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Myth and the Extraordinary Event

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Abstract

There is no myth without extraordinary event that gives it the supernatural qualities it requires in order to become part of the literary and mythological History. A definition should be given about what "extraordinary" means: an event involving facts done by personal beings (either gods or human) belonging to the supernatural world is an extraordinary one (e.g. the fight between gods and titans). But there are also myths involving personal beings who act only in the natural world (Clytemnestra). This article also presents some groups of beings categorized in categories by their origin and acts performed in each world (natural, divine...), in an attempt to demonstrate that a personage of the natural world may be involved in a process of mythification under specific conditions. Thus we can explain that human beings can operate ordinary facts in the natural world, and that these human —even sometimes historic— beings may become myths (Alexander the Great, Humphrey Bogart).

Keywords: Myth, History, Natural world, Supernatural origin

1. Introduction

An event is what occurs, is related to or in contact (*con-tingere*): everything concerning what happens and actions by the characters, all they do; their mere appearance or introduction is already an event.

Here the concept of "extraordinary" will be discussed in a literal, restrictive sense. In order for an event to be extraordinary, it is necessary for a character or his action to be outside of the ordinary world, albeit in a hypothetical way.

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In large part, what constitutes the nature of the extraordinary is not only the event in itself, but rather the origin of the characters. This is because, as shall be seen, myth relates extraordinary events with a personal referent: if there is no person, there is no myth. Indeed, the characters of these events belong to the magical, extraordinary world, or, being from this world, they come—or seem to come—into contact with the magical world.

In every extraordinary event there is always at least action by some character belonging to the supernatural world; there is no myth lying beyond that world. On many occasions there is an interaction between both worlds. We are experiencing, then, a series of combinations that mark all the possibilities that myths can bring. Essentially, they are developed in two spheres: the otherworldly (the supernatural world, the world beyond) or the earthly (the natural world, this world).

In turn, these two large spheres from where their characters originate, subdivide depending on the world where their characters act: in the supernatural or the natural.

There are, therefore, four possibilities for combination. A being of supernatural origin can act in the supernatural world or natural world. A being of natural origin can act in the supernatural or natural world.

In theory, when a being from the natural world acts in the natural world, there is no myth. Instead, there are two exceptions, and quite interesting ones.

The first is when the being from the natural world achieves an act that presents a transcendental dimension (as will be shown later on, every myth has a transcendental referent). They are not at all isolated cases. Here are myths which affect us particularly because of their incomparable human power: Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, Phaedra and Hippolytus, Oedipus and his parents.

The second is when, as stated above, "In order for an event to be extraordinary, it is necessary for a character or his action to be outside of the ordinary world, albeit in a hypothetical way."

When a character from this world acts only in this world something in particular is required to be able to speak about myth.

That "something" is for the act to be able to be mythologized, that is, that the action be at least hypothetically otherworldly or that it itself is mythologizable.

As a schema for this, this map results (which will be developed in this paper):

1. Character of supernatural origins

a) Acting in the supernatural world
b) Acting in the natural world

2. Character of natural origins

a) Acting in the supernatural world
b) Acting in the natural world
i. Non-extraordinary act with a transcendent dimension
ii. Non-extraordinary act able to be mythologized

This article discusses this multiple modality of the mythical event.

2. A Character with Supernatural Origins

2.1. Acting in the Supernatural World

If the character is from the other world, it does not make sense to wonder about the nature of the action: even when it is ordinary (eating, drinking, or sleeping), the otherworldly essence of the character who is acting is already an extraordinary event, is already the essential part of myth. Wherever he acts and independent of how he acts, Zeus is using myth.

Zeus rescues his siblings, frees the Cyclops and the Hecatonchires in the other world. Then he has relations with Metis, Themis, Demeter, Mnemosyne, Aphrodite, Leto, and Hera. These are extraordinary acts because they involve beings from the other world. All these acts, however, remain in the other world, without any consequence in this one.

The mythical character of these acts is always unmistakable, but its relevance for us is rather limited: no human being is involved, nor is the earth or animals mentioned. Only the gods inhabit this heaven or this hell where humans are absent.

2.2. Acting in the Natural World

Very different from this is the case of the myth in which an otherworldly being acts in this world. This kind of myth is more interesting because of the combinations which it allows to occur. Several examples will follow.

2.2.1. The Childhood and Love Affairs of Zeus

Surrounded by Corybants and Curetes, Zeus is nursed by the goat Amalthea on the island of Crete. This interaction is rich in its consequences: the dancers, who cover the god's cries with their voices and dances, prevent Cronos from discovering and devouring him; and Amalthea's broken horn turns into the horn of plenty. Later, Zeus's unions with women produce the demigods and heroes, a new race which points toward a hierarchy in the human race. The seat of preference, though, goes to his conjugal relation with Alcmene, the wife of Amphitryon, who gives birth to two children one after another: Iphicles, Amphitryon's son, and Heracles, Zeus's. The myth, already since Plautus's *Amphitryon*, allows for various reinterpretations. This is because it is valuable not only for the comedic profit in its husband substitutions and playful mistakes, but also for the doubt it raises about one's identity, encompassing the Theban king and his servant Sosia equally. In both cases there is the mythical theme of the double.

