

# Mythological Syncretism in the Works of Four Modern Novelists

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In the nineteen forties and fifties while the world was still in the throes of war and social upheaval, four novelists wrote fictional works with similar archetypal themes. Thomas Mann is the senior author as his *Joseph Cycle*<sup>1</sup> most directly influenced the work of his younger colleagues. The Scandinavian Pär Lagerkvist so closely followed in his footsteps that similar characters and structures can be found throughout his entire opus, from the popular *Barabbas*<sup>2</sup> through the *Sybil*<sup>3</sup> and the *Holy Land*.<sup>4</sup> The fictional works of the Greek poet Nikos Kazantzakis such as the *Greek Passion*<sup>5</sup> and the *Last Temptation of Christ*<sup>6</sup> also display the same mythological images and patterns. Finally, repercussions of almost identical archetypal figures impress the reader of the novels of Jacques Roumain, a Haitian poet and writer of fictional works, such as *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*<sup>7</sup> ("Governors of the Dew") which won him worldwide acclaim just prior to his untimely death in 1944.

It is significant that these four novelists came under the influence of Nietzsche<sup>8</sup>, that all four view life as myth, and that all studied mythology<sup>9</sup>. All had read Wundt's sociological studies, and all were impressed by Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, where he postulates the existence of a "Collective Unconscious."<sup>10</sup> It must be emphasized that this work dates back to 1913, a period when Freud still collaborated with the philosopher C.G. Jung, with whom he was to feud later on.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Mann, *Joseph und seine Brüder*; four parts, published 1933-1943. Edition cited here is the 1956 edition (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1956).

<sup>2</sup>Pär Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*; published 1950. Translation cited here is by Alan Blair (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958).

<sup>3</sup>Pär Lagerkvist; *Sibyllan*, 1956. Translation cited here is by Naomi Walford (New York: Random House, 1958).

<sup>4</sup>Pär Lagerkvist; *Det heliga landet*, 1964. Translation cited here is by Naomi Walford (New York: Random House, 1966).

<sup>5</sup>Nikos Kazantzakis, *Ho Christos xanastauronetai*, 1948. Translation cited here is by Jonathan Griffin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959).

<sup>6</sup>Nikos Kazantzakis, *Ho teleutaios peirasmos*, 1951. Translation cited here is by P.A. Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).

<sup>7</sup>Jacques Roumain, *Les Gouverneurs de la Rosée*, 1944. Edition cited here is the 1946 edition (Paris: Les Editeurs français réunis, 1946).

<sup>8</sup>Kazantzakis went so far as to pattern his own existence after that German model, and in every one of his works he was to present life as an arena wherein a would-be superman was torn between Apollonian and Dionysian forces.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Mann collaborated with the Hungarian mythologist Karl Kerényi. The correspondence between the two has been published under the title *Romandichtung und Mythologie*, (Zürich: Rhein Verlag, 1945).

<sup>10</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Totem und Tabu*, 1912-1913 (*Totem and Taboo*; New York: Norton 1952), p. 157. Mann wrote an Essay, "Freud und die Zukunft," wherein he acknowledges his indebtedness to the Viennese psychologist.

Finally, all four, including the Haitian who had studied anthropology in Zurich, were directly influenced by the Jungian Archetype Projection theories and openly acknowledged their debt to the Swiss psychologist.

A study of the backgrounds of these four authors reveals certain similar patterns. Thomas Mann was born into a stolid mercantile family in Hamburg, but he did have a Brazilian mother who instilled a note of spontaneity and musicianship into the formal household. During his entire life, Thomas Mann felt the split between conventional paternal milieu and the lure of more artistic and Bohemian life style. His own desire for the joys of normalcy and of mediocre domesticity, sharply conflicted with latent homosexual and anarchistic tendencies, such as one sees reflected in his protagonists as well.

Lagerkvist was born into a stifling Puritanical background. His father was a pastor, and his mother a cold, censorious hypocrite, who was to poison his entire life with feelings of guilt and resentment. His long quest for meaning in life, whether on a religious or on an existential plane, never ceased and was reflected throughout his opus.

Kazantsakis was born in a Greek Orthodox family of peasants on the Isle of Crete, at the crossroads between European, Asian, and African cultures.<sup>11</sup> While he revered his saintly mother, he was torn by feelings of ambivalence towards his father, whose coarse machismo he would emulate in vain.<sup>12</sup> Even during his childhood he felt the split between two antagonists: Greece and Turkey, active virility and artistic sensitivity, a clash between the precreative traditions of his ancestors, and his own fear of women.<sup>13</sup> Later in his life, he became an active Leninist and he died a guest of Mao in China, in 1957.

Jacques Roumain was born into a well-to-do family of Port-au-Prince mulattoes. After studying in Europe and in the U.S.A., he rejected the privileges of his bourgeois family. He revolted against several repressive regimes in his island, and founded the Communist Party there. After repeated incarcerations, as well as torture, he died in 1944 at the age of thirty-seven, under suspicious circumstances.

