-169.

Mediterranean climate with distinct dry and wet seasons. Another example of the motif of death and regeneration is the cycle of the moon, which can be found in the Osiris myth and the legend of Park Hyukgeose's five tombs. If we thus understand the significance of the death and regeneration motif across cultures, we realize that Sang Hwa Lee's aforementioned poem has deeper meanings and the universal truth, not tied to a specific historical context. Of course, I do not deny the importance of the poet's social responsibility during the Japanese colonization. However, a poet's protest is different from a demonstration on the street. Like a persimmon tree produces beautiful ink within its body to heal a wound, a poet needs to create poetry that transcends the historical and the profane.

Dong Yup Shin's poem, "The Talking Ploughman's Earth," can be also read as an allusion to the Goddess of the Earth, not merely to the poet's age. As seen in E. O. James's study on the earth goddesses of the Mediterranean (*Mother-Goddess*) and in E. Neumann's Jungian psychoanalytic study (*The Great Mother*), the Goddess of the Earth mythology can be found across cultures and ages. When analyzed in Neumannian terms, Dongyup Shin's poem is a symbolic expression of the union of the ploughman and the earth. Then, this poem can be read as a panorama of the poet's fantasy of the Earth Goddess.

## 4

The twentieth century, the century of science, has gone. How will we call the twenty-first century? Will myth continue to exist in this age of high technology? Of course, challenges to myth have a long history, dating back to Plato's days. Plato condemned Homer's myths as trifle and immoral. Plato's insistence on exiling the poets

is a rejection of the mythological worldview. However, the Stoic school defended the mythological worldview by reinterpreting myths in metaphysical and moral allegories. Today, it is science that challenges myth. Scientists claim that myths can no longer explain the origin and mechanism of the physical world. However, if science and magic coexist in today's world, why can't science and myth? In fact, science and myth are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Mythic time and space is just an enlargement of real time and space through fictionalization.

Myth is a narrative. Humans invented the narrative to contain time after having tried to tell their experience in terms of time. As a shape of water varies according to a container, a narrative varies according to a treatment of time. *Samgukyoosa* provides a repository of myths and Buddhist narratives. If poets peruse it, their poetic imagination will be enriched; if novelists peruse it, they will produce good narratives. If we confine *Samgukyoosa* in the historical reality, our imagination will become like a faded record. The Confucians of the Chosun Dynasty denied the Buddhist culture of the Koryeo Dynasty and transformative myths originating from Confucius himself; as a result, our territory of literary imagination was reduced to “myths of the reality” and “a possible world.” We need to remember that the development of Western culture and arts of today is unimaginable without the Greek and Roman mythologies and the Bible. Then, Korean poets and writers should read Chinese, Mongolian, and Siberian myths to know more about the Asian Culture. I also recommend Eliade's *History and Cosmos*, *Sacred and Profane*, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, *Images and Symbols*, *Yoga*, and *Shamanism*. Since myth is a treasury of imagination, both literary scholars and writers need to study it deeply. I think it is ironic that Greek mythology books are best sellers in Korea these

days. I recommend Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* as a must-read. This book helps with understanding mythical symbolic systems and provides many subjects and themes for poetry such as the sky, the sun, the moon, water, sacred stone, the earth, symbolic system of plants, agriculture and rituals for harvest, sacred space, sacred time and the myth of eternal return, and structure of symbols. It will also help with poetic recreation of ancient Korean poetry, especially *hyangga*.

In today's world in which rivers and seas suffer from pollution, myth criticism is ecocriticism. When the sacred water decays, we cannot regenerate anything. The moon seen through smog is far from the moon in "Wonwangaeng-ga" or "Changiparang-ga." Even the sun lost its light in the polluted sky. The earth cannot be the "Mother Goddess" anymore. Extremely speaking, everything is dying. Poets and writers should rise above this dismal reality.

## 5

The destination of myth criticism is culture criticism. Northrop Frye, the father of myth criticism, also wrote many essays on culture criticism in his last years.<sup>7</sup> We ask ourselves, "Are modern men unrevivable?" A hero of tragedy always sinks down to the abyss before he soars up and reverses the situation. The modern man, however, is like Theseus in André Gide's *Thésée*, who does not even realize that he is in a tragic situation. Then, who will kill Minotaur? Gide wrote this novel to warn the modern man who does not try to get out of the labyrinth. We have no writer like him today, so we are waiting for a great writer. He should stand up in indignation and soar up to the sky. One cannot be a great writer if he does not gaze at all dying things. The new century and the new

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<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Denham (ed.) *Northrop Frye: Myth and Metaphor, Selected Essays 1974-1988*, Univ. Press of Virginia, 1990. This book features Frye's 22 essays.

millennium began just a few years ago, but the black clouds of the end of the century still loom large in this century's sky. And yet, the sun will rise tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, and the seasons will rotate. If poets and writers are tied to the reality, they cannot transcend to the eternal time. E. B. Tyler cut mythology in pieces with the theory of evolution in *Primitive Culture*. Modern men regret and cry only after losing myths, just like King Midas. We cannot dream of our revival without a resolution. With a resolution of Phoenix that should die to live forever, we should firmly place myth and literature at the opposition of science that boasts rationality. Myth should be restored as myth; poetry should be restored as poetry.

The modern men should embark on a journey to regain myth that had a dynamic power in the archaic society. The journey will not be easy. To regain poetry, the poet will need Orpheus's resolution to descend to the Hades. Myth does not exist far away from us. It unveils itself through our ceaseless interpretations. A living myth in our lives does not exist anymore; however, when poetry imitates a living myth, it reveals the essence of poetry (literature) and all dynamic creation. The poet should always gaze at the horizon beyond history. Myth and poetry are the stepping stones over history. We should set each stone diligently. When the sun sets on the horizon, a poet should catch it with the power of language. We do not know what we really are; therefore, we do not know what myth and literature really are, either. Parodying Saint Augustine, I would say, "If someone asks me what myth (or literature) is, I don't know. But if someone doesn't ask me what myth (or literature) is, I know what myth (or literature) is." The modern men have finally realized the meaning of myths they threw away. We will have the same regret for literature before long. Then, with what will we contain the disappearing literature?