2.2.2. The Creation of the World

The example par excellence of a transcendent character's intervention in the natural world is the transcendent creation of the world. Since the number 7 implies fullness, there is a mythical account in the succession of six days of creation followed by one day of rest. In order to emphasize the divine origins of the institution of the Sabbath, the author of the holy book chooses a logical classification of creatures according to a temporal model of a week, which ends in the Sabbath rest (the first day light, the second day heavens, the third day waters and vegetation, the fourth day the sun/moon/stars, the fifth day animals, the sixth day the human being, the seventh day blessing and sanctification).

The concept of the week did not exist in the unknowable time of the creation, nor did God need to rest: new representations of a mythical account.

In turn, each of these passages about Elohim's creation of the world also enters into this type of mythical narration. Here is an example from *Genesis* 1:6-8:

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. / And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. / And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

For the Jewish people the firmament of the heavens was a dome which retained the waters above. The unleashing of the flood proves this in *Genesis* 7:11: "the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened". The writer does not conceive of cosmic space as we know it today, instead representing a heavenly vault, positioned by God to separate the waters and conserve the earth. The image of this extraordinary intervention, of a god propping up an impermeable firmament, is a mythical representation of creation.

In the previous cases, the human dimension generally remains at the margins of the divine action. Alcmene's infidelity to Amphitryon is completely unwilling; Zeus seduces her under the appearance of her husband. Without the will, there is no morality or any truly human act, although this is indifferent for the god.

In Elohim's creation of the world there is not any human dimension, either.

There are, instead, many cases where the otherworldly being's intervention brings about human will and, consequently, human morality.

2.2.3. The Fairy and the Two Youths

This is the case with fairies, fantastical and ethereal beings that appear and enter into dialogue with humans. In "The Fairies" ("Les Fées"), a story by Perrault, a fairy appears as a poor woman to two sisters, one by one, by a spring: to the first, to reward her humility, and to the second, to chastise her pride.

The flowers and diamonds which come out of the mouth of the younger sister are symbols of her virtues, contrasting with the vices, serpents and frogs that come out of the mouth of the older sister. While the younger sister marries the prince, her sister dies abandoned in the forest. Perrault gives in his moral a panegyric on meekness when faced with power. The younger sister who had to go fetch the water every day did not seek any revenge, so she receives remuneration for her daily obedience at home and for the favour she does for the fairy when she is dressed as a poor woman. The interaction of both worlds is complete; the moral acquires a particularly important dimension.

2.2.4. The Commander's Statue

Another example *par excellence* of this intervention by an otherworldly figure on earth appears in the Don Juan myth. We see this in *The trickster of Seville* (*El burlador de Sevilla*), a play attributed to Tirso de Molina.

During the first of these encounters, the protagonist invites the statue of the Commander Don Gonzalo to have dinner with him that night at his inn. The Commander agrees and Don Juan has him to dinner. The Commander invites him, in turn, to dinner the following day in the chapel. As a sign of agreement, the libertine gives him his hand. When the moment comes, Don Gonzalo offers his guest scorpions and snakes while a choir intones a moralizing song about the fate of those who mock God. They then shake hands. At that instant, the seducer feels himself burning and exclaims, a prisoner of panic: "I did not offend your daughter, / for she saw my tricks beforehand" ("*A tu hija no ofendí, / que vio mis engaños antes*," p. 187; my translation). When facing the prospect of death, the libertine tries to unload the blame for his onto the Commander's daughter; but his strategy proves fruitless. God's tribunal, unlike human tribunals, judges based on internal law. When Don Juan later asks, "Allow me to call / someone to confess and absolve me," it is useless: "There is no chance. You remember late." Without sincere repentance, there cannot be divine pardon: Don Juan sinks into the tomb while Don Gonzalo's voice resounds: "This is the justice of God: who so does, so he pays."

As in the case of the fairy, the Commander intervenes here in the name of the transcendent world. His action represents the sacred rights of family and military orders, of deep religious roots, which the seducer has reviled.

The supernatural is interested by what is happening in the world and then acts, via some intermediary, when human justice has proved ineffective. This intervention of the divine world in the human is an extraordinary event.

3. A Character of Natural Origins

Not all myths are accounts of otherworldly beings that live in their worlds or intervene in our world.

3.1. Acting in the Supernatural World

When a character of natural origins intervenes in the supernatural world, he brings about what we can call an "extraordinary act." As has been stated, all interaction between the two worlds is authentically extraordinary. It is worth stressing that this is not an extraordinary human being: an extraordinary human being is outside of our ordinary world, he is himself otherworldly. Speaking more accurately, the extraordinary human being does not exist. (This is excepting resuscitated people.)

For this reason, the particular case we will undertake now is especially interesting, because it concerns beings like us. This "us," however, needs more specification. They are not necessarily real in the sense of in-the-flesh. Furthermore, in the mythological world, the majority are fictional characters. Some examples should help clarify this.

