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Rewriting the Hero and the Quest

Myth and Monomyth in *Captain Corelli's
Mandolin* by Louis de Bernières



Introduction

Louis de Bernières' book *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (1994) is a work which uses myth, in general, and the monomyth of the hero and the quest, in particular, as a medium to represent human existence in a postmodern world. Through the examination of the mythical restructuring as shaped by de Bernières, emerges the assumption that his work creates a distinctive depiction of reality, characteristic to postmodern literature.

Although the purpose of our study is not the integration of Louis de Bernières' novel into any of the postmodern experimental trends, we should mention that the emphasis of the author upon the transformation of myth, as well as his continuous tendency to deconstruct and then to reconstruct semantically the key components of the mythical models, may be qualified as postmodern. The postmodernity or postmodern period includes both traditional, realistic literature and experimental, innovative literary practice which is referred to as postmodernism, and it is claimed that de Bernières is not a realist but rather postmodernist by approaching reality through myth. He is also an author of magical realism, yet *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* is neither a realistic novel nor a text of magical realism, and, in the case of this work, the British novelist is not a traditional, concerned with reality and socially concerned writer, and not exactly an experimental postmodernist, but definitely postmodern.

In order to avoid the possible entrapment in a mythical situation or into an archetypal pattern, the writer uses a well-known prototype with the aim of rethinking myth and monomyth in an original way, as a result of which the known and predictable situation and archetypal character are changed and come to denote new meanings.

Consequently, in Louis de Bernières' novel, the "protean" characteristic acquired by myth thwarts the recreation of predictable meanings, connotations, and outcomes of an easily recognizable situation, and the mythical situation and the archetypal pattern and character are not merely revived, but renewed and reloaded with new perspectives of thematic and structural significance.

De Bernières does not simply unravel and reconstruct myth and monomyth, but, in a typically postmodern manner, achieves a playful undermining of the conventional, modern Western ideological patterns, constantly engaging the reader into the creation of new ideas and possibly new meanings.

Throughout the course of this study, we attempt to reveal the postmodern representation of myth and the monomyth of the hero and the quest in de Bernières'

work. Through the close textual analysis, we attempt to expose the most vivid patterns of his deconstruction and reconstruction of the monomyth, patterns which serve as powerful metaphors that reflect the great communal transformations which mark the passage from the modern to the postmodern.

Louis de Bernières' novel *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* is a work that uses myth and monomyth to convey the deconstruction of the modern ideals. In the post-modern fashion, the writer has revived, rethought, reimagined, and rewritten the monomyth of the hero and the quest, as well as the Biblical myth of salvation, the myth of the golden age, and the utopia myth. At the same time, the atrocities of the Second World War, which are represented in the novel, made the author emphasize and reconstruct the myth of descent into the underworld, as well as the various thematic perspectives of the totalitarian myth, the Dictator myth, and the Apocalypse myth.

The main concern of our study is the monomyth of the hero and the quest, which we also refer to as the hero myth. We focus also on various related aspects, such as history, character, and dominating mentality, among others.

Myth and history are generally considered as opposing modes of explanation. However, in de Bernières' novel, these two concepts do not exclude one another; on the contrary, history is represented as a myth, a fable, and a construction of human imagination. The writer deconstructs the all-encompassing modern ideologies with their mythical models rooted in Christianity and in the legends of Western Civilization, and re-contextualizes them.

Louis de Bernières plays with the conventional meanings of myths, deconstructing their established connotation. At the same time, he confers new meanings which radically modify the "universal truth" of myth, allowing its perpetual change and new interpretations. Deconstruction, playfulness, semiological changes, the concern with myth and history, as well as the alterations of the absolutisms of the modern era, emphasize the novel's postmodern nature.

1. Theoretical Perspectives and Their Applicability in the Approach to Louis de Bernières

1.1 Defining Myth

Since Louis de Bernières' *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* revives and reconstructs the ancient literary myth, in general, and the monomyth of the hero and the quest, in particular, rather than the ethno-religious one, as our starting point, we are aware that it is impossible to embark on a study of "the monomyth of the hero and the quest" without first considering the meaning of the word "myth". Myth, as it is explained in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, gives us a surprisingly short definition. It states that myth is "a purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena". It suggests that this word might refer to "a fictitious or imaginary person or object". Traditionally, it is considered that the word "myth" comes from the Greek *mythos*, which means "story". In the course of time, subsidiary meanings appeared in the common usage of the term, such as "an untrue or popular tale, a rumour".

