The Metamorphoses of Myth in Fiction
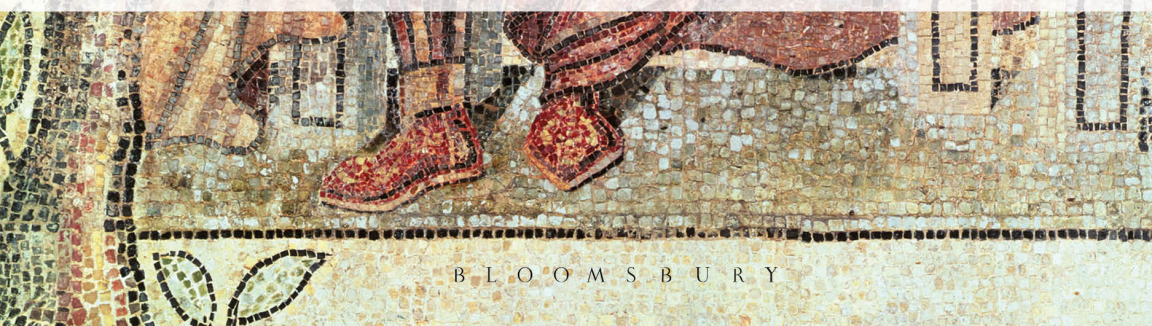
since 1960

KATHRYN HUME

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For Delphi, Jervaulx, and Talisker

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PREFACE

Why should contemporary Anglophone writers use myths from ancient Greece and Rome, from Pharaonic Egypt, from the Viking north, from Africa's west coast, and from Hebrew and Christian traditions? Some of those cultures are long gone, and even those stories still alive in current religions are not taken literally except by fundamentalists. What do these stories from premodern cultures have to offer us? In Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*, a dead young man listens to his equally dead great-grandfather plot how to survive in the Egyptian Duad, a postmortem realm of trials that annihilates most souls. A. S. Byatt recaptures anxieties of the Second World War through reanimating the stories of the Old Scandinavian Ragnarok. Exploiting somewhat different effects, William Gibson introduces the loa of Vodoun into cyberspace in *Count Zero,* and Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor build emotional resonance with the myth of the flying Africans. Leslie Marmon Silko can rightly claim that Laguna culture still has believers, but presenting versions of their myths for Anglo readers raises many of the same artistic problems we see in the use of classical myth. What does myth permit writers of the contemporary era to do that they cannot achieve by other means? Why would writers find myths useful, given the dominant scientific materialism of our culture and the postmodern outlook of many serious readers, neither of which is very compatible with mythic thought?

Gods and mythic worlds clash rather obviously with scientific materialism. They do not even make much sense as validators of cultural patterns or relievers of anxiety if we do not belong to their particular culture. After all, the underworld invaded by Orpheus is hardly inviting, and in that form, it enjoys no current belief, so how could it do anything for a materialist's fear of death? Writers using the symbolism of a living religion in their fiction can build on cultural knowledge: Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* may suggest satanic qualities to religiously aware readers; Zeus, Odin, and the Morrigan have a few neopagan worshippers, but such revivals do not give those gods credibility in the scientifically defined world. An invented cult cannot relate to the god as original worshippers might have. Hence, we need to look for artistic, and perhaps psychological and cultural, reasons for such mythological presences in recent literature.

Some writers do not even demand that myth have a religious origin or aura. They invent their own myth-like situations, identifiable as quasi-mythic

because they involve actions normally part of a mythology, such as creation of a world or apocalypse or metamorphosis. Kathy Acker presents intense scenes where a nameless father, the daughter he abuses sexually, and a son have apparently brought a world into existence around them. Donald Barthelme's Dead Father claims to have created many features of our world. He does not behave much like a classical god, but he does slightly resemble a Native American trickster creator in his insouciant escapes and genital humor. Russell Hoban imagines the myths and rituals that might result from a nuclear war that pushed humanity back into pretechnological conditions. To complicate matters, some invented mythic figures seem to function as philosophical thought experiments: outside the Anglophone world, we find that Italo Calvino's Qfwfq and the other characters in his cosmicomical stories have no worshippers and are portrayed as Italian neighbors rather than as gods, but they bring about such cosmically important moments as the Big Bang and the first light.