3.1.1. Pygmalion

The legendary king of Cyprus, scandalized by the depravity of the indecent Propoetides, had chosen bachelordom. He was, furthermore, a famed sculptor: he sculpted out of ivory a young woman so beautiful that he fell in love with her. His love became such that, as Ovid says, he asked the gods to make his wife, "someone like my ivory girl" (Ovid 10.305). It is not an extraordinary act that a man asks something of the gods, but the gods' response *is* one. The extraordinary act stems from the transformation that Venus works on the statue, changing it into a living being.

This is how the sculptor's position, kneeling in front of the living statue, portrays it in Falconet's sculpture (1763). Romanticism further built up this interference of two worlds: Hoffmann ("The Sandman," 1816), Eichendorff (*The Marble Statue*, 1819), Mérimée ("The Venus of Ille," 1837), Poe ("The Oval Portrait," 1842) or Offenbach (*The Tales of Hoffmann*, 1881). It is worth emphasizing the extraordinary character: new Pygmalion, with his otherworldly vision, Nathanaël gives life to the automaton Olympia, who thereby represents his interiority.

Conversely, there is no supernatural, extraordinary act in Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912). This play (and Cukor's celebrated 1964 musical *My Fair Lady*) describes the gradual transformation of the girl from the underclass into a respectable lady. The instructor teaches her good pronunciation so well that the pupil ultimately advances beyond his control. We also see falling in love here, although there is an ambiguity about its ultimate object: is it love for the creation or for the created "thing" herself? It could seem unlikely that a flower vendor could learn the subtleties of pronunciation from the upper classes, but in no way is this an extraordinary act. Shaw's play is an appealing adaptation of the Pygmalion myth, but without the mythical account.

3.1.2. The Wizard Merlin

This druid and prophet is before anything else a human character, specifically not divine. Geoffrey of Monmouth identifies him in his *Historia Regum Britanniæ* (1136) with a certain Ambrosius that Gildas, in his *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniæ* (4th century), claims to be a descendant of the Roman consular family.

His extraordinary nature begins at birth: according to the *Historia Britonum* by Nennius (c. 976), he was born from the union of an incubus and a woman. His universal knowledge is described in the work of Robert de Boron: from his father, he received the gift of knowledge of all the past, and from God, as compensation, the gift of knowledge of all the future.

Among other extraordinary acts, he uses spells in Arthur's ascent to the throne. Wanting to lend prestige to his destiny, Henry II Plantagenet links his lineage with the mythical king of the Britons.

It does not take long for there to appear monks who insist on having found his tomb in Glastonbury and even his sword, the famous Caledfwlch, which Geoffrey of Monmouth latinizes into "Caliburnus" and his followers transform into Escalibor and, ultimately, Excalibur, *i.e.*, "freed from the stone."

There are two traditions about the relationship between Merlin, Arthur, and the sword:

● To placate the discord among the nobles over the throne of Britain, the wizard convenes them in Logres on Christmas. That night a slab of stone mysteriously appears holding up an anvil, into which a sword has been driven. There is an inscription on the sheet: he who is able to remove this sword shall be the King of Britain. No one can do this except the young Arthur.

● Since Arthur has broken his sword in combat against Sir Pellinore, Merlin takes him a lake out of which emerges a beautiful woman, the Lady of the Lake. Merlin asks her for a magic sword which she holds in her power, and the lady gives it to him. The sword is in a sheath which, the wizard assures him, will protect the king from death in battle.

Merlin is a human character, as we have seen, but in intimate connection with the other world.

3.1.3. Alexander the Great. Anxious to know the depths of the sea, Alexander the Great descends in a strange sort of submarine and observes the fish that he finds there. At least, this is how the scribe Juan Segura de Astorga tells it in the *Libro de Aleixandre* (13th c.):

> The good king walked enclosed in his house,
> his large heart in a narrow resting-place,
> he saw all the sea tenanted by fish,
> there is no beast in the age that was not found there. (My translation)
>
> Andaual bon rey en su casa cerrada,
> seya grant coraçon en angosta posada,
> veya toda la mar de pescados poblada,
> no es bestia nel sieglo que non fus y trobada.
> (Sánchez, stanza 2147)

Alexander the Great is a real character, but the celebrity of his actions explains how one might call some of them extraordinary or marvelous.

3.1.4. The Paladin Astolfo

> Ariosto's hero rides a hippogriff:
> Astolpho in his flight will I pursue,
> That made his hippogryph like palfrey flee,
> With reins and sell, so quick the welkin through;
> That hawk and eagle soar a course less free.
> (Ariosto, canto 33, stanza 96).

> Voglio Astolfo seguir, ch'a sella e a morso,
> a uso facea andar di palafreno
> l'ippogrifo per l'aria a sì gran corso,
> che l'aquila e il falcon vola assai meno.
> (Ariosto, canto 33, stanza 96).

Unlike the previous person, Astolfo is a fictitious character, whom the poet places on an imaginary animal.

The circumstances of both heroes are different, but both undertake extraordinary acts: remaining underwater for long periods of time, flying through the air. For our purposes, it does not matter overmuch that one of them, Alexander, is real, while the other, Astolfo, is fictitious: the marvellous action places both in an equally marvellous world. The attainment of an extraordinary action elevates them to the level of myth.

