The Mythological Themes In The Fictional Works Of Jacques Roumain

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Jacques Roumain was born in 1907 to a Port-au-Prince family of comfortable means. Before he reached the age of twenty, he had traveled in Germany a country whose culture he admired, and had studied in Berne and Zurich in 1925. In the latter city he must have acquainted himself with the works and thought of C. G. Jung, as repeated echoes of the Swiss philosopher's theories of the Collective Unconscious run through the fiction which the young Haitian poet was to create at an early age. Subsequently Roumain engaged in serious anthropological studies in Belgium, at the Sorbonne, and at Columbia University, which led him to become a much reputed archeologist and ethnologist of Haiti.

Although at the end of his brief career he was also engaged in scientific research in Botany and Paleontology, his main goal in life was political activism. Denouncing his own class he snubbed those he called "Les Fantoches" or the bourgeois mulattoes of the Haitian cities whom he considered snobbish and effete.[1] He vigorously opposed the occupation of his Island by the American Marines, founded the Haitian Communist Party in 1934, and became its General Secretary. His denunciations of the dictatorial policies of President Borno and of his successors caused his imprisonment on several occasions; but he defied his captors despite beatings and torture. After his release from prison two bouts of illness caused his untimely death in 1945 at the age of thirty-eight. There were rumors that he died of unnatural causes.

Although Jacques Roumain is the author of many poems, scientific treatises, translations, short stories, and essays, he is best known for his two novels, one published in 1931 and entitled *La Montagne ensorcelée,* and his fictional masterpiece *Gouverneurs de la Rosée,* which was published in 1944 and won him worldwide acclaim.

Though the youthful novel did not attain the scope or the depth of the mature work, we can detect in it certain traits which presage the later development. Both novels deal with peasants and are located in rural and arid mountain settings. Both follow similar patterns as far as plot and symbolic imagery are concerned. It must be pointed out, however, that the first attempt is imbued with a nihilistic pessimism, as the poet had not yet reached the philosophical views of his maturity. Despite some differences, both works may be qualified by the words of poet Jacques Stéphen Alexis: "Chez Roumain, nous trouvons une sorte de réalisme symbolique. Le roman est une espèce de grand poème populaire aux contours classiques et aux personnages quasi symboliques."[2]

A brief outline of the plots of the novels will show that they follow a parallel course of action. The basic structure is simple: there is emphasis on a collective group or a small village community composed of several generations. In *La Montagne ensorcelée* the misery of the peasants is exacerbated by a wet spell which follows the drought and prevents farming of the eroded countryside. Cattle and children are decimated by dysentery. The disgruntled and idle men must project their anger upon a scapegoat whom they readily recognize in the person of old Placinette, an outsider and daughter of a sorcerer who has left her some coveted

property. What precipitates her lynching at the hands of the enraged mob is the love which unites her daughter Grâce to young Aurel. The girl is also courted by the Village Chief who, by inciting the farmers to violence against the "witches," wreaks vengeance on her for spurning his marriage proposal. After the mother's death by stoning, the daughter is decapitated like the snake which appears to be the family's tutelary deity. The old woman's last appeal to the serpent god Damballah's protection is as futile as the girl's outcry for public pity! The end seems bitter and futile, a denunciation of collective superstition and mass cruelty, such as can be found in the modern mythological novels of Nikos Kazantsakis or Pär Lagerkvist where we witness similar scenes of death by stoning of a woman whose role recalls that of the Biblical Mary Magdalene.[3]

In *Gouverneurs de la Rosée,*[4] a lyrical work which reaches epic proportions, the author shows a more optimistic and compassionate attitude towards suffering humanity. The Village of Fonds-Rouge is devastated by drought and ensuing famine. The archetypical old couple Délira and Bien-Aimé have had no news from their son Manuel who left for Cuba more than fifteen years before. Suddenly the young man returns after having slaved for many years on a Cuban sugar plantation where he participated in a strike against its American owner. Shocked at the sight of his arid homeland he comes to the conclusion that mistreatment of the soil and man-caused erosion is the reason for the wretched condition of his village. As a result, he sets out to discover a new spring which could be tapped for irrigation. In this undertaking he is aided by Anaïse, the daughter of a clan which pursues a blood feud against his. The secret relationship between the lovers is discovered by the traitor Gervilen, a rejected suitor of the girl. After Manuel finds the water and organizes the hitherto inimical factions into one "coumbite" or cooperative work gang, he is stabbed in the back like many a mythical hero and dies, but not before entrusting to his mother and to his bride the task of organizing the channeling work. After his death Anaïse is comforted by the realization that she expects a child and that Manuel has not completely died as the farmers are now reconciled and prosperity has returned to the land.