These explanations of the term "myth" being far from satisfactory, we rather focus our attention on mythographers, scholars that should provide us with more helpful understanding and description.

David Leeming, in *The World of Myth*, claims that "human beings have traditionally used stories to describe or explain things they could not otherwise" (Leeming, 1990, p. 3). Looking at myth through this perspective, makes us see myth more than a story of what happened, or a story told for amusement.

Michael Bell stresses the difficulty of defining myth, claiming that "it means both a supremely significant foundational story and a falsehood" (Bell, 1997, p. 1).

Eric Dardell states that myth is a "typical" story with immediate and powerful impact (Dardell, 1984, p. 232), while Riane Eisler claims that it concerns "larger-than-life" persons and events which are transmitted from generation to generation (Eisler, 1997, p. viii).

R. G. Stone calls attention to myth's moral aspect (Stone, 1967, p. 177), whereas John J. White insists upon the continuous recurrence of myth stressing its own resonant force by the paradox of permanence and transformation (White, 1971, p. 25).

One of the most important religious historians, Mircea Eliade, suggests the following definition of myth:

myth is regarded as a sacred story, and hence a “true history”, because it always deals with *realities*. The cosmogonist myth is “true” because the existence of the World is there to prove it; the myth of the origin of death is equally true because man’s mortality proves it, and so on. (Eliade, 1963, p. 6)

Consequently, for Eliade, myth is a sacred, timeless and eternal story. Myth recounts a sacred story; it relates an event that took place in primordial times, during the legendary era when things began.

Therefore, while the literary narrative refers to a historical moment, the narrative of myth, according to Eliade, presupposes a temporal form which is reversible and an aspect of sacred time. Also, the literary narrative tends to a dialectical resolution of the conflict, whereas the narrative of myth offers initiation within an altered situation; and the literary narrative represents a relative form of truth, but the narrative of myth, Eliade argues, discloses eternal and absolute truths, which are fundamental stories.

Other scholars see myth from a totally different perspective: for Sigmund Freud, myth is the projection of psychology onto the external world (Freud, 1953–1966, p. 258), whereas Jean-François Lyotard perceives it as a form of fantasy (Lyotard, 1989, p. 72).

Gilbert Durand, in his *Les Structures Antropologiques de l’Imaginaire* (1960), suggests that myth is “a dynamic system of symbols, archetypes and schemas, a dynamic system that tends, when prompted by a schema, to take the form of a story”; consequently, the source of the power of the resurgence of myths lies in its own “dynamics” (Durand cited in Brunel, 1992, p. x).

Andre Jolles in *Formes Simples* proposes to view myth as “the place where an object is created from a question and its answer (...), myth is the place where, starting from its innermost nature, an object becomes creation” (Jolles cited in Brunel, 1992, p. xi).

For Thomas Stearns Eliot and Northrop Frye, literature is a universal order, a complete world where all the topics, characters and stories we find in literature belong to a vast totality whose principle of integration, according to Claudio Guillen, is explained by “the persistence of ancient myths”:

Understand by myth not only a collective fantasy that incarnates ideals and memories (...) but an effort of the imagination to unite the world (...). Literature and myth do not describe or measure the surroundings in which we live but absorb them and shape them, converting them into our space, more human, more intimate, and also more bearable. (Guillen, 1993, p. 238)

In accordance with the important contribution made by Olga Freidenberg (whose ideas are close to those of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the members of the Tartu semiotic school) in the area of structural and semiotic analysis of myth and literature, the emergence of literature in general is to be sought in the transition from the mentality based on mythical and mythological images to a thought based on formal-logical concepts, that is, the transition from mythical to conceptual thought. The content of mythic images is inherited, thus becoming the texture of some new concepts (Freidenberg, 1997).

In other words, the creative perception of the writer means in reality *changing* the primary scheme of myth, transforming it “through losses, through mythemes originating in other myths, etc.” (Durand, 1998, p. 303) and “creating” an original symbolic situation as a new literary and mythological tradition, next to the diversity of angles relating to the topic, theme, representation of characters, typology of the archetype, the fundamental situation, and strategies for the structural organization of the text.