3.2. Acting in the Natural World

3.2.1. Non-extraordinary Act with a Transcendental Dimension

It could be that the human character performs a completely ordinary act. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus kill Agamemnon.

Phaedra kills herself. Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother. Properly speaking, none of these acts is extraordinary, marvellous, supernatural. The characters are, although fictional, humans like us. Therefore, this case is on different terms from all the others seen up to now.

Or expressed in another way: if there is no extraordinary act, where does myth come from?

From the necessary and transcendental nature of the act.

If we pay attention, we notice that Agamemnon's murder conforms to a superhuman element: fate. The murderers' intentions seem to follow their human motives: ambition, lust, revenge, jealousy… yet there is a more powerful influence: Agamemnon, son of Atreus and nephew of Pelops, falls under the curse of the murdered charioteer, Myrtilus.

To marry Hippodamia, Pelops had to win against King Oenomaus in a chariot race, an impossible feat because of the king's excellent horses. Pelops asked Myrtilus' help to rig his future father-in-law's chariot by replacing the bronze bolts on the wheels with wax bolts; in exchange for this, he offered Myrtilus the privilege of spending the first night with Hippodamia, since he knew Myrtilus was in love with her. Oenomaus died in the accident. When Myrtilus reclaimed his repayment, Pelops not only refused but threw him into the sea. Before dying, the charioteer cursed Pelops and all his descendants. Because of this curse, death follows all the Pelopidae: Atreus and Thyestes kill their half-brother Chryssipus before ferociously fighting over power. Atreus massacres his nephews and feeds them to their father, Thyestes, who calls upon Aegisthus to kill Atreus… Agamemnon is the latest link in this chain.

The completion of the curse brings us into the world of the extraordinary. Fate, the necessary and transcendent being that exceeded the limits of the merely human (Gouhier), is being fulfilled. This necessity and transcendence of fate is what transforms an ordinary act into an extraordinary one. In this case, Agamemnon's killers operate under a power (the *fatum*) from which they cannot escape. Neither the ambition for the throne nor the desire to satisfy their lust fully explains their regicide: in the end, only fate explains the ease of the murder of Agamemnon, conqueror of Troy.

The transcendence of fate, introducing the supernatural element in this story, transforms an apparently ordinary act into an extraordinary one, and makes myth possible.

Fate also can be found at the centre of Phaedra's suicide. Disgusted with the ugly, crippled Hephaestus, Aphrodite takes up relations with Ares, but Helios reveals the marriage to her husband, who surprises the two lovers *in flagrante dilecto* and, trapping them in a net, offers them in ridicule to the looks of the gods of Olympus. Aphrodite comes down on the descendents of Helios in revenge: Pasiphae, who develops a monstrous love for a bull, and Phaedra, who feels a love that is no less monstrous, for her stepson Hippolytus.

More can also be said of Oedipus' misfortunes. Concerned by his lack of an heir, Layos, King of Thebes, consults the oracle at Delphi, whose prediction terrifies him: the son he is about to have will kill his father and marry his mother. It is little help that his mother, Jocasta, exposes the son on Mount Cithaeron. After a series of coincidences, Oedipus faces his father in a fight—without recognizing him—and kills him. He then frees the city of Thebes from the Sphinx, so they name him king and have him marry—also without recognizing her—his own mother.

Thus, the issue requires new consideration. We said above that the character undertakes an ordinary act and that there was no room for myth. Now, though, upon reconsidering that the act takes the form of irrefutable, necessary destiny, and acquires a transcendent quality. In this way the supernatural world is brought into this character whose action becomes, consequently, extraordinary.

Tragic heroes know what they want to do, and they even believe they are free. In fact, one could define fatality as a transcendent necessity that acts on a being who has freedom (Brunel). The combination of all these terms is apparently paradoxical. Yet in reality, each hero's will is mysteriously guided by a foreign element. The exterior and superior passion of a god, of a curse, or of an oracle overcomes the hero's interior, inferior passion. Necessity, transcendence, and freedom unite to form the tragic hero. Within the need that it must be, transcendence is a component that is external to immanence, implying exteriority, openness to an order beyond pure determinism. Freedom also acts, but as an illusion, the chimera to which everyone aspires without ever reaching it.

Countless people believe to act theoretically in full possession of their freedom; but it is a guided freedom: all their little free acts lead them irrevocably towards the fulfillment of a need, transcendent to this world. Only this way could the ordinary acts of tragic characters open to the marvelous, supernatural, extraordinary world.

3.2.2. Non-extraordinary Act Capable of Mythologization

We come now to one of the most controversial issues in myth criticism: if myth can be the account of a non-extraordinary act achieved in the natural world by a character from the natural world. In other words, if myth is the opposite of what has hitherto been said!

We are far removed from the myths discussed until this point: Zeus, fairies, Don Juan, Pygmalion, Merlin, Astolfo, Clytemnestra, Phaedra, and Oedipus. We find ourselves even far removed from the underwater, marvelous Alexander.

