

Contemporary Imaginative Transformations - Re-visiting a Romantic and Victorian Poetics/Aesthetics of Myth and Dream

Paper presented at Bologna University, Italy, May 2019

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Good morning. The purpose of my paper today is to re-visit nineteenth-century English poetry and poets, and to attempt to trace what we could call their respective ‘mythical and oneiric transformations’, as well as their impact in the larger aesthetic culture.

Although most nineteenth-century British mythographers were hampered by the need to conciliate a strong evangelical lobby, which was deeply suspicious of paganism in any form,¹ Romantic and Victorian poetry offered a special field in which myth could indeed be used, revised, and even explicitly discussed, with more freedom. And, likewise important for a loosening of the restrictions of language from the more dogmatic religious discourse of the period, were dreams and dream poetry in particular.

A rich and broad array of projects for recasting literature as a form of thought, and for revising its relationship to such rival discourses as myth, philosophy, and science, emerged during the Romantic period. To begin with, the prophetic books of the English poet and artist **William Blake** contain an invented mythology (a mythopoeia), into which he encoded his spiritual and political ideas as a prophecy for a new age. This desire to recreate the cosmos is at the heart of his work and his psychology. Among Blake's inspirations were John Milton's biblical *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, but also the visions of Emanuel Swedenborg and the near-cabalistic writings of Jakob Böhme. Blake included his own interpretations of druidism and paganism, revealing a strong interest in utilising ancient myth to reinterpret contemporary historical events (like the French Revolution).² The longest elaboration of this private myth-cycle was also his longest poem, called *The Four Zoas: The Death and Judgment*

• ¹ Margot Lewis, “Gods and Mysteries: The Revival of Paganism and the Remaking of Mythography through the Nineteenth Century”, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 47, n° 3, Spring 2005, pp. 329-361.

² Jason Whittaker, *William Blake and the Myths of Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999).

of *Albion, The Ancient Man*, written in the late 1790s.³ But the element of dream is also an intrinsic device or natural channel for Blake to reveal his and his speaker's visions, namely in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794).

According to Grevel Lindop,⁴ the most vital questions that preoccupied Romantic writers were: whether dreams can give us access to other worlds; the relationship between dream life and waking life; whether anything real can be brought back from sleep; and the implications of this for our view of the world. In early 19th-century Britain, there was no general agreed theory of the causes and nature of dreams occurring in sleep. The topic, though, was dominated by two major ideas (one religious and the other medical): One was that dreams were caused by spiritual agency – God, angels, good or evil spirits intervening to give messages; the other was that dreams were caused by mere bodily factors. **Byron's** "The Dream" (1816) begins with an overview of the characteristics of dreams that covers many of the era's dream theories, suggesting many questions that the Romantics consider on the nature of dreams - whether they are prophetic, visionary, inner truth or nonsense.⁵ (SLIDE 4)

³ The fall of Albion and his division into the Zoas and their emanations are also the central themes of *Jerusalem, The Emanation of the Giant Albion*.

⁴ "Romantic Poetry and the Idea of the Dream".

⁵ l.

OUR life is twofold: Sleep hath its own world,
A boundary between the things misnamed
Death and existence: Sleep hath its own world,
And a wide realm of wild reality,
And dreams in their development have breath,
And tears, and tortures, and the touch of Joy;
They leave a weight upon our waking thoughts,
They take a weight from off our waking toils,
They do divide our being; they become
A portion of ourselves as of our time,
And look like heralds of Eternity;
They pass like spirits of the past,—they speak
Like Sibyls of the future; they have power—
The tyranny of pleasure and of pain;
They make us what we were not—what they will,
And shake us with the vision that's gone by,
The dread of vanished shadows—Are they so?
Is not the past all shadow?—What are they?
Creations of the mind?—The mind can make
Substance, and people planets of its own
With beings brighter than have been, and give
A breath to forms which can outlive all flesh
I would recall a vision which I dreamed
Perchance in sleep—for in itself a thought,
A slumbering thought, is capable of years,
And curdles a long life into one hour.