Some literary uses of myth are identifiable by the presence of particular characters and their stories, such as Iphigenia or Aeneas, but some concern mythic situations and mythic worlds—worlds in which multiple levels of reality exist and that are considered as real as the material world. Such non-tangible realities and other levels of existence almost always encode the possible existence of a soul or consciousness after the death of the body. Where those alternate levels were once Heaven and Hell or Olympus and Hades, for instance, in futuristic fiction they become worlds of virtual reality that exist in parallel to, but separate from our material world, or they become electronic worlds within the internet. As we increasingly combine our physicality with electronic and digital worlds, we transform ourselves into a new kind of creature, one that may even exist in multiple spaces simultaneously or in multiple forms. Metamorphosis thus reemerges as a master-trope of future fiction. The plurality of forms of consciousness it offers curiously merges with the postmodern congeries of subjectivities. We will see a postmodern form of this in the Egyptian novels of William S. Burroughs and Norman Mailer, and posthuman forms in Charles Stross's *Accelerando* and Rudy Rucker's *Postsingular*.

Fiction of the last half-century or so presents us with a surprising variety of god-like figures, heroes of legendary proportions, and mythological landscapes, and I would like to understand how these work artistically. Above all, in this book, I treat myth as an artistic tool that can be studied as a tool. As an agnostic and materialist, I do not believe in any of the myths, yet in some fashion their presence works positively for me in literary contexts. When I look back over my professional life and the fiction that I have most enjoyed writing on, I can say that a surprising amount of it had some kind of mythological element that made it depart from material reality. Interestingly and puzzlingly, that pleasure was not the same as the pleasure derivable from fantasy, which I also enjoy and published on in *Fantasy and Mimesis*.

I would certainly not claim that all myth-inflected works are doing the same thing, but I wonder how they affect readers prepared to enjoy them. What do they have in common, or if they do not, then what different effects can such claims to nonmaterial reality create? Moreover, whatever the subconscious effect may be, it does not come (for me) as a weak form of religion of the sort analyzed by John A. McClure in *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*. Nor does the same engagement come from wish-fulfilling fantasy of the generic sort. In *Romancing the Postmodern*, Diane Elam suggests that the excesses of postmodernism, the irreal parts, manifest the spirit of romance, and one can see that in the fiction of William S. Burroughs, with his cowboy and space exploration fantasies. Plenty of postmodern fiction, however, seems uninfluenced by the romance quest or its special world where magic or other departures from reality are possible. I start with a different assumption, namely that gods and immortals, certain kinds of heroes, mythological landscapes, and mythic situations seem to lend themselves in our culture to modeling certain kinds of problems, and I would like to see what those are.

Mythology has meant many things to scholars, from allegories of the weather to psychoanalytic deep truths about human nature. Anyone talking about myth has to identify how the term will be used in the current study. The preferred meaning is a matter of choice; one can do different things, given the starting definitions. The prolegomenon, therefore, will define the basic tools for this study; these include myth, mythology, invented myth, situational myth, and mythic worlds. I will also make my unusual and contrarian argument for considering invented myth as well as inherited myth.