Theoretically, one cannot speak of myth when there is an object, nor when there is a human character unrelated to any transcend dimension. These are two non-mythical cases.

Despite these appearances, it is worth exploring whether an object and a person are capable of mythologization, if they comply with certain requirements. In the first place, I will discuss the object, then, the person.

3.2.2.1. Mythologizable Object and the Mythologization Process

I shall begin discussing the way in which a certain object has been perceived in the modern age: tobacco, and, by extension, various forms of herbal inhalation: opium, hashish, etc.

The following is an extract from Molière's *Dom Juan*. This comedy opens with Sgnarelle's panegyric on tobacco:

Let Aristotle and all your philosophers say what they like, there is nothing to be compared with tobacco; 't is the passion of all people of quality, and he that lives without tobacco is not fit to live. It not only exhilarates and clears the human brain, but likewise breeds virtue in the soul; and through its fellowship one learns to be a gentleman. Have you not observed how, the moment a man takes it, he becomes affable to everybody, and is delighted to share it right and left, wherever he may be? He does not even wait to be asked for it, but forestalls people's wishes. So true is it that tobacco inspires sentiments of honour and virtue in all who partake of it (1.1, my translation).

Quoi que puisse dire Aristote et toute la Philosophie, il n'est rien d'égal au tabac: c'est la passion des honnêtes gens, et qui vit sans tabac n'est pas digne de vivre. Non seulement il réjouit et purge les cerveaux humains, mais encore il instruit les âmes à la vertu, et l'on apprend avec lui à devenir honnête homme. Ne voyez-vous pas bien, dès qu'on en prend, de quelle manière obligeante on en use avec tout le monde, et comme on est ravi d'en donner à droite et à gauche, partout où l'on se trouve? On n'attend pas même qu'on en demande, et l'on court au-devant du souhait des gens: tant il est vrai que le tabac inspire des sentiments d'honneur et de vertu à tous ceux qui en prennent (*Œuvres complètes*, 1.1.1-8).

Molière's text does not allow for asserting that tobacco be considered a myth in 1665. No object, by its own properties, could be a myth: it is a *sine qua non* condition of myth to have a personal referent. The Holy Grail is a mythical object because it is related to Christ. Without Christ, the Grail is no more than a cup. Objects, in certain circumstances, participate in a process of mythologization because of their close relation to supernatural beings, with which they are associated: the trident with Neptune, the golden branch with Prosperina and Aeneas, the hammer with Thor. Objects acquire myth qualities by metonymic transfer.

Tobacco is a plant, no more. In theory, nothing predisposes it to undergo the mythologizing process. Nonetheless, as we shall see, a series of inherent qualities, as well as others given it by man, explain how it has undergone a process bordering on mythologization until relatively recently.

In 17th-century France, there is not a consensus about tobacco. On one side, there are its bitter enemies for health and moral reasons, since it is smoked in cabarets and houses of dissolution.

On the other, there are its entrenched defenders, also for health reasons—doctors consider it a remedy, and it is only sold in pharmacies—even for moral and social reasons. Neither its nefarious side effects nor its curative abilities make tobacco or its consumption anything unique. In fact, every surgeon's bloodletting produces similar awful effects and purgative qualities in blood circulation and brain vapors, without being in danger of becoming myth. There is something more to tobacco than its medical and moral aspects.

Some botanical-geographical observations could help us understand the reach of Molière's text.

The tobacco that Sgnarelle so praises is a plant with a strong smell and narcotic properties, which originates in America. Other herbs have similar qualities: the poppy, from which comes opium, is an opiate; Indian hemp, from which hashish is extracted, has similar narcotic and hypnotic properties.

Another essential characteristic of tobacco is its distinctiveness. Its origins give it an exotic quality in the 16th and 17th centuries, when West Indian products attain a regard similar to that of the spices coming from the East Indies in the 14th to 16th centuries. Just like spices, tobacco can boast of an added, superfluous value, particular to a society that has gained a certain opulence and therefore can allow for the unnecessary. Because of this, it acquires a distinctive quality compared to other plants like the potato, which have identical geographical and biological origins: its unnecessary, therefore luxurious, quality.

Finally, some literary considerations. According to classical rhetoric, plays should begin with a secondary character. Nonetheless, Sganarelle does not speak as a servant, but rather as an educated bourgeois man. His speech is charismatic, as the widespread use of metaphors indicates, and his model is the *honnête homme,* as his appreciation of courtesy and conversation shows. The servant, then, holds up the model of a polite man, an artist of conversation, incapable of getting angry for nothing, a paradigm of civility: virtues which are brought together in the tobacco consumer. Tobacco is the object of civilized exchange, elevating the man who inhales it.

A series of unusual aspects coincide, then, in tobacco and its consumption:

— For geographical reasons, it is found among the emblematic discoveries of the modern age.
— For chemical reasons, it has olfactory and narcotic qualities that are out of the ordinary.
— For economic reasons, it is a scarce and unnecessary good, subject to the laws of speculation which apply to luxury items.
— For rhetorical reasons, it enables social climbing and gives access to civilized life.