For Anita O'Connell,⁶ Romantic poetry demonstrates an unprecedented fascination not only with the phenomenon of dreaming, but also with the literary techniques that dream writing offered. **Samuel T. Coleridge** took an exceptional interest in dreams and even recorded his perspective and ideas on the subject. In his writings, he spent much time musing over the difference between dreams and nightmares, whether or not his dreams were creations of his mind, the supernatural or physiological processes, and the transition from waking to sleep.⁷ The dreaming mind becomes, for the Romantic poets, a means of accessing the creative imagination. Dreams are seen as the mind's own 'poetry', dramas that the imagination constructs in the absence of will and conscious reason. Sleeping dreams are often strange and elusive in meaning; they do not adhere to the laws of reason in waking reality. As such, they lend themselves to the poetic, allowing a poet exceptionally creative licence, and a poetic voice that suggests symbolic interpretation.

Dream poetry usually refers to poetic 'narratives framed by the fiction of a dream'.⁸ O'Connell states that some of the most central Romantic dream poems follow the Medieval dream-vision form closely in narrative technique (- in which, after a prologue, the poet falls asleep and dreams a series of events -). However, many poets do so to explore the genre of romance itself. Besides, their adaptation or transformation of the Medieval form suggested their own metaphysical and aesthetic interests. But dreaming can refer, in Romantic writing, to daydreams as well as sleeping dreams, to thought and reverie. The latter, itself a term with complex and varying definitions, is at times called 'waking dream'; a state of thinking or imagining, somewhere in between remembering and being lost in thought. In "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), **John Keats** famously uses the ambiguity of dream to demonstrate an uncertainty about the imaginative state: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: - Do I wake or sleep?" (79-80).

In "Kubla Khan: A Vision in a Dream" (1797-1816), **Coleridge** also emulates the state of illusion in dreaming, in order to create for the reader a waking dream experience. Among

⁶ *A Place of Vision: Romantic Dream Poetry and the Creative Imagination*, PhD Thesis, University of Durham, 2006.

⁷ See, for example, "Dejection: An Ode" and "The Pains of Sleep".

⁸ Helen Phillips includes: Coleridge's "Kubla Khan", Wordsworth's "The Dream of the Arab" from *The Prelude*, Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, and Keats' *The Fall of Hyperion*, in the genre, but also "La Belle Dame Sans Merci".

critics, there is a difference of opinion as to whether Coleridge's thoughts on dreams were actually affected by his consumption of opium and other substances.⁹ In turn, P.B. Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* (1822-24), presented in the dream-vision tradition, hovers between dream and vision, between the frames of Chaucer and Dante, in order to explore a biting political and social commentary. Later on (in the 1840s), in "The Dream-Fugue", **De Quincey** – an avowed opium-eater – is able to express the anxieties of a time of social and political upheaval through a dream-state, and to bring all the extremes of emotion to a final resolution.¹⁰ But other paradigmatic dream poems might equally be considered: Shelley's *Queen Mab* and *The Mask of Anarchy* and Byron's superbly apocalyptic "Darkness" (1816-17).

Earl Wasserman¹¹ shows that myth for **Percy B. Shelley** was not a fixed and definitive narrative, but rather an image or an aspect of a single, immutable truth. Such a conception entails an ambiguous relation between the traditional form of legend or myth and the poet's use of it.¹² However, according to Pablo Varela,¹³ the philosophical underpinnings (naturalism and scientism) of Shelley's earlier writings can be interpreted as having been strategically advanced in his critique of myth and religion. Shelley's later mythical dramas are read as an alternative representation of history to that of natural history, where a new conception of collective political agency was developed. The truth value of myth and poetry could be reassessed as that of a guide for political action.¹⁴ His departure from Aeschylus's play, in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), is central in incorporating his Romantic, philosophical vision into his own work.¹⁵