The postmodern, disunified self poses problems for myths of all sorts. For many participants in Western culture, Christianity's concept of a soul guaranteed the self as a unitary being—all of the soul was saved or damned, not parts of it. More complicated possibilities emerged once Freud postulated the existence of an unconscious. Today, theorists talk about multiple subjectivities with no underlying unity. Chapter 1 will tackle the apparent dissonance between the postmodern mindset and the mythic story. In unexpected ways, multiple subjectivities have found an answering resonance in some properties of polytheistic myth. Monotheism harmonizes with belief in a core unity; to deal with the lack of unity, William S. Burroughs and Norman Mailer have turned to the Egyptian tradition, partly because Egyptians pictured the individual as having seven souls. Because they use Egyptian material, I will also take the opportunity to see how else that tradition can be used to very different ends as done by Ishmael Reed and Roger Zelazny. Reed embodies in the story of Set and Osiris a ferocious critique of American culture's underlying values. Zelazny uses the mythic figures to comment on such social forces as revolution. One book cannot explore the uses of all non-Western mythologies in Anglophone literature.

Because of its recent prominent use by Mailer and Burroughs, Egyptian myth will be used to exemplify what effects myth can produce when separated from familiarity, and myth's power as cultural capital.

Mailer and Burroughs use the mythological material to express fears of death, but I pay more attention to multiple souls in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 examines how various mythologies are used to talk about death in a cultural climate that offers no reassurance of afterlife. Kathy Acker, Neil Gaiman, and A. S. Byatt furnish my primary illustrations of handling death through Tantric, Norse, and other mythologies, but secondary texts will include William Kennedy's *Legs* and Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, both of which use the Tibetan Book of the Dead and its postmortem experiences. For a change of pace, the chapter will end with James Morrow's upending of Judeo-Christian mythology by portraying the physical corpse of God and exploring death from that perspective.

Chapter 3 will take the perennially popular Orpheus story as a case study and look at the many ways it has been used. For variety, we will look at a few poems, a play, a workbook for a game, and some horror and zombie fiction, as well as novels by Samuel R. Delany, Janette Turner Hospital, J. J. Phillips, and Russell Hoban. Once Orpheus entered Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, he became not only the apparent starting point for the frame tale's sprawling chronology but also the justification for Morpheus's disturbing death at the end. Richard Powers's *Orfeo* combines avant-garde music with genetics and raises the possibility of a new kind of music that might even restructure our minds when nature and its inner rhythms are coded as sound.

Chapter 4 will explore various forms of invented myth and focus on what these disparate works have to say about power, for that is overwhelmingly the focus of such stories. Our best-developed invented mythology is the rise and fall of King Arthur, a mythology that continues to evolve to this day. However, other such invented worlds and heroes include *Star Trek* and the densely interwoven worlds of DC and Marvel Comics that are peopled with superheroes. Less stereotyped use of invented myth appears in works by Kathy Acker, Donald Barthelme, Russell Hoban, and Italo Calvino. While Calvino lies outside my English-language focus, I shall discuss him because he comes up with a truly original answer to the problem of power.

Chapter 5 also concerns invented myth, but this time the myths are those we are inventing about our future, and in particular those relating to the posthuman condition. The dominant myth is that of metamorphosis, of transforming the human to something never before seen. This usually involves a new mode of existence that can take us beyond death, an artificial enhancement of intelligence, or a changed mode of inhabiting a body during life. My examples come from speculative fictions by Vonda McIntyre, Anne McCaffrey, Dan Simmons, Cory Doctorow, Marge Piercy, Charles Stross, Rudy Rucker, and Lavie Tidvar.

In the final chapter and the conclusion, I will pull together my answers to six basic questions that have driven this investigation.

1 How is myth used as an artistic tool?

2 How can one invent myth and how does that differ from fantasy?

3 What do authors gain from using myth, given the generally postmodern and scientific-materialist mindset of many contemporary readers?

4 How does myth as tool function if the audience is not familiar with that myth? (How do Western readers respond to non-Western myth, or non-Euro-American readers respond to Western myths?)