The stage instructions in the first scene show the lackey "with a snuff-box in his hand," but from this use by a servant, we should not assume that the consumption of tobacco was general: it is merely a literary device. Two signs indicate that Sganarelle is referring in his apologia to snuff, or ground tobacco.

- He gives a speech on the purifying virtues of tobacco on "the human brain." Indeed, in the 17th century, snuff enjoyed even more social standing than smoking tobacco:

> It must be remarked that the sneeze [which it produces] is of great advantage to a brain full of vapors, purging the filthy humors out of the ventricles of the brain, and aiding greatly to spit out the thick material (J. Neander, *Traité du tabac*; translation mine).

Another beneficial effect is the ritual of the handling of tobacco; according to de Caillères (1693), one should "hold it for a time between the fingers before bringing it up to the nose and sniff it with care upon inhaling it" (p.178).

- This is about a snuffbox, not a cigarette case; on the contrary, the text would have indicated *étui à cigarettes*.

The type of tobacco and its container are quite specific. In that period, the snuffbox itself formed a whole fashion: "elegant" people of the moment handle with just one hand various types of snuffboxes with a spring-based opening mechanism: the container thus brings a distinctive and further supplementary quality to its content.

Given all this, we can add to tobacco's uniqueness the allure of tobacco's healthy faculties, the sophistication of its ritual, and its fashionable attractiveness. Tobacco is thus found in a fitting position for the mythologization process in which it will intervene during the whole modern age.

In *The Painter of Modern Life,* Baudelaire shows that this artist wants to "extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory" (p. 12; "*dégager de la mode ce qu'elle peut contenir de poétique dans l'historique, de tirer l'éternel du transitoire*").

Tradition linked a canon of the ideal of beauty; classical taxonomy offers a general base for this which could be characterized by stability, necessity, and permanence. Modern aesthetics does not completely throw out ancient art; nonetheless, it gives preference to shifting elements of beauty, among which fashion stands out. Baudelaire assumes the transitory, fleeting character of fashion, but at the same time, he stresses its ability to reveal the poetic and eternal nature of beauty. A hermeneutic instrument, fashion allows the modern painter to capture and reproduce the two halves of art: half modernity and half eternity.

Sganarelle does something similar in his monologue. The servant begins with a rejection of ancient man from the old days, compared to modern man, from the present. Weighed against the antiquated Aristotle, the *honnête homme* represents the present-day. But, however, he is a man who consumes tobacco, because this object "is the passion of all people of quality," makes man "fit to live," etc. So tobacco is not unique in its origins and effects; instead, it has a lofty purpose. It only lacks a personal dimension.

Baudelaire seems to take this step in "The Poem of Hashish" in *Artificial Paradises:*

Imagine that you are seated, smoking a pipe. Your attention lingers a moment too long on the spirals of bluish clouds that drift slowly upward from the pipe's bowl. The idea of evaporation—slow, uninterrupted, and obsessive—grips your mind and soon you will apply this idea to your own thoughts, to your own thinking process. Through some odd misunderstanding, through a type of transposition or intellectual quip, you feel yourself vanishing into thin air, and you attribute to your pipe (in which you fancy yourself crouched like packed tobacco) the strange ability to *smoke you*) (P. 51).

Je vous suppose assis et fumant. Votre attention se reposera un peu trop longtemps sur les nuages bleuâtres qui s'exhalent de votre pipe. L'idée d'une évaporation, lente, successive, éternelle, s'emparera de votre esprit, et vous appliquerez bientôt cette idée à vos propres pensées, à votre matière pensante.

Par une équivoque singulière, par une espèce de transposition ou de quiproquo intellectuel, vous vous sentirez vous évaporant, et vous attribuerez à votre pipe (dans laquelle vous vous sentez accroupi et ramassé comme le tabac) l'étrange faculté de "vous fumer" (my translation).

The smoker experiences the dual tendency which characterizes, according to Baudelaire, human existence: tendency to concentration and evaporation (J.-P. Richard). Neither the pipe, nor the composition of Indian hemp, nor evaporation is a mere passive object: they are the authentic agents of the alchemic operation which works itself on the smoker. It is not hashish that evaporates as an effect of combustion, but rather, the *smoker,* who finds himself subject to an operation of "evaporation—slow, uninterrupted, and obsessive." Curled up in the inside of the pipe just like the tobacco, he feels the transformation within him of his notions of space and time. The image is irrational, symbolic of the state of evanescence in which the smoker has stayed immersed due to the stupefying effect of the drug.

Even so, we cannot infer that tobacco is a myth. The personal referent applies here to the pipe, not to the tobacco. Furthermore, the orality of the narration is missing, as well as the lack of historical testimony and, above all, the transcendent dimension.

This exploration has, nonetheless, been fruitful: it has shown that there are some objects that, in very particular circumstances—Sganarelle's exaltation, the smoker's experience of hashish—, acquire a dimension bordering on myth, although the mythologization process has not been fully carried out. Later, we shall see how tobacco intervenes in a unique way in the gestures of mythologized characters.