Focusing on **John Keats's** widely discussed interest in Greek myth, Dorothy Van Ghent finds the underlying coherence in both his poetry and his letters to be archetypes of the hero and his double -- pervasive myths of creation and generation reflected in his poetics of desire.¹⁶

⁹ In her book *Coleridge on Dreams*, Jennifer Ford leaves the opium influence on Coleridge as a source of much of his dream imagery almost unmentioned. In contrast, Alethea Heyter ascribes almost all of Coleridge's poetic imagery to the drug in the self-explanatory title of her book *Opium and the Imagination*.

¹⁰ Work included in *The English Mail-Coach*.

¹¹ *Myth in Shelley's Poetry* (1965)

¹² For example, the myth of Aurora, goddess of the dawn, is not to be understood as a particular narrative in Western culture; but as an integral and self-sustaining thought because of its beauty and truth as a composition.

¹³ "Myth and Enlightenment: Necessity, History and Agency in Shelley's poetry and prose", 27-11-2017.

¹⁴ Shelley's debate with Thomas Love Peacock concerning the social function of poetry catalysed the process by which the attributes of myth were transferred to poetry.

¹⁵ While Aeschylus's play accentuates Prometheus's bondage, suffering, and his lack of means, Shelley's work, as its title suggests, stresses the protagonist's freedom and position of power.

¹⁶ *Keats: The Myth of the hero* (1983), Princeton University press, 2014.

For William Coker,¹⁷ the restoration of myth was clearly an enduring concern for Keats before he began to write *Hyperion* in 1819.¹⁸ Because the poem is not only an attempt to write epic, but also an attempt to write myth, it is bound to confront the historicity of myth as a form of thought. In so doing, it exposes the fetishism latent in post-Enlightenment mythography. That time when “holy were the haunted forest boughs,/ holy the air, the water and the fire,” as Keats called it in the “Ode to Psyche” (38–39), was already an object of nostalgia for the poet of *Endymion*, desirous of a “flowery band to bind us to the earth” (7), which he identified with mythical stories. As an ironic myth of myth’s demise, *Hyperion* reflects critically on the Idealist project of reconciling sensuousness and rationality, poetic and rational thinking.

The influence of ancient mythology and history on **Victorian culture and art**, as Isobel Hurst¹⁹ has argued, reveals the extent to which Greek examples became applicable to modern life. Because, as Catherine Maxwell comments, ‘mythic representations allow the expression of different kinds of human desire’, we witness a remarkable variety of reworkings of classical myth in the period. But the causes, meanings, and significance of dream were issues also present in Victorian religion, philosophy and science, including pseudo-science.²⁰ Although they did not utilise Freudian terminology, the Victorians observed the dream experiences of displacement, condensation and symbolization. They realised that, since dreams transformed, dramatized, and intensified vision and emotion, they could provide ingredients for art. That dreams become a frequent and precious poetic resource is clear from poets as Tennyson and Browning, who in their dramatic monologues explored the dream as a psychological device for the revelation of character.

¹⁷ “Keats, Hegel, and Belated Mythography”, *Comparative Literature*, 2015.

¹⁸ *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, sometimes subtitled as *A Vision* instead of a dream, is an epic poem. In it, the narrator introduces the idea that the poem could be either a dream or a vision, and is unsure of which. The poem is divided into three scenes before its final fragmentation.

¹⁹ *Victorian Literature and the Reception of Greece and Rome*.

²⁰ For example, the Oxford Movement supported the truth of biblical prophetic dreams; **mesmerism** valued dream, as well states of trance and sleep-walking; **spiritualism** discovered in them paths to the eternal and means of communication with the dead. The etiology of dream was explained by metaphysical theories such as those of Erasmus Darwin and Benjamin Brodie, and physiological theories like those of Burton, Hobbes and Hartley; J. Waller studied the nightmare (a verbal equivalent to H. Fuseli’s painting). A psychological study, *The World of Dreams*, was published by Havelock Ellis.