5 Insofar as literary use of myth supplies things felt to be lacking in current culture, what are they?

6 What does myth as artistic tool let the writer do that cannot otherwise be done?

I will answer these through specific examples. Myth as cultural capital helps explain the Orphic element in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, while myth as cultural compensation runs through various Arthurian literature. Some authors attack their culture's myths: Michel Faber, Philip Pullman, and James Morrow challenge Christianity. We find Jewish-myth-fueled explorations of language by Rikki Ducornet and Ben Marcus. Eden, or Eden with altered humans, attracted Margaret Atwood and Kurt Vonnegut, and the Eden myth mixed with the Lemurian appears in Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*. Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor challenge Anglo culture with the myth of the flying Africans, and Leslie Marmon Silko through the worldview and prophecies in *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead*. Myth can be used to attack the very idea of myth and gods (Byatt, Östergren, and Gaiman). Myth can also embody personal problems, as in the Canongate Myth novels by Jeanette Winterson, David Grossman, and Margaret Atwood. Finally, we will see how we mythologize our technology and project our desperate desire to survive death in mythic situations that we are trying to make scientifically possible.

Even in a secular, materialist world, myth endows some literature with cultural capital, and readers who possess the requisite knowledge can congratulate themselves on possessing the key to the action. Myth as known story can, of course, produce pleasure at the release of tensions and gratification of expectations. Unlike religion, it does not assert meaning or confirm it. For those who are willing to open themselves to the traditional story, myth does convey a "sense" or "feeling" of meaning that does not demand intellectual belief or affirmation.

Prolegomenon

Myth as a Tool in the Artist's Toolbox

Incest begins this world. Incest begins the beginning of this world:
A father's fucking his daughter. Night's fucking with morning.

Night's black; morning, red. There's nothing else.

In this area between timeless and time, a father, realizing that maybe he shouldn't come in his daughter or maybe just that he shouldn't come, pulls his cock out of her box. His timing must be off because his cock spurts white liquid out. Out into the future, what will be time. In this arena between timelessness and time, the most dangerous thing or being that can come into being is time.

Sperm is explosive.

The night's black.

The moment that the white drops fall on what will be ground, down, time or this world begins.

Sperm is lying everywhere, in the world of time, on its ground.

Lying in viscous pools. Since there's time now, the sun, the first being in the world, not yet quite being, cooks away all the sperm; black char and red earth are left.

The first animals are colored red or black.[1]

What are we to call Kathy Acker's bold scene, if not myth of some sort?

Incest is not uncommon in creation stories. In an originary setting, such couplings do not themselves violate taboos because taboos have not yet come into existence, and the tiny cast of characters necessitates inbreeding. Zeus and Hera are brother and sister, a fact not stressed by the Greeks, but not repressed. For most readers, though, the incest creates unease. Acker clearly has no wish to ignore the implications of incest. Her mythic moment reeks of disgust and anguish, and the conviction that nothing good will evolve from this vile and violent beginning. Mythic moments like this are one of many kinds of invented myths and, more specifically, situational myths—in this case, creation—that can be found in recent literature. Hence,

though I am fascinated by the problem of why writers in the postmodern and post-postmodern era would turn to inherited myth—Greek, Egyptian, or Norse gods and heroes, as well as myth attached to living religions—the literary use of myth needs to recognize variations like Acker's as well.

Myth has been defined as everything from proto-science to weather allegory to linguistic error to cultural control to deep psychological truth to national unifier to structure that defines the local cultural pattern as natural. Anyone wishing to discuss myth, therefore, must specify an appropriate definition for the project at hand. Throughout Western culture, certain obvious mythic stories can be identified, mostly those from the Greco-Roman civilization. When Orpheus appears, educated readers have expectations that the author may gratify or deliberately balk, but Orpheus is not a blank. He comes with complex baggage, and such readers know that he may be there as fabulous musician who charms beasts as well as humans, as lover who returns alive but unsuccessful from the land of the dead, as founder of homosexuality, as man torn apart by maenads, and as oracular head.[2] This chapter will briefly establish what defines myth in the current study and then turn to the more complex question of what makes invented myths of different sorts, how those relate to traditional myths, and how they differ from fantasy.