A reader of the works of these writers is struck by the recurrence of parallel themes. In some cases, the fictional types seem to mirror each other. The first, and most pervasive, is the prototype of the "hero." For Thomas Mann this figure is incorporated in the pseudo-biblical character of Joseph, whom he endows with typical heroic traits, such as a charismatic physique, early separation from a virginal mother, and a life fraught with trials and tribulations. This particular Joseph wills himself into some of the roles which he assumes, and which vary according to the stages of his development and to the locales in which he is cast. Not fate alone, but also his own subconscious manipulations determine his path. So, for instance, he plays the part of a Baal sorcerer while in Canaan, the role of Tammuz-Attis-Adonis Corn-gods while in Syria, and later on, while in Egypt, he comes to successively impersonate dismembered Osiris, Anubis the jackal-god, and the sacred Apis bull. Throughout, he identifies with the playful Graeco-Roman god Hermes-Mercury.

Lagerkvist's "hero" prototypes are often anti-heroes, as is the case for the "Dwarf" and for "Barabbas." In their case, the epiphanies are ambivalent or aborted, and in the final outcome, they submit to unremitting darkness or existential despair.

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<sup>11</sup>See, Helen Kazantsakis, *Nikos Kazantsakis: A Biography Based on His Letters* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968).

<sup>12</sup>See, Nikos Kazantsakis, *Report to Greco*, trans. P.A. Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 451.

<sup>13</sup>Kazantsakis, *Report to Greco*, p. 49.

The divine hero, such as conceived by Kazantsakis and by Roumain, is more Christlike. True to messianic tradition, the hero chooses to suffer immolation so that his ultimate sacrifice may redeem the community. The Greek Christ impersonator is a shepherd named Manolios, while his Caribbean counterpart is a peasant whose name, significantly, is "Manuel." Both these characters are very human, but their mission grows on them so that their people come to accept them as saviors.

Another constant theme which dominates the works of all four of these writers, is that of the "magna mater" or "great mother." If the Jungian jargon of "anima projection" or "archetype" is to be avoided, this recurrent image can be referred to as the "eternal feminine," as Goethe called it, or the "female face of the earth," to use Kazantsakis's own terminology. This "great mother" is associated with animals such as the snake, which is omnipresent in all the works, the vulture, the goat, and the black mare of Scandinavian mythology. She is not only symbolized in these animate forms, but is also associated with water symbols (such as the sea of oblivion and the well of purity), plant symbols (such as flowers and trees), and astral bodies (such as the morning star and the moon). To sum up, she comes to represent all of nature in its benevolent and nurturing aspects as well as in its destructive ones.

This mythical female, who in most cases impedes the progress of the hero, represents yin, or the dark forces of nature. She operates on a much broader scope than the hero's carnal mother. In any case, the umbilical cord must be severed if individuation is to be achieved: "Siehe, man muß sie durchschneiden, die Nabelschnur, daß sich das Kalb von der Mutterkuh löse und werde zum Stiere des Lichtes" (*Joseph*, p. 866). The female element represents an archaic matriarchal order which the hero must supersede.

Woman represents a threat to Mann's, to Kazantsakis's, and to Lagerkvist's heroes: she means sloth and natural conservatism geared to a procreative purpose: "But man with God . . . would have been obliterated by hunger, fear and cold; and if he survived these, he would have crawled like a slug midway between lions and lice; and if with incessant struggle he managed to stand on his hind legs, he would never have been able to escape the tight warm embrace of his mother the monkey" . . . (*Last Temptation of Christ*, p. 281). To a man who is dedicated to his Apollonian mission, she is a mere distraction. (Of course this is only true in the case of the outstanding man endowed with an artistic or prophetic vocation.) However, for even this type of man, it is not easy to renounce what Thomas Mann ironically designates as "Die Wonnen der Gewöhnlichkeit," the common joys of everyday living. The Promethean hero, however, is constantly warned that he cannot stagnate in trivial existence, lest he be caught in the spokes of the wheel of time. And so he must break loose from the grip of the Mother, the family, the tribe, and even from the nation. Often this "magna mater" appears quite unreal as she is a figment of man's imagination or a projection of his atavistic superstition. Part of growth and maturity depends on the demystification of this myth. Ultimately, the female element can become a Beatrice-like benign guiding spirit who helps the dying hero to find peace.

For Thomas Mann, Mut, wife of Potiphar, the Eunuch, embodies all these traits. Her very name suggests the Mother. She is represented as a frustrated middle-aged temptress who plays the role of Babylonian Astarte-Ishtar, the goddess who seduces her son Gilgamesh, the Asian Earth Goddess Cybele who emasculates her son Attis, and "Eset als Geierweibchen" (*Joseph*, p. 968), Egyptian Isis who is the consort as well as the mother of dismembered Osiris. Her utterances are reminiscent of Hellenic Phaedra, Medea, Dido, the Maenads, and witches

engaged in black magic under the spell of Hecate's dark moon. Thomas Mann, in his letters and his essays, declares that he purposely mixed all his mythologies so as to point to the ground common to all humans and to exorcise the Nazi myth of racial superiority.<sup>14</sup> It is by no means accidental that he thus fuses biblical, Assyrian, Egyptian, and African prototypes, "Denn das Typische ist ja das Mythische schon, insofern es Ur-Norm und Ur-Form des Lebens ist, Zeitloses Schema und von je gegebene Formel, in die das Leben eingeht, in dem es aus dem Unbewußten seine Züge reproduziert" (*Joseph*, p. 162).