According to Simon Petch,²¹ **Tennyson** used myth to control, order and shape his own feelings; but his attempts led him to evolve images of increasingly suggestive social significance. His mythologizing impulse reveals that myth was a perfect form of disguise – a way for him to cloak the private with the public, and of giving voice to the dilemma of withdrawal from or involvement in life. And he placed these personal concerns in a context whose implications were universal and whose reverberations were timeless. Legendary rather than historical, Timbuctoo (an early poem) shares the mythical qualities of Atlantis and Eldorado, places which may never have existed in reality, yet which endure forever within the human mind. Camelot is another such place, which is built forever by the Muses. It came to stand for the days that are no more, which are ever-present but can never be recreated, and it developed into a symbol of all that Tennyson valued most. In “The Day-Dream” (1842),²² similar to *Morte D'Arthur* and *The Princess*, in that it relies on a frame for the story, **Tennyson** discusses precisely the nature of sleeping and of dreaming, especially in relation to individuals that would want to escape from reality. Significantly, it also compares the act of composing poetry with dreaming, and asserts that the two are the same.²³

²¹ “Tennyson, Mood and Myth”, *Sydney Studies*.

²² It was an expanded version of his 1830 poem "The Sleeping Beauty". It was further altered in 1848 for a dramatic performance.

PROLOGUE

O LADY FLORA, let me speak:

A pleasant hour has passed away
 While, dreaming on your damask cheek,
 The dewy sister-eyelids lay.
 As by the lattice you reclined,
 I went thro' many wayward moods
 To see you dreaming—and, behind,
 A summer crisp with shining woods.
 And I too dream'd, until at last
 Across my fancy, brooding warm,
 The reflex of a legend past,
 And loosely settled into form.
 And would you have the thought I had,
 And see the vision that I saw,
 Then take the broidery-frame, and add
 A crimson to the quaint Macaw,
 And I will tell it. Turn your face,
 Nor look with that too-earnest eye—
 The rhymes are dazzled from their place
 And order'd words asunder fly.

²³ It probably inspired an oil on canvas painting with the same title by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood founder Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in 1880.

For Jeannette Vallier,²⁴ **Matthew Arnold**'s public life, and all his writing in both poetry and criticism, represent a heroic labour to provide some surrogate mythology, to take the place of the failed religious myth of transcendent meaning. She demonstrates that Arnold's poems, particularly the longer ones, are parts of a coherent series that can be treated as versions of a single myth. Arnold's basic theme is the exploration of what it means to be a poet and a man, a thematic quest he never abandoned - to clarify the task and the situation of his mythic Poet. Using a three-dimensional landscape (mountain, valley, sea) created for the purpose, given texture and colour by dream and myth, Arnold explores this more abstract territory through the agency of his Poet, who acts as the mediator between the reader and dream, myth, or legend.

According to Marwan Abdi,²⁵ **Arnold**'s poems represent heroic characters populating two different worlds: one Mythical and the other Real, an epical struggle between good and evil for saving 'Humane Values'. They create 'mythological' landscapes that contain 'real world people' and places, and they represent Arnold's modern England and world as an arena of a cosmic struggle, upon which rests the destiny of human civilization. The shadowy forces at the end of "Dover Beach" (1867) are the outcome of Arnold's tendency towards transforming the catastrophic modern world into a hybrid realm that embraces both the mythical and reality-bound elements. Like "The Strayed Reveller" (1849), his other poems intermingle myth with reality without heavy allusion to specific myths. By contrast, the vagabond in "The Scholar-Gipsy" (1853) is essentially a flawless hero, who embodies all the moral codes and virtues that are required to restore the world to a balance. The construction of a hybrid world, containing both mythical and real elements, enables the writer to give superhuman qualities to these figures to emerge as saviours. The poet's critical vision thus becomes universal through mythologizing the real inhabitants of the world.