3.2.2.2. Character and the Mythologization Process

Now we shall pass onto the second of this section's inquiries: whether every person is able to be mythologized, under the condition of fulfilling a series of requirements.

Let us propose the most complex case: mythologization of individuals who are not fictitious but rather real, in the flesh.

Criticism has given several explanations of this process; as Ferrier-Caverivière (1988) shows:

Neither history nor the real is in itself mythical. They can, nevertheless, become so if, among other things, an unfathomable mystery penetrates them, if they cease to be readable, to evolve logically. When a historical event or the attitude of a great character appears in rupture with the plot of time or the normality of human behavior, when the zone of shadows and of incomprehension overrun them all at once and make them escape the grasp of science and of pure intelligence, the imagination of a group of men or of a people, defying the laws of the everyday, naturally finds the means to impose its colors and its metamorphoses, its distortions and its expansions (my translation).

Ni l'histoire ni le réel ne sont en eux-mêmes mythiques. Ils peuvent cependant le devenir si, entre autres, un mystère insondable les pénètre, s'ils cessent d'être lisibles, d'évoluer avec logique. Lorsqu'un événement historique ou l'attitude d'un grand personnage apparaît en rupture avec la trame du temps ou la normalité des comportements humains, lorsqu'une zone d'ombre et d'incompréhension les envahit tout d'un coup et les fait échapper aux prises de la science et de la pure intelligence, l'imagination d'un groupe d'hommes ou d'un peuple, défiant les lois du quotidien, trouve naturellement le moyen d'imposer ses couleurs et ses métamorphoses, ses déformations et ses amplifications (p. 598).

Despite its indisputable contribution, it seems that this text does not reach the full richness of the process. There is no doubt that the "logic" of myth is not rational and deductive, but rather symbolic, one particular to the imaginary, but it is essential to draw myth out of the shadows into which it is normally relegated. This is the objective of the book.

Three reflections prevail over this mythologization process relating to people.

3.2.2.1.1. The first relates myth, character, and gesture

Each historical period is prone to the mythologization of a series of people, and it does this according to their typology; i.e., it prefers to confer mythical status after classifying people as if they were characters. It does so according to the times: the politician, the athlete, and the actor have followed the warrior, the sovereign, and the saint.

The type of historic person mythologized is an extremely suggestive figure for myth criticism. It is sufficient to bring to light the new status of actors and actresses, universally known thank to mass media. Because of the media, the public associates famous film stars with a pose, real or false, but constant, conscious, and distinct from other actors, and above all, from the mass in general. We can see this clearly by thinking of famous stills of Audrey Hepburn or Humphrey Bogart.

Without wanting to repeat the previous discussion, let me summarize by saying that, in these images, tobacco takes such prominence that the observer cannot help but associate, through metonymic translation, tobacco with these idols, and these idols with tobacco. An observer of these photos can unconsciously perceive that the film star's abilities with which he would want to identify are not completely foreign to the tobacco that he holds in his lips or she holds in her fingers. Such a perception does not only concern tobacco itself, but the way of smoking and holding it, in the same way that Sganarelle or the "elegant" society people of the 17th century handled the snuffbox: a style is born. The public imitates the gestures, attire, or even the speech of this or that admired character, under the conviction that their objects, clothes, or words bring them, albeit it temporarily, complete satisfaction. Baudelaire expresses this clearly in his essay *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (1995): "Man ends by looking like his ideal self" (p. 2).

According to René Girard, the habitual triangular desire relates a desiring subject, an object of desire, and a mediator of the desire: the influence of the mediator on the subject is such that the subject begins to imitate the mediator. Don Quixote, for instance, imitates Amadis of Gaul, the indisputable mediator of his desire to achieve full chivalric virtue. Madame Bovary imitates various models and their desires, in order to view herself as different from how she is. In the same way, the public views the gestures, intonation, and dress of its heroes as mediators which bring them closer to the object of their desire.

3.2.2.1.2. The Second Reflection Relates Myth, Character, and History

A historical character maintains a direct relationship with certain formally determined years. In other terms, the fact that these real people are perceived as myths shows that, unlike other myths about fictitious characters, the type of character mythologized does not exclude an external verification.

This historical identification seems to contradict my definition of myth as beyond historicity ("the lack of historical testimony…"). It applies, furthermore, as much to classical or ancient characters as to medieval, modern, or contemporary ones. Thus, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Attila the Hun, Charlemagne, the Cid, and Joan of Arc have undergone a similar mythologization process to that of Napoleon, Stalin, Che, or Michael Jackson. Each of these people has been the object of oral and synthetic accounts about their acts, their trials, social roles, and exemplary universal vocation.

Perhaps the ancient and medieval mythical figures are adorned with a greater aura than modern and contemporary mythical figures, but all of them have a greatness which consecrates and distinguishes them from the common people.

In general, all these figures have undergone an identical sublime yet catastrophic ordeal to that experienced by fictitious heroes such as Phaedra, Orpheus, and Arthur. In both cases, their death elevates them above the common fate of mortals and, in some way, deifies them (or demonizes them). The people applies exceptional qualities to exceptional individuals; it resists believing that a hero (whether a benefactor or tyrant), allotted an exceptional life, could be subject to the common laws of human life.