The topic, theme, fundamental situation, and archetype represent the content of a mytheme, “the smallest unit of discourse bearing mythical significance”, situated “at the core of the myth”, being of a “structural nature” (“archetypal nature” in the Jungian sense), or “schematic” nature by Gilbert Durand, where “the verbal dynamic dominates the substantiality” and which can be used by authors from different periods affected by and “depending on repression, censorship, morals or ideologies of a certain period and certain milieu” (Durand, 1998, pp. 303–304).

1.2 Carl Jung

The work of Carl Jung, which underpins so much the contemporary thinking about myth, deserves our special consideration, since Louis de Bernières’ novel has been greatly influenced by Jung’s theories. The key to Jungian theory of myth lies in his idea of a universal collective unconscious, “the repository of man’s experience” which is comprised of “archetypes” (Jung, 1969).

According to Jung, archetypes are some emblematic forms of behaviour which manifest themselves as ideas and images to the conscious mind. As he explains,

the archetypes, which are pre-existent to consciousness (...) appear in the part they actually play in reality: as a priori structural forms of the stuff of consciousness. They do not in any sense represent things as they are in themselves, but rather the forms in which things can be perceived and conceived. Naturally, it is not merely the archetypes that govern the particular nature of perceptions. They account only for

the collective components of a perception. As an attribute of instinct they partake of its dynamic nature, and consequently possess a specific energy which causes or compels definite modes of behaviour or impulses; that is, they may under certain circumstances have a possessive or obsessive force (numinosity!). (Jung, 1963, p. 347)

In Carl Jung's opinion, archetypes produce and form all our most powerful thinking, initiating science, philosophy, mythology, and religion. Being influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer's writings, Jung introduces the idea of the ultimate unity of existence, which, in his opinion, is situated outside space and time. Archetypes find their origin in this transcendental unity, and although they might be formed by consciousness into opposing concepts, they continue to be the facets of the same reality. Jung believes that the continuing influence of archetypes clarifies the reoccurrence of the identical motifs throughout world mythology, which appear in the thoughts and dreams of people unaware of mythical tradition.

In case we approve of Jungian theory, then it may well provide an explanation of myth's continuous reoccurrence and influence, when the motifs it employs are generated by our most basic motivating instincts. For Jung, archetypes represent "deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity"; therefore, there are chances that if our experiences change, so will do the archetypes that instigate our myths (Jung, 1983, p. 68).

Jung also insists upon the organizing function of archetypes, given that they "behave empirically like agents that tend towards the repetition of these same experiences" (Jung, 1983, p. 71).

In Jung's own mythic pattern, he considers four major archetypes which transmit us the story, as it were, of the psyche. Jung insists that although collective, these archetypes must be realized on an individual level. First, he considers the "ego", the conscious mind; this represents the human being's sense of purpose and identity. Second is the "shadow", or the unconscious aspect of the human psyche, which ego attempts to annihilate or disregard, frequently represented in dreams by a person of the same gender as the ego. The ego should first confront and then assimilate the power of the shadow. Third, Jung considers the "anima" (Latin, "soul"), the unconscious, feminine element of a male personality; and the "animus" (Latin, "spirit"), the unconscious, masculine element of a woman's personality. In other words, the former is the man's inner woman, whereas the latter is the woman's inner man. These elements have the potential to inspire the ego in order to perform the journey through and beyond the realm of the shadow. Fourth, is the "self"; it is the essential archetype, that of accomplishment of potential and the integration of personality. Usually, this archetype is represented by a mandala or magic circle, and it signifies the psychic totality towards which all life moves.

Undeniably, this means that the journey from ego to self is circular, implying the descent into the darkness of the shadow and the ascent towards the light of the self.