In both novels certain themes recur and similar archetypes are featured. These mythological figures are not necessarily limited to the Voodoo cults which prevail in Haiti nor to the ancestral religions of Africa, but take their roots even further in a ground common to all mankind. Like Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Roumain realizes that all humanity is alike and that the same myths operate for all.[5] Roumain depicts Voodoo ceremonies with great authenticity and with a wealth of accurate detail. This is not surprising since this cult is part of the heritage of a group with which he sympathized, and since its folklore is rich in humor and poetry. It also offers a refuge to the congregation in time of crisis. Naive religion, however, plays a far greater part in the life of the unenlightened and the elderly such as Délira, Placinette, and the senile and gullible Désilus. These old people are steeped in archaic beliefs and address their prayers to Christ, the Saints, the Virgin Altagrâce, and the African deities such as Papa Legba, Damballah, Mistress Erzilée, and the Ancestors who are said to rest in Guinea but exact their share of libations and grain.

Roumain cleverly evokes the quality of syncretism inherent in Haitian culture and religion. As a trained anthropologist he describes with veracity rites based on Dahomean and more specifically on collective memories which have been amalgamated with Christian and other elements in the New World setting. As an example he presents a child's funeral as presided upon by the "Père Savane," an unordained itinerant priest who officiates according to Latin rites, whereas the mother in her bereavement invokes the help of the "Houngan" or Voodoo Priest and of the "Loas" or ancestral spirits to bring her baby back to life. In a similar vein, one of the protagonists compares the Serpent Damballah with the Biblical Snake in the Garden of Eden.

The Dahomean Goddess of Love, Erzilée, Mistress of the Springs, is presented as a testimony to the common ground from which myths sprout, and is surrounded by attributes associated with the Classical Sirens, Mélusine, Fata Morgana, Ondine, and the Lorelei, to name but a few. "A minuit, elle sort de la source et chante et peigne sa longue chevelure ruisselante que ça fait une musique plus douce que les violons. C'est un chant de perdition pour qui l'entend, il n'y a pas de signe de la croix ni d'au nom du Père qui puisse le sauver, son maléfice le prend comme un poisson dans une nasse et la Maîtresse de l'Eau l'attend au bord de la Source et chante et lui sourit et lui fait signe de la suivre au fond des eaux d'où il ne remontera jamais" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 166).

Several other modern writers have deliberately injected anachronisms and mixed mythological patterns to point to the common features shared by the so-called primitive as well as the civilized mind. Notably Thomas Mann in his *Joseph* Cycle mixed Classical, Biblical, Oriental, and African myths. Nikos Kazantsakis does the same in his *Odyssey* and in his novels, whereas Pär Lagerkvist delights in mixing Norse, Christian, Judaic, and Greek myths in his symbolic fiction.

Certain themes which are favored by Roumain recur even more frequently than others. The Magna Mater or Earth Mother is ever present in his works. As a guiding theme in *Gouverneurs,* she may be primarily equated with the Soil or Sod adored by the son, Manuel. Sometimes she is identical with his own carnal mother Délira, or Mater Dolorosa, but more often she is extended to Nature and the ancestral earth. She is portrayed in a more general fashion than Asase the Fanti-Ashanti Goddess, or Dahomey's Dagowe, or even Aboma, the Congolese divinity.[6] Manuel immerses himself in her, kisses her, fondles, and tills her with a frenzy fraught with sexual overtones: "Je suis ça: cette terre-là, et je l'ai dans le sang. Regarde ma couleur: On dirait que la terre a déteint sur moi . . ." *(Gouverneurs,* p. 79). Finally he dies for her after consenting to sacrifice himself so as to ensure her fertility in a Voodoo ceremony. He becomes her bridegroom and is carried back into her womb: ". . . ils emportent leur frère vers cette terre qu'il a tellement aimée, qu'en vérité il est mort pour elle" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 205). In earlier days he treats her as a beloved bride. She is his "pays" and "on l'a dans la peau, les yeux. . . . Chair de sa terre, les os de ses pierres, fruits de sa bouche" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 30). She must be treated well and protected from overwork and erosion, as he wishes to "Vivre en bon ménage avec la terre" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 25). This represents a principle of survival and sound economics. If too much abuse is heaped upon her, she shall be barren as a result. At this point it would be relevant to mention that both Manuel and Aurel in the earlier novel, overpower their virgin brides on the ground while inhaling their earthy scent in scenes fraught with an aura of archetypal rape.

