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The prescriptive-sounding title of this slim volume, combined with its stated aim to provide a comprehensive theory of myth (16), provide this reviewer with a double-edged problem, because form my reading the volume is both too ambitious and too limited at once. Too ambitious, because the very idea of a generic approach to the sprawling beast that is 'myth,' which could offer us a single approach that would work under any circumstance, reminds us of the limits to the structuralist approach, which looks for the common factors in any given version of a myth at the (potential) cost of local nuance, individual flavour, momentary meaning or particular environmental concerns. Myth survives and proliferates because it transcends any given specificity or analysis. The search for such a 'skeleton key' can thereby become a dangerous reduction in a postmodern world where the universals and essentialisms redolent of a previous era are being consistently challenged by new ways of seeing, experiencing and knowing the world. And not ambitious enough, in the sense that Marderness's actual aim does not seek to take into account a wide variety of myth theory, but limits itself to creating a rapprochement between two thinkers whose contribution to twentieth century analysis of myth is both persistently potent and troublesome. In order to account for a range of diversity in the way myth communicates, Marderness seeks common ground between Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis of mythic symbol as a series of signs and Mircea Eliade's interpretations of the religious aspect to myth, which takes into account its narrative power but lacks the critical teeth to engage with the 'journalistic' mode of myth, according to which myth stands as a falsehood.

This represents a useful comparison, which operates to draw out the strengths of each strategy while dispensing with their limits. It is thereby

both critical and creative and this is a very worthwhile approach. There seems to be a lack of engagement with other recent analyses that have pointed out serious flaws in both theorists, however. Bruce Lincoln, for instance, discusses Eliade's ideological bias in his *Theorizing Myth* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), coming to the perhaps too harsh conclusion that Eliade's attraction to the element of transcendent ecstasy in myth and ritual is made redundant by his tendency to favour Aryan religiosity while considering the Hebrew contribution of historic consciousness "a catastrophe for humanity's sense of the sacred." (142) Meanwhile, Laurence Coupe, in *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997) points that Barthes's is a brand of structuralist critique that concludes the anti-historicising conflation between culture and nature 'is a sinister deception', whereas for Lévi-Strauss it can also be a mediation (with the potential for creativity and adaptation) coded by the grammar of myth. For Coupe, Barthes's is a demythologising political allegory without an alternative to bourgeois capitalist ideology, eradicating any of the liberating potential of mythopoeia. (156–58) Marderness' stated aim would have been much improved by reference to these other critiques and he could have done this without compromising his creative approach, which takes into account recent novels as well as advertising alongside narratives (such as the Biblical and Classical) traditionally recognised as mythic. Marderness uses all of his materials well and in a way that stakes out the utility of his theoretical schema, while his concentration on living myths such as the idea of the 'homeland' of modern Americans is valuable.

Still, it remains difficult to discern the extent to which Marderness believes his own hype; because even while his goal is clearly more limited than the 'comprehensive theory' he offers, he claims that his book "clears up the confusion" (15) between the two approaches he has chosen to discuss. Barthes' insights in *Mythologies* retain significant intellectual cache because they represent a kind of Marxist structuralism that tackles the falsehoods inherent in capitalism, nationhood, the culture industry – in short, the ills of modernity. As myth theory, that is about as far as he goes: of note, but limited, more to be footnoted for historical purposes than to be utilised as a significant platform for contemporary mythic analysis. Eliade, like Joseph Campbell, is important for his laudable attempts to retain the importance in mythic behaviour today of its religious, spiritual, or metaphysical element. To deny that myth operates, alongside ritual, to transform the individual drawn within its vortex of power is to reduce the exercise of myth's analysis to a dry intellectual endeavour. The question that must be asked is: what is the enduring power of mythic symbol and narrative to motivate behaviour and belief irrespective of reasoned reflection? Any theory

of myth that goes towards extending this understanding is helpful; but while this book does this, it cannot possibly live up to the claims it wants to make for itself. The extent to which the book succeeds therefore becomes relatively superfluous, except at the beginner's level, where it could be a good way of teaching the positive senses of Barthes' and Eliade's perspectives to undergraduate students of myth.