This study approaches *myth as an artistic tool*. What it may have meant to its original culture is probably not determinable, if the changing generations of myth criticism are any indication.[3] The uses to which myth has been put in art and literature change with each historical period, however, and these can be traced.[4] Many of those former uses are now ineffectual; they do not address our current cultural concerns. With our plethora of pornography, Adam and Eve in the garden have little to offer our imaginations, and if someone today proposed Orpheus as embodiment of good government, we would look blank, although that made sense in the Renaissance. Myth in the contemporary era differs from earlier uses, because it is trying to satisfy the demands of a very different culture.

Myth, Mythology, Mythic Worlds

Since the Greco-Roman myths are those that educated people of Euro-American cultural background recognize most easily, let me use them to lay the groundwork. At the highest level, we find stories exclusively about gods: Aphrodite's adultery with Ares and Hephaestus's revenge is one such tale involving only divinities. Not many stories, though, take place entirely on Olympus; most include humans. Zeus chases Io, Leda, and Europa, and carries off Ganymede. Gods pull strings to help some hero on the battlefield. Hera persecutes Heracles; Poseidon aids Theseus. Gods and humans can produce offspring, most of whom seem to be mortal, but a few are born with or achieve demi-god status or even immortality as constellations, as do Castor and Pollux.

Mortals may speak directly with gods, but even if they do not, they experience special relationships to specific gods through oracular statements made to them personally, sacrifices, dreams, and promises given or behests wished upon them. Gods deal with men face to face in the Golden Age, but only indirectly in later periods. This sense of what was possible *in illo tempore* or sacred time (as Mircea Eliade calls it) when the divine and the human interact directly is paralleled in the era of the Hebrew patriarchs. Then too, chosen men walked and talked with God, an ability that was lost to later generations.

At the periphery of such mythic material comes legendary material, and I will include it broadly in this concept of myth. The mortals are legends; their connection to gods may be genealogical, or they may just enjoy a special relationship. Worship of the same gods persists, but the deities are less visible in everyday life. I would call the story of Odysseus legendary, and likewise the story of Lucretia. The Roman kings whose story links to hers traced their descent back to Romulus, and thence through many generations to Aeneas and Venus. They are not, though, in any significant sense different from other mortals. Such mortals may or may not be historical, but they function much like the heroes of old in pointing a moral and adorning the tale.[5] Once we move out of the Greco-Roman framework into the Christian era, such legendary stories mingle with those more specifically mythic and simply belonging to the larger mythological world of the Roman Empire. These, then, are the basic characters and stories that qualify as mythic during the European Middle Ages and later.

As for how myths work in literature, the explanations correlate to the various definitions of myth. Andrew Von Hendy gives us a theoretically sophisticated explanation: "In symbol we experience and express the immanence of the sacred, but in myth we signify the gap between its infinite promise and our finite attainment of it" (311). He goes on to quote Paul Ricoeur to the effect that myth sets forth the discordance "between the fundamental reality of man and his present existence, between his ontological status as a being created good . . . and his existential or historical status, experienced under the sign of alienation."[6] All this assumes that man is created and that the sacred exists; many writers and readers who are atheists deny those assumptions. Harry Slochower boils myth down to a kind of hero monomyth with Edenic beginning, departure, and return, but that seems to me too constrictive.[7] Kathy Acker, to name but one, does not assume an Edenic beginning. What I hope to present eventually is an explanation of how myth can satisfy certain desires (at least for some readers) without assuming that the readers have a doctorate in philosophy. We must also be clear on the fact that not everyone is susceptible to the attractions of myth, even among those who know the stories.