Next, the Magna Mater incarnates herself in the shape of the Mater Dolorosa as personified by old Délira. She represents the suffering of the earth and assumes the part of a mediator between men. Like the Virgin Mary she bore only One Son. At solemn moments "Délira-Délivrance" remembers her birth pangs with stereotyped accents: "O fils de mon ventre, douleur de mon ventre, joie de ma vie, chagrin de ma vie, mon garçon, mon seul garçon" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 27). "La terre est dans la douleur. . . . Tout mon corps accouche la misère" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 14). Upon various occasions she is equated with death as she willy-nilly consigns her son to his fate by calling the Voodoo ceremony during the course of which he will be symbolically immolated as the sacrifice demanded by the god Ogoun who presides over the water. She presages the final catastrophe with greater intuitive powers than her old husband. Like a Pietà, she holds her dying son in her lap as he

significantly returns to his mother and not to his lover when he is mortally wounded. After his untimely death, Délira is a source of strength and fulfills her son's mission. In this respect she reminds one of the African Matriarch rather than of the sorrowing Mary whose gentleness she nonetheless shares.

The Magna Mater may also take a much less sympathetic guise in the witch-like Placinette. Her very name suggests that of the Petro deity Marinette, who is as frightful in her manifestations as Erzilée, her Rada counterpart, is young and gentle.[7] Placinette, the daughter of a sorcerer who practiced not Voodoo but harmful Wanga magic, cannot help being possessed by the snake spirit of her ancestors, despite her basic lack of malevolence. Her heredity prevents her from practicing beneficent white magic and everything which comes in contact with her, including her child, dies. She is the primeval snake, or at least she is perceived as such consciously by others and subconsciously by herself.

Another archetypal figure closely associated with the Magna Mater is the Son, or Divine Hero, or even "Child Archetype" if one wishes to adopt the Jungian-Kerényi mythological nomenclature. Manuel incarnates this type very aptly. In typical fashion he returns from servitude in alien territory where he was exiled in a sort of death just like Joseph, Oedipus, or Herakles. He displays charismatic features to his beholders, who do not remember him, upon his return from Cuba "auréolé de mystères et de légendes" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 88). Strangers call him their "chief" as they expect salvation from him. Even Anaïse surmises: ". . . tu es le nègre qui trouvera l'eau, tu seras le maître des sources, tu marcheras dans ta rosée et au milieu de tes plantes" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 98). Like other corn gods such as Adonis and Osiris, he must be dismembered and must die so that the seed can be sown and reaped to feed the community. His role, in addition, is both Christ-like and Promethean as he desires to provide not only food but education, fraternity, and enlightenment for his people even at the price of rebellion. This identification with Jesus is actually not too startling if one considers that Manuel is sacrificed and identified with Ogoun in a prefigured Epiphany, since in the Haitian cult the African God is often depicted with a Christ-like effigy and martyred.[8] He is conceived as a noble but mortally wounded warrior who partakes of both Christian and Pagan attributes as he willingly, as well as unwillingly, faces death for the welfare of the group.[9] Manuel, true to the Savior Archetype will be reborn in his child and his name will survive in song and in folklore. Furthermore, his reconciliatory efforts will be crowned by posthumous success.

Manuel is a bearer of progress, a Son Figure who can be opposed to that of the more primitive father who is steeped in the unconscious and unbending ways of tradition. Bien-Aimé embodies this type; like Papa Legba, the aging god, he is growing weak and senile and he adheres to outdated taboos. He relentlessly refuses the conciliatory mission of his son and clings to narrow-minded prejudices. It is significant that in Africa Legba was a beautiful young procreative Divinity associated with phallic symbols, whereas in Haiti, Papa Legba is an ancient man who walks with the aid of a cane. Clearly what had been young and potent in the Old World lost its relevance in the New World and the Sons had to adapt themselves or rise against the state of slavery which replaced their peaceful agricultural past in Dahomey. Manuel does not actually revolt against his carnal father whom he humors but against a corrupt regime at home, racism on a broader scale, and exploitation from any source even if it is subtly practiced by the "Houngan" who enriches himself by promising fraudulent cures to the ignorant peasantry.

Another archetypal figure, closely associated with the hero but pitted against him is the traitor. He is the symbolical enemy brother, the jealous competitor, the

Cain or Judas of the Bible. Gervilen incarnates this role as he is by nature "le malveillant, le Judas" hated by all and perpetrating evil in an unconscious fashion. He is depicted as a fratricide, as a hairy, vicious animal, and as red-eyed *(Gouverneurs,* p. 57). He shares physical and moral traits with the Biblical Esau as well as with the "Yé-ruj" sorcerers of the evil Petro cult. In *La Montagne ensorcelée,* treacherous Balletroy fulfills a similar function and precipitates the sacrificial murder.