Lagerkvist features a nameless temptress who is an almost exact replica of Mut. She, too, is over thirty, married in a loveless arrangement, and eager to seduce a naive youth in an atmosphere of social sham and secrecy, so as to denounce him later on. Like her Egyptian counterpart, she displays a thin aristocratic face which contrasts with a voluptuous body. Both heroines end their careers by filling life's void with religious practices.

Kazantsakis depicts similar types such as the Magdalenes and the widows who never relent in their pursuit of younger men: "I must look at you, because woman is issued from the body of man and still cannot detach her body from his . . . Allow me to look at you, therefore, my child" (*Last Temptation of Christ*, p. 329). These predatory females coax, mother, and smother the chaste young hero in a fruitless attempt to attain one single goal, common to all: namely motherhood. Jacques Roumain's Haitian heroines are less hysterical and more natural in their maternal parts. But they too risk death and social disgrace in order to fulfill their sexual mission. Like several similar heroines in Kazantsakis's and in Lagerkvist's work, Grace, a character in *La Montagne ensorcelée*, an early novel by the Caribbean author, is stoned by the superstitious populace.

To all these writers, this type epitomizes collective interchangeable womanhood that goes through similar phases: Virgin girlhood, wifehood, harlotry, kindly but demanding motherhood, and ultimately sainthood. Sometimes she is pure, sometimes ribald, at times castrating and malevolent, but at all times she represents the earth with its lures as well as its bondage to eternal cycles. The old adage "from womb to tomb" is valid in all cases, as the Apollonian Sun-hero must escape from her clutches if he will attain light and freedom.

Two of these authors, Thomas Mann and Kazantsakis were open misogynists, the other two display more sympathy for the plight of the female. All of them, however, equate signs of ascent with pure light, the sword, the flame, and the flight of the Phoenix, which are yang or male symbols, whereas the yin is typified by backwardness, sex, and the sow,<sup>15</sup> emblematic of the female world.

Throughout their work, these writers conspicuously mix their myths. Mann deliberately injects pagan elements into the biblical. He borrowed some traits from Frazer's *Golden Bough*, several from Frobenius's African studies, others yet from Dacqué's Chaldean studies, and amalgamated the entire opus with Egyptological and Classical lore. Lagerkvist introduces elements from Norse mythology into early Christian settings. In his case, the milieus are so stylized that the reader may wonder whether he depicts an apocalyptic time, the present, or some future epoch.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Thomas Mann, "Joseph und seine Brüder; ein Vortrag," not to be confused with the cycle of novels in *Neue Studien* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1948), p. 173.

<sup>15</sup>Yet even Lagerkvist displays a fat boar-like Miller's wife who literally stuffs her young lover to death in an orgy of self-indulgence in the short story "The Eternal Smile."

<sup>16</sup>See Lagerkvist, *Holy Land*.

Lagerkvist points to the syncretism of myths by leaving his characters so vague as to render them universal. Kazantsakis illustrates his own theory of mythological accretions when he associates the Crucified Jesus with a supernatural black child and dying Odysseus with a "Little Negro Fisher Boy."<sup>17</sup> In the case of Jacques Roumain, his hero Manuel is placed in Haiti which is at the crossroads, like Kazantsakis's Crete. Here too, European Christianity is mixed with the pagan Voodoo cult, which has supplanted earlier Dahomean traditions. His is a transplanted culture, resulting from upheaval and forced amalgam. Although he is a modern Marxist, Manuel bears attributes which derive from the ancestral African cults, as well as from the Catholic religion. Significantly, he resembles the immolated god Ogoun, whose effigy is often confused with the images of suffering Jesus. Likewise, Erzilee, the goddess of love and of the springs, is compared not only to an African deity, but to the Sirens, Mélusine, Fata Morgana, and the Lorelei: "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 celui que l'entend . . ." (*Gouverneurs*, p. 166.)

This desire to inject deliberate anachronisms in their novels, to suspend historical and spatial conventions, should come as no surprise since all four writers were interested in the works of anthropologists, ethnologists, and mythologists such as Franz Boas, Mircéa Eliade, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, who were concerned with the universality of the myths. So, in their own fictional opus, they wanted to illustrate the primeval community of mankind by depicting the similarities in their heroes' fate and actions. Mythological syncretism is therefore presented in almost identical fashion by all four.

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<sup>17</sup>See Kazantsakis, *Odyssea*, 1938 (*The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, trans. Kimon Friar [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958]).