Myths tend to aggregate into a mythology, which I would define as a broad *network of related mythic stories involving gods and humans*. The tendency to come together and build a loosely interlocking system of stories

both stretches temporally over generations and broadens out geographically over new territories, sometimes adding new gods. Dionysus is a latecomer to Greece, and did not enter into his powers without friction with older forces. If mythic tales do start to link up, then we can assume that various bards and tale-tellers (and later, writers) all contribute by adding, subtracting, linking, and inventing. This element of invention is important to the growth of mythology. Some of these variations will reflect late developments among different peoples. We have the *Völsunga saga* among the medieval Scandinavian people, and the somewhat different history that is nonetheless demonstrably analogous in the German *Nibelungenlied*. This story takes new turns and meets new cultural needs in Wagner's hands. Meanwhile, the Scandinavian version blossoms unpredictably in A. S. Byatt's *Ragnarok* (2011). Writings that were denied canonical status in the New Testament show some of these myth-making forces at work as they create suitable stories about Jesus' infancy, for instance.

Probably because the Christian Bible offers a clear beginning and end of the world, we tend to think of mythologies in terms of such a linear development, but that is not crucial. We have Eden and the Apocalypse, but Greek creation stories are far less central or uniform, and classical mythology does not give us an agreed-upon and feared end. The old Scandinavian stories give us both beginning and end, though we cannot be sure to what extent this form-giving structure reflects Christian influence; the appearance of a new world after the old is destroyed could suggest a cyclical concept of history or could be a monkish addition. Subordinate stories within a mythology may have their own structure. Troy, from its founding to its sacking, is a major mythological unit in the classical tradition. The travels of Odysseus and Aeneas form their own mythic trajectories, and all three have clear beginnings and clear but future-oriented finales.

The collaborative nature of such mythological stories comes through when we think of the alterations and additions down through the ages: *The Aeneid* is not *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*, yet it had immense influence specific to itself; then came Dares Phrygius and Dictys Cretensis, various French and Italian poets, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and on through Tennyson to Barry Unsworth's *Songs of the Kings* (2004), Madeleine Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2012), and David Malouf's *Ransom* (2009), to name only a few recent additions to the tradition. Each artist tweaks the tradition to make it serve new ends. Within the literary context, mythologies are ongoing and developing, even evolving. The fact that they no longer reflect religious beliefs perhaps frees them to take new shape or follow new cultural logics. The writers feel free to invent and alter the inherited material. This combination of known material and ability to be bent to new ends makes mythology a particularly useful tool to an artist.

The next quality that helps define the literary use of myth is projection of a mythological world. Almost any prescientific world qualifies, because

what makes a *world mythological is its containing (or being contained by) acknowledged and accepted nonmaterial dimensions*. In the simplest systems, we find three layers or dimensions: that of the gods, that of mortals, and that of the dead. In Egyptian lore, more emphasis is put on the actions of gods, which may take place in their own realm or on earth, but humans are not as directly involved as in Greek myth; however, the land of the dead in the Egyptian system is particularly elaborately constructed. In Scandinavian myth, we get what seem like several overlapping realms of the giants, the dwarves, the elves, and the Aesir and Vanir, as well as the land of the humans and the halls of the dead. Catholic Christianity gives us Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven (from the viewpoint of souls, all lands of the dead) as well as Earth. One of the great virtues and probably one of the sources of inspiration for nonmaterial dimensions is that they permit some form of human consciousness to live on in such intangible realms after the death of the body.

When I call these nonmaterial, I may seem to be fudging slightly. By the time Wagner constructs Valhalla, it has enough material existence that it can be burned up in a fire. For the purposes of humans getting there while alive, it remains beyond the material world they inhabit. It may not be lacking in some kind of material existence, however. The same ambiguity characterizes contemporary posthuman stories that involve uploading one's consciousness into the internet. Computers consist of metal, plastic, and rare-earth components; electricity is material enough that it can be interrupted, even as the computers and the satellite relays could be destroyed. The larger the network, however, the less likely total destruction seems to be, so electronic existence of the mind functions in the novels as a nonmaterial existence compared to life in the flesh but lived without that flesh.