Of particular note are these figures' deaths: often, they are marked by a special death, even a certain immortality, as if they were supernatural beings. Three examples show this clearly:

- On May 5, 1821, Napoleon dies on St. Helena Island, but since then a theory of his poisoning by the English or by the Marquis de Montholon has developed. His death has only extended his fame: buried with military honors on the island, the Chamber of Deputies votes for the repatriation of his remains to France.

Exhumed on October 15, 1840, the emperor's body is moved on board *La Belle-Poule,* commanded by the Prince of Joinville, the son of King Louis-Philippe, and buried two months later in Les Invalides.

● According to doctors, Stalin dies on May 3, 1953 as a result of a cerebral hemorrhage, but there is still a common conviction that he was assassinated by the hand of his collaborators, afraid of a new purge. The circumstances of his burial also invite such an interpretation: interred in Lenin's Mausoleum, his body is secretly transferred to a tomb at the foot of the Kremlin on the night of October 30-31, 1961.

● Arrested in Bolivia after a shooting, Ernesto Guevara is executed on October 9, 1967. Facing a general disbelief that a combatant such as Che could have died, the commander-in-chief of the Bolivian armed forces orders that his hands be cut off and placed in formaldehyde (to show them in case Castro should deny that he had died in combat). Later, the hands were stolen and sent to Cuba. His mortal remains were interred in a secret place.

In these cases the dates give witness to a historical event: the death of a real person. Nevertheless, for good or for ill, these three have become, insofar as they concern us, mythical characters. With mythologized historical people, something happens that is different from literary myths. In literary myths, the absence of historical testimony operates as a mythologizing element. In historical characters inclined to mythologization, historical testimony weakens history itself: immediately, one doubts the truthfulness of the facts and explanations that surround the character's death, and a hypothesis normally devoid of a testimonial basis is disseminated. In other words, death discharges oral accounts, an indispensable element of the mythologizing process which up to that moment historical reality denied. The deaths of these historical characters corroborate the eschatological quality surrounding every myth.

3.2.2.1.3. The Third Reflection Relates Myth, Character, and Distancing

Another essential condition of the mythologizing process is the distance between mythologized individuals and normal people. This distance results from the exceptional—or apparent—human dimension of the mythologized historical characters. The nonpareil individuals in politics, war, sports, song, or film acquire in life a greatness which is clearly disproportionate to reality.

Occasionally they are authentic heroes, i.e., women or men whose actions or abilities fully exceed those of common mortals: an athlete who continuously breaks a world record immediately comes to form part of the *aristoi*.

On the night he won the 200-meter in London, Usain Bolt exclaimed, "Now I am a legend" (personal communication, August 9, 2012).

As a consequence of this excellence, these characters might be blocked by their trainers or agents from appearing at ordinary places, often to their detriment. Separation is the tribute that they have to pay for their idiosyncrasy. The media, with the help of studied methods in optics, acoustics, and presentation (that is, staging and effects of perspective), makes sure to create distance between the spectator and the hero. Sometimes they do this for security reasons, but others it is to increase the hero's exceptional aura.

Paradoxically, this distance often increases in the case of artificially-fashioned heroes. In these cases, the amounts of distancing are inversely proportional to the real value of a given character, and directly proportional to the image which their agents try to preserve among the public. Hence the frustration when the barriers break; it is not unusual for an idol to cause disappointment in his fans after an unexpected encounter, equal to equal, on the street, on public transit, or at a café. In general, admiration for heroes is ephemeral, and the closer they are in space or time to the admirer, the more ephemeral the admiration.

Once distance is created, the public tends to approach its idol not out of any wish to break down its myth, but to satisfy a desire or fill a lack. While the spell lasts, the admirer really or imaginarily emulates the gesture that best fits his hero, like Napoleon's placing his hand on his chest or Che's smoking a Cuban cigar. This gestural emulation evokes reductively and ephemerally that person's desires for the greatness of empire or for the rising of a new Vietnam.

4. Conclusion

More and more, new myths are ephemeral. Today, myths have a run of an exponentially short run, which ends in their dizzy devaluation and consequent replacement: they follow one after another with a shocking speed, as much because of the conditions of the media as for the laws of supply and demand.

Compared to ancient and medieval myths, we are witnessing the trivialization of modern and contemporary myths, the disorder of their conditions of birth, development, and death.

This demythologization is not free from skepticism. In the middle of his panegyric on tobacco, Sganarelle allowed a hint of irony to shine through about the true capabilities of the object in itself. A similar detachment shows in Baudelaire's dialogue on the fleeting effects of hashish. Another occurs among the passing admirers of mythologized real characters: whether because they value little on their own, or because they are no longer sustained by the media, fans observe, not without frustration or contempt, the downfall of their idols.

In this piece, I have shown four ways of combining the natures of characters and events. Myth, both literary and historical, arises every time that an extraordinary quality affects characters or events. So we should ask whether myth is possible without an extraordinary dimension—and I have fundamental doubts about that.

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