Carole Silver defined **Pre-Raphaelitism** as "a movement to which dream is central, which utilises accounts of actual dream, dream language, dream symbol, and most significantly, a movement with the characteristics of dream itself."²⁶ Besides using the conventions and devices of medieval and Romantic dream literature, the works of the Pre-

²⁴ "From Myth to Meta-trope: Matthew Arnold's Progress in His Major Poetry", edited by Robert J. Vallier.

²⁵ "Mythological and Non- Fictional Elements in Matthew Arnold's Poetry", Department of English, College of Languages University of Duhok, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.

²⁶ "Dreamers of Dreams: Toward a Definition of Literary Pre-Raphaelitism", in *The Golden Chain. Essays*, New York and London: The W.M. Society, 1982, pp. 5-51.

Raphaelites show a special concern with accurate accounts of ‘real’ dream experiences, and put an emphasis on capturing dream logic and structure. **D.G. Rossetti**’s translations of Dante’s *Vita Nuova* led to a knowledge of medieval dream forms and theories; an example is his poetic description (and repeated painting as *Dante’s Dream*) of the Italian poet’s dream of Beatrice’s death. Because he creates a mental geography of dreamland and then transfers it to his poems and paintings, Walter Pater remarked that, to Rossetti, “Dream-land is a real country”. But it is generally subterranean, a dark hazy dream realm of woods and waters, filled with elf-like women, as in his “Willowwood” sonnets from *The House of Life* (1868-70). Other works record a moment seen in premonitory dream or trance, like *Beata Beatrix*; and *The Blessed Damozel* pairing is about a creature of dream that addresses him from Heaven.

For Dinah Birch,²⁷ the material of myth lies at the heart of **William Morris**’s imagination and writing: not only as the Pre-Raphaelite artist, or the successful poet, but also as the political revolutionary that he became in his later years. The work that comes most readily to mind, in thinking of Morris’s myths of romance, is his giant epic poem, *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), a mixture of Greek and Scandinavian legends.²⁸ As the work shows, myth-making was, for Morris, in part simply Romantic story-telling, but it provided him with stories of a particular kind. Their anonymity, ahistoricism, and concern with the sacred had a magnetic attraction for Morris. And these were not purely aesthetic concerns – they had a political point. Drawn to the concept of myth’s popular origin, seeing it as evidence of ancient wisdom, untainted by the modern vices of materialism and mechanism – myth could be read as a form of communal literature. Like Keats, Morris writes of a lost golden age in an attempt to recreate an ancient happiness through the active reverence of nature.

And John Ruskin pays a generous tribute to the poetry of Morris in his strangest and most far-reaching study of mythology, called *The Queen of the Air* (1869), an interpretation of the myths surrounding the Greek goddess Athena. But, unlike Keats and Ruskin, Morris was hardly interested in the static gods, for humanity concerned him more urgently. He was especially moved by tales of searching and questing heroes – those mythical figures, half-

²⁷ ‘Morris and myth: A Romantic heritage’

²⁸ It is a lengthy collection of retellings of various myths and legends from Greece and Scandinavia. Morris uses a frame story concerning a group of medieval wanderers searching for a land of everlasting life. After much disillusionment, they discover a surviving colony of Greeks with whom they exchange stories. The poem is divided into twelve sections, each section representing a month of the year and containing two tales told in verse, drawn largely from classical mythology or mediaeval legends, including the Icelandic sagas.

mortal, half-immortal. That is the case of his first major mythological poem, *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), a great Greek story of quest. And, for Morris, there is a close relation between the qualities of myth and the nature of dream, one that had previously motivated Keats. For Morris, as for Keats, the association between dreams, myths and the bleaker waking world was instructive and helpful. Being more realist in his orientation, Morris tended to treat dreams as internal, psychological responses to external fears and problems, exploring their absurdities as well as their transformative force. Ultimately, he was to find much of the material that interested him in the Northern cycles of myth (Icelandic sagas),²⁹ which emphasized courage, endurance, and martial valour to a much greater extent than the myths of Greece.