In a broader sense, another archetypal structure haunts all of Roumain's poetic conception: it can be designated by the pairing of opposites. We find throughout his works constant contrasts and antitheses such as drought and wetness, sterility and fecundity, cool moonlight and harsh sunlight, symbols of ascent and descent, the archetypal male or Yan element of *machismo* with its opposite female or Yin counterpart, and, of course, life opposes death. Yet all this contrast between opposite elements does not constitute an absolute split. The circle or wheel of time causes alternating facets to manifest themselves. The order of birth, toil, death is unchanging. It started in primeval epochs on African soil, but it will go on forever. Sometimes Roumain takes a pessimistic view of this immutable destiny of the race, yet in his last work life triumphs: ". . . la vie c'est un retour continuel. Les morts, dit-on, s'en reviennent en Guinée, et même la mort n'est qu'un autre nom pour la vie. Le fruit pourrit dans la terre et nourrit l'espoir de l'arbre nouveau" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 40).

Although Roumain's farmers are steeped in mythology and are forever ready to be possessed by their ancestral "loas" or spirits, while they adhere at the same time to a rather naive Catholic faith, the hero Manuel transcends these beliefs when he expresses his creator's existential thought that: Man is the author of his own fate. Praying to Saints, or Spirits or God is useless: ". . . la Providence . . . c'est le propre vouloir du nègre de ne pas accepter le malheur . . . de dompter la terre" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 54). Although he avows respect for ancient customs he is impatient with the fatalism and resignation of his people whose Voodoo religion is but a temporary palliative for a wretched social condition: "Les habitants oubliaient leur misère: la danse et l'alcool les anesthésiaient, entraînaient et noyaient leur conscience naufragée dans ces régions irréelles et louches où les guettaient la déraison farouche des dieux africains" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 76).

It may appear that Roumain's attitude toward the popular creed of his people shows fluctuations and a sense of ambivalence. This will be more understandable if we realize that the poet's Marxist philosophy forced him to consider myth, tradition, and folkways as a factor which deters from revolt: ". . . l'expérience est le bâton des aveugles et j'ai appris que ce qui compte . . . c'est la rébellion, et la connaissance que l'homme est le boulanger de sa vie" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 96).

Like Kazantsakis' heroes Jesus and Manolios, the shepherd, Manuel, has socialist goals. He wishes to free the people, organize their ranks so they can fight exploitation whether it be on a Cuban plantation run by a ruthless American boss, or at home in the Haitian hills where they fall victims to corrupt judges, policemen, notables, cheating land surveyors, and city tradesmen, who prey on their poverty and ignorance *(Gouverneurs,* p. 80). He realizes their vulnerability since they are illiterate, divided, and unaware. His ultimate goal is to join them in one giant "Coumbite" where they can pool their mutual efforts. He wants to imbue in them a sense of solidarity. Although this culture-bearing hero is himself as illiterate as his neighbors, he dreams of starting a School in his Village.

A belief in Divine Providence, miracles, and reenactment of a set of mythical stereotypes would only hamper progress. What actually killed Placinette, Grâce, and Manuel was the envy, greed, superstition, and hatred of men, not divine retribution. The chain of poverty and ignorance can only be broken by inculcating a sense of unity and self-determination into the minds of the serfs. Manuel speaks for his creator, Jacques Roumain, when he voices a thought the scope of which extends far beyond his beloved Island: ". . . tu vois, c'est la plus grande chose au monde que tous les hommes sont frères, qu'ils ont le même poids dans la balance de la misère et de l'injustice" *(Gouverneurs,* p. 100).

NOTES

[1]See Jacques Stéphen Alexis, preface to *La Montagne ensorcelée,* by Jacques Roumain (Paris: Les Editeurs français réunis, 1972), p. 13.

[2]J. S. Alexis, preface to *La Montagne ensorcelée,* p. 24.

[3]See Nikos Kazantsakis' *Greek Passion, Freedom or Death,* and the *Last Temptation of Christ,* and Pär Lagerkvist's *Barabbas.*

[4]Roumain, *Les Gouverneurs de la Rosée* (Paris: Les Editeurs francais réunis, 1946). Any subsequent references to this work shall appear as *Gouverneurs.*

[5]Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), p. 354.

[6]Cf. Roger Bastide, *African Civilizations in the New World,* trans. Peter Green (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 100.

[7]The Dahomey Rada Voodoo is connected with the peaceful Damballah cult, whereas the later Caribbean Petro rite is bloodthirsty, bitter, and unbending. According to scholars such as Bastide this contrast is due to the revolted spirit of Africans transplanted and enslaved in a strange milieu.

[8]Cf. Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen, Voodoo Gods of Haiti* (New York: Delta, 1970), p. 132.

[9]Cf. C. G. Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious* (London: Trubner, 1946), p. 23.