When we imagine other layers of reality, we tend to imbue them with a bit of materiality; we have trouble picturing existence without that. Plucking harps in Heaven to make music either assumes material strings and wooden sounding boards, and air to carry the sound waves or represents a mode of making music beyond our vocabulary. Doubtless, a theologian would say that was the truer way of thinking of such music, but as far as our imaginations go, harps are material, even if never heavy or out of tune. The torment of souls in Hell is imagined in bodily terms; their bodies may not be exactly like ours, but their nonmateriality does not make them lacking the equivalent to nerves that can conduct pain. In theory, Heaven is very different from electronic life, but we imagine them in similar ways, which will lead eventually to my arguing that such artistically invented myth belongs in this study of contemporary mythological practices.

The final characteristic of *inherited* myth and mythology is an origin in religion. When Christianity overwhelmed Greek and Roman religion, the classical mythology lost any religious power it may have had, but anything at the core of mythic writing, anything that qualifies by a strict as opposed to a loose definition, needs a relatively clear connection to a culture with

gods other than that or those of the fiction writer. This stricture does not apply to all forms of invented myth, but helps separate that from myth in its most traditional form. For religions that still have followers, the stories may be considered truths, not myths. Non-literalists do not consider Noah's ark true, and writers who are agnostics or treat religion as their cultural background may use such material as tools in their novels—Joseph Heller's *God Knows* (1984) about King David and James Morrow's *Towing Jehovah* (1994). Those are examples of biblical myths used in recent literature, and Salman Rushdie bravely, if rashly, used Islamic myth as an artistic tool. Believers too can use mythic materials, as may be the case with some Native American writers or with Pat Robertson's *The End of the Age* (1995) and the Left Behind fantasies by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, but the ways they use these tools will mostly differ from the various aims of nonbelievers.

Talking about a modern work that uses mythical material assumes that the material includes the gods, heroes or legendary figures who are known, a mythical world of multiple layers of reality, and the knowledge that once upon a time, these had religious meaning that they now lack. When Botticelli paints Venus emerging from the waves, we know that she has been born from the sea-foam and the severed genitals of Uranus. We also know that she will be associated with erotic love, both licit and illicit, and we may know that she is mother of Aeneas and hence a distant progenitrix of the Roman Empire—and hence of the Italian world in which the painting was made. When Shakespeare writes "Venus and Adonis," we know the tragic outcome before starting. When Monteverdi writes an opera called *L'Orfeo*, we expect a journey to the underworld, although we may be surprised when the musician is raised to the heavens by Apollo rather than murdered by the maenads (two versions exist). When we pick up Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters," we know lotus will represent a temptation that Ulysses should resist. What Tennyson does with that situation will be the product of his own concerns and era, but we enter his poem's world as if we shared its larger mythology, since its stories are part of educated readers' cultural capital. When Mary Renault and David Malouf enter into the Greek world in *The King Must Die* (1958) or *Ransom* (2009), we may swallow whole or resist Renault's beautified image of ancient life and may puzzle over what Malouf's King Priam experiences mentally, but we enjoy these as twice-told tales as well as revel in their authors' original contributions.

Invented Myth, Situational Myth, and Invented Mythic Worlds

What, though, of mythic seeming material that lacks religious roots and known gods? What about Kathy Acker's moment of creation? What of William

Blake's mythologies? What of the obsessive fantasy world-turned-private mythology described in Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1971) or in the psychoanalyst's account of a patient's fantasies in Robert M. Lindner's "The Jet-Propelled Couch" (1982)?[8] What of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Silmarillion* (1977), in which we find a creation story and superhuman beings who control the events of a world? And what of the aggregation of heroic tales—one that is still growing—centering on King Arthur? What of the posthuman situational and metamorphic myths that are becoming common in speculative fiction? Or where in this group of tales that act a lot like myths does one put the growing "universes" belonging to DC and Marvel Comics, networks of interrelated superheroes who sometimes cross one another's paths and who pass from one writer's hands to those of another? They are sometimes immortal and certainly superhuman, if not gods. Are they forming a quasi-mythological world before our eyes the way that one formed about Arthur in the medieval period? This is the kind of literature that I consider invented or quasi-mythology, for lack of a more graceful term. These many works signally lack roots in a separate religious belief system, although some come close to achieving cult status, as can be seen at Star Trek conventions, or as might be true for obsessive creators of such worlds such as the one in Lindner's "The Jet-Propelled Couch."