In his turn, **Algernon Charles Swinburne** explored all the possible dimensions of dreaming in his poetry, namely in “A Ballad of Dreamland” and “The Garden of Proserpine”³⁰, just to mention a few. Indeed, his *Poems and Ballads* (1866) imitate dream structure and language: settings appear and disappear, transitions are based on irrational dream logic, and fragments are presented but unexplicated. Moreover, his style amplifies the dream effect, through repetition and diffusion, introducing new conventions of image and association. Charlotte Ribeyrol addresses **Swinburne's** liminal and transgressive excursions into marginal Hellenic territories,³¹ suggesting that while some critics strove to defend the purity of Swinburne's Greek inspiration, others accused him of 'glorify[ing] all the bestial delights that the subtleness of Greek depravity was able to contrive'.³² She argues that Swinburne rejected the chromatically limited vision of ancient Greek literature and art. Under the veil of his mastery of Greek language and culture, he explored the frontiers of the Other, the unknown margins that archaeologists, anthropologists, and Cambridge Ritualists at the end of the nineteenth century would attempt to exhume and reveal.

²⁹ They inspired his long poems "The Lovers of Gudrun" and *Sigurd the Volsung*. Between 1868 and 1876, Morris translated several major sagas into English for the first time with his collaborator the Icelandic Eiríkur Magnússon.

³⁰ Proserpine is the Latin spelling of Persephone, a goddess married to Hades, god of the underworld. According to some accounts, she had a garden of ever blooming flowers (poppies) in the underworld. These poppies induce waking sleep if picked and travellers forget their purpose. The Greek and Roman festivals honouring her and her mother, Ceres, emphasized Proserpine's return to the upper world in spring.

³¹ These were often obscured by the exclusively Olympian vision of Greece, extolled by most Victorians in their quest for secure ideological foundations. See “Swinburne. A nineteenth-century Hellene?”, chapter in *Algernon Charles Swinburne* (online), October 2017.

³² William Rutland and John Morley, respectively.

Another *fin-de-siècle* iconoclast, **Oscar Wilde** also associated myth closely with poetry in his works, as is visible in his symbolic poem called “The Garden of Eros”, which alludes to several mythological figures (like Persephone, Artemis, Endymion, etc.). It describes a metaphorical garden of England that plays host to varied ‘flowers’ and the memories of some of the greatest English poets. But it shows a change of season is fast approaching, and time seems unbearably limited: this ‘garden’ has thus reminded the speaker of the great poetic losses of his age.³³ However, there was another mythological figure of great importance for **Wilde**, one that he allegorically revived in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1892). The common denominator for the turn-of-the-century interest in Narcissus was the sense of a lost foundation of selfhood. Reflected in the ephemeral image in the water, Narcissus comes to symbolize the self who lacks substantial grounding. What crystallizes through the figure of Narcissus is an aspect of what more generally could be called the problem of decadence. In an era of disbelief, of the death of God, and of crumbling social, moral, and metaphysical structures, the self’s very core was subject to the forces of dispersion and decay. What if there was no safe ground, even for the unity and identity of the self? The Narcissus theme thus offered a poetic matrix through which these questions, even if not answered, could be explored.

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³³ He reflects on the death of Keats, a true devotee to the goddess Venus, and then on the drowning of Shelley. This turn to mourning is a perfect contrast to the pristine image presented in the first stanzas. He states that Shelley was an admirer of Greek thought and spirituality but, after his death, only one true worshiper of Venus, the goddess of love and pleasure, remained. Swinburne took up the mantel and crafted poetry that took him through the ages of antiquity. The final poet mentioned is Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who is the last devotee to the ideals of Greece and especially the tenants of Venus.

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