Jung also considers that there is one archetype for each human situation, such as the child, the mother, the father, the hero, the trickster, the divine saviour, and others:

They are repeated in all mythologies, fairy tales, religions, traditions, and mysteries. What else is the myth of the night sea voyage, of the wandering hero, or of the sea monster than our timeless knowledge transformed into a picture of the sun's setting and rebirth (...) Prometheus, the stealing of fire, Hercules, the slayer of dragons, the numerous myths of creation (...) and many other myths and tales portray psychic process in symbolic imaginary form. (Jacobi, 1951, p. 62)

For Jung, myths are not just some allegorical expressions of the natural phenomena; they represent the symbols of inner, unconscious world which could be accessed through projection and telling. He defines myths as "narrative elaboration of archetypal images" (Walker, 1992, p. 18). In his opinion, the mind grows aware of the archetypal image and engages itself in mythmaking, myth being "the natural and indispensable intermediate stage between unconscious and conscious cognition" (Walker, 1992, p. 19).

Myths reveal some fundamental messages, at the same time offering insights into unrealized or neglected aspects of human personality and forewarning the imbalance or the wrong action. As such, mythology becomes a mere "mirror of the collective unconscious" (Walker, 1992, p. 5).

Of course, this theory runs a great risk, since it may signify nothing but the denial of our freedom. Jung's theory threatens to reduce all our behaviour and, especially, all our literature to a known and well recognizable (archetypal) pattern in the collective psyche. This means that all situations are composed of some invariable or barely variable elements. Every generation of humanity exhausts itself in its attempt to reformulate these invariable elements and drains itself while writing down new lines found in the same ancient works.

This assumption leads to the idea that all great works of world literature are cyclical and Louis de Bernières' novel can be considered as a fraction of the same cycle.

However, Jung disputes the determinist aspect of archetypes, insisting that they are not determined in their content but in their form, and even this to a small degree. They present an "empty" structure, the substance of which is being filled by the matter of conscious experience and which, as a result, varies in each new manifestation. The power of archetypes lies in their structure rather than in their content, as the structure is transhistorical, whereas the content is appropriate only

for a certain period and background. Therefore, myths and fairy tales that we inherit are mere expressions of the archetypes which have obtained specific features of the time in which they were written.

To sum up, Jung believes that myths are our expressions of the archetypes in-born in all of us, as our inheritance and part in the collective unconscious. The most important function of myth, in his opinion, is “to reveal the existence of the unconscious, to provide guidance in dealing with the unconscious, and to open the individual up to the unconscious and its wisdom” (Rochelle, 2000, p. 19).

Myth reveals essential truths about human condition in an emblematic language, and we become aware of these truths in this language and in the narrative of myth. Through story and language, myths manage to tap the human psyche, which is a gigantic, infinite depository of all knowledge about man and his relation to Divinity. Universal knowledge becomes available as individual knowledge only through the realm of myth.

There are some difficulties in applying Jung’s sequence of archetypes to Louis de Bernières’ novel, since in the case of a number of characters, there is a journey which is performed. This journey acquires the significance of an accomplishment of a potential and the integration of personality; sometimes, it takes the aspect of a physical motion; some other times, there is just a psychic movement of the character.

It is relatively easy to identify Corelli with Ulysses and his archetypal journey which de Bernières’ protagonist has to perform, a journey which is both physical and psychological, and which conventionally implies the character’s descent into inferno (or, in Jungian terms, the descent into the world of the shadow), where he encounters many demonic doubles of himself and even sees the greatest shadow of all, that is Satan/Evil. Then, reaching his anima – Pelagia (Penelope) – he becomes able to ascend from the abyssal darkness and attain a total vision of the cosmos and of his place within it.

The difficulty of approach to the novel emerges when we understand the writer’s willingness to avoid the possible entrapment into a mythical situation or into an archetypal pattern, and his desire to deconstruct this well-known Odyssean formula. The postmodern Odysseus performs the journey, but does not achieve any material success; his anima is not encountered on his return home, but during the journey on a mysterious island, reminding us about Ulysses’ bitter-sweet imprisonments by Circe and Calypso (negative animas); and the twenty years separation of Odysseus and Penelope has lasted for about fifty years in de Bernières’ novel. Eventually, the mandala or magic circle, which signifies the psychic totality towards which all life moves, is not entirely completed by the protagonist, and

is replaced by a spiral, since at the end of his odyssey he does not go home, but returns to the mysterious island and the woman of the island, who is his feminine counterpart, his journey being repeated several times.