When we look at the sweep of European literature, the Arthurian material will be there alongside the Greco-Roman, offering different tools and solutions to mythic problems. It was widely read or heard and enjoyed by medieval audiences, not just in England and France but in Italy, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. The amount of belief it enjoyed is difficult to assess, but as deeply learned a man as Milton originally considered Arthur a genuine historical figure, and only when he tried to choose a topic for his great epic endeavor did he ultimately reject the story as untrue (as well as being too royalist for his purposes).[9] Although the Arthurian mythology does not figure gods from a pre-Christian religion, since it already possesses the Christian God and Christian mythological universe, it adds giants and faerie, the latter being able to breed with humans and produce fated offspring (Mordred). The Arthurian world also vivifies the religious, supernatural dimension in the grail story, which may have Celtic pagan roots as well as Christian.

Arthurian literature seems to me closely analogous to a mythological cycle such as the Troy story. As it developed, it had a beginning in Arthur's immediate forebears and his own begetting, his recognition as king, the rise of a nation, and a tragic end. Motives for the downfall shifted as time went on from territorial overexpansion to adulterous tangles. Tellers, recorders, and writers of the story seem to have felt fairly free to invent characters and adventures and change the dominant concerns. English national expansion was obviously more attractive to an English audience

than to the French or the Germans, but the French romance-orientation toward love made its way back to England.[10] The Arthurian world is mythic, not just in being Christian and having the Virgin Mary help Sir Gawain but in gesturing to such other levels of reality as the realm of faerie and the Isle of Avalon, where Arthur's wounded body can be taken, nursed, and preserved in some alternative to Heaven until his land needs him again. This is a rather special form of life extension. He does not die and need not be reborn later when needed. He will just live in this other twilit reality until the time is right.

If treating the Arthurian material as invented mythology is plausible, then what about situational myth? By this, I am specifying certain situations that are part of our inherited mythic cycles: the creation of a world, the end of a world, a messianic leader with powers beyond the normal, or a story focusing on metamorphosis. Kathy Acker's creation story quoted earlier is an example of situational myth. So are Italo Calvino's cosmicomical stories, if I may stray from English-language literature. Speculative fiction has produced a rich array of apocalyptic novels. Messianic novels are less popular, but consider Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), Nevil Shute's *Round the Bend* (1951), and Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1971).

Yet another kind of situational myth is one focusing on the conditions of a mythic world, one with nonmaterial or at least not-normally accessible levels of reality. Such a level develops in *The Universal Baseball Association* or turns up as the deep web in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013). Most post-singularity novels offer such an alternative reality. This last is as far as I wish to stretch the term mythic, but the basic agreement among different writers about what would be possible in such a world does suggest a collaborative effort to explore a non-tangible dimension that is so clearly conceptualized that it might become a reality. The postsingular is a world whose dominant myth is metamorphosis. We shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye. This may be through cloning bodies or growing them to suit new conditions and then transferring our consciousness into such alternative bodies. We may locate our consciousness in robotic bodies or may do away with bodies and take up a new mode of electronic existence. We may carry on a virtual existence inside the internet. If one author were exploring this, then I would treat it just as speculative fantasy. The burgeoning growth of novels set in this layered existence suggests to me the validity of at least exploring it as a mythic world.

Drawing a line between such speculative fiction and fantasy is not easy. Many readers do not think of science fiction as mythographic in any sense related to those discussed earlier, and yet it relies on certain basic situations that might be called mythic.[11] The first of these is that we will be able to travel in deep space. Never mind that perfect closed systems are nearly impossible to create, that current technology would not let us block