However, we may hypothesize that, in the case of Corelli, each journey from ego to self is circular, involving descent into the darkness of the shadow and ascent towards the light of the self. Here we can even make a clearly discernible parallel with James George Frazer's cycle of the dying and reviving god, or with Eliade's eternal return, by which cosmos emerges from chaos. In de Bernières' work, however, the ultimate representation is the psychological integration.

The situation grows in complexity when the writer uses well recognizable prototypes in order to explore them and explode the meaning of myth and momom myth in an original manner, where a predictable situation or character typology is transformed into a completely different one, creating new connotations and gaining a new significance.

In Louis de Bernières' novel, myth acquires a kind of "protean" characteristic, preventing the creation of predictable meanings or expected outcomes in well-known situations; instead, the mythical situation or the archetypal pattern is perpetually renewed and reloaded with new meanings.

Consequently, the well-known Odyssean formula as completed by Odysseus and Penelope takes at certain instants the shape of Paris and Helen of Troy, Hector and Andromaque, Osiris and Isis, Eros and Psyche, Hades and Persephone, or Orpheus and Eurydice.

Orpheus myth is important to our reading through archetypal patterns, since Orpheus/Corelli is a musician and an artist who also goes to the underworld in order to bring back Eurydice/Pelagia, in Jungian terms, his anima, from the dead. Orpheus' material failure leads to his spiritual success, as Corelli's first loss of Pelagia leads to the composition of Pelagia's March, his music symbolizing also the attainment of the cosmic harmony. It is worth mentioning here de Bernières' attempt to deconstruct this archetypal pattern, when, like Orpheus after being dismembered by angry women, Corelli – here his body is torn out by the bullets of the Nazi soldiers – is saved from death by a woman, Pelagia, who assumes the role of Circe, a sorceress with knowledge of medicine.

At the same time, Corelli's resurrection leads us to another recognizable prototype, which is that of Jesus Christ, especially when the dismemberment/crucifixion similarity is completed by the fact that in both cases the material failure leads to spiritual success. But since we mention the "protean" characteristic of myth in Louis de Bernières novel, one cannot expect the creation of predictable meanings or expected outcomes in these well-known situations.

Similar interpretative perspectives can be discovered concerning other characters and situations involving these characters, as to name just Pelagia, Mandras, and Carlos, who, at different times, assume diverse archetypal roles, transforming the invariable mythical situations into other, unpredictable ones, gaining each time new connotations and new meanings.

In this respect, the Jungian theory of archetypes provides us with a useful pattern of analysis which is to be considered when it is revealed that the author makes appeal to this pattern, and, we may say, it must also be regarded when the author deconstructs it, since the rejection of a model presupposes a very good knowledge of it. In other words, it is essential to know and properly understand Jung's perspective in order to identify it when the text reveals it as used by de Bernières, as well as to apply it to the reading of de Bernières' text. It is also necessary to know the theory in order to understand how much Louis de Bernières deviates from a known archetype or replaces it with another one, and thus, in an intertextual perspective, reaching new symbolical significance and meaning.

1.3 Joseph Campbell

It is necessary to outline Joseph Campbell's understanding of myth, since Louis de Bernières focuses and relies heavily on some of Campbell's key concepts, among which is that of "the Monomyth of the Hero and the Quest". Although Campbell rejects to be classified as Jungian, his definitions of myth bear a resemblance to Carl Jung's ideas. Campbell accepts that the closest to a proper comprehension of the real significance of myth is Jung. In his description of myth, Campbell sounds much Jungian, because for him

myths are telling us in picture language of powers of the psyche to be recognized and integrated in our lives (...). Thus they have not been, and can never be, displaced by the findings of science, which relate rather to the outside world than to the depths we enter in sleep. (Segal, 1987, p. 125)

Campbell, like Jung, embarks on a specifically psychological approach to myth. For him, myths are analogous to dreams and must be considered as seriously as dreams are. Myths provide access to the insight of the collective psyche or the collective soul, and the mere attempt to repress or disregard them as illusory might be psychologically and spiritually damaging.

The knowledge about human being is provided through dreams and this knowledge cannot be corrupted by the conscious defence mechanisms. Myths serve the same purpose for cultures. Joseph Campbell, similar to Carl Jung, insists that we