Given this limit, *How to Read a Myth* does clear a space between Barthes and Eliade for analysis of mythic symbol and narrative, and ritualistic behaviour, which respects the multivalent qualities of such ongoing phenomena in today's world. Chapter 1 contains a useful discussion of Barthes' semiotic system, pointing out the 'motivation' that underscores such mythic language as can be found deployed in images like the Marlboro Man, who promotes smoking tobacco with his lean individualism and pastoral self-reliance. The following chapters each trace one of the ways Marderness offers for the reading of myth. Chapter 2 considers 'mythical reading,' in which the myth takes on its naturalistic hue, subverting the place of culture and history with its seemingly eternal verity. The subject retains its mystic or sacred aura but allows no critical purchase; for Barthes it is emptied of its motivation, for Eliade it can be a portal to the numinous. The founding of sacred space, perhaps around an *axis mundi* that operates to centre and hold the gyrating world, helps delineate a homeland (44-46), while sacred time helps place the individual in a ritualistic relationship with the object of their veneration, as does the celebration of the Lord's Supper (46-48). This comparison is all very reasonable and helpful, but it is not very advanced, as is evidenced by the very simple allusion to Lévi-Strauss and the recognition that every version of a myth is true that is validated by recourse to its archetypal power or motivation (49). The way this is further explained with reference to identity in the Chinese Communist Party of Anchee Min's novel *Red Azalea* is nicely performed, as is the further analysis in regards to the historical homeland myths of Abraham and Aeneas. Effectively reporting on powerful homeland myths such as the destiny of Aeneas in historical context (62-7), Marderness shows how both mythical characters and their narratives 'provide historical contexts that … give access to archetypes, which give meaning and purpose to life' (68). But the author's conclusion lacks punch because no interrogation is made into the inevitable conflicts and tensions surrounding and inhabiting these destinies between opposing collectives, or between individuals who identify themselves *within* such stories but with differing versions of their meaning. The expectation that such technical difficulties will be approached, if not ameliorated, is only partly met in the rest of the book.

Chapter 3, "Cultural and Extramythical Readings," for instance does

not tackle these issues, which seem to me of vital importance in any theory of myth purporting to even approach comprehensive status. While Marderness considers the cultural obedience of the 'Old Testament' Israelites, as interpreted from the 'inside' (where faith ensures obedience to customary practices, which admittedly both repulses and pleases their God, 82), he does not give due consideration to the ruptures that inevitably simmer beneath any composition of sociocultural boundaries. This obedience from within is then compared with what Marderness calls 'extramythical reading,' which is simply the response of someone who does not understand the context or code of the mythic symbol or narrative, due to their considering it from the outside, as an English speaker would the Chinese language (82-3). The way Marderness considers this 'outsider' position is fascinating and extends an opportunity to understand the 'other' (as well their potentially aggressive or surreptitious strategies for infiltration or devastation). He uses the example of the Trojans facing the fateful wooden horse at their gates, who are fooled into accepting the Greeks' gift because of the way their understanding of its significance is translated by the 'escaped' sacrificial slave Sinon and the uncanny tragedy of Laocoön and his sons (who are devastated by monstrous snakes after striking the horse, 'thinking it spelled trouble,' 87). This reading, which points out that to consider another's ways from the outside puts one in a position of both danger and potential, offers tantalising possibilities to the interpretation of myths across cultural and historical divides. Such a strategy could be further applied to current circumstances in considering the plight of innumerable refugees appearing at the 'gates' of the west today – not to defeat but to join it – and this would make a fascinating addition to current myth theory.

Finally, in Chapter 4 Marderness discusses what he calls "Mythological Reading," which simply turns out to mean that myths work until they are deciphered, at which point they are often remythicized. Hans Blumneberg's point, in *Work on Myth*, seems to me a superior play on the way this operation proceeds. For Blumenberg, the very act of working on the myth guarantees its perpetuity, a notion that sits well with Lèvi-Strauss' comment, in *Structural Anthropology*, that any version of a myth is a valid one depending on the purchase it finds in its audience. Marderness acknowledges this (48-9), but is seemingly unaware of its further, theoretical import; for if this is really the case, and Freud's Oedipus is ours just as Sophocles' was the Greeks' of antiquity, then it also stands that theorizing myth cannot entirely resist perpetuating its power. Lincoln points this out (the Epilogue to *Theorizing Myth* is titled "Scholarship as Myth") as does Coupe; *Apocalypse Now* might sound out the depravity of Kurtz's sacrificial-king act, but it does little to dent the enduring fascination we hold for the archetype of the man-

god who must die in order for the fertility myth to survive (*Myth*, 21). Marderness' conclusion is sound, but in a way that underscores the initial and ongoing problem I have with his book, in that it fulfils a helpful but minor operation, as opposed to the overhaul of myth theory it claims to be. Yes, *How to Read a Myth* helps account for mythic diversity and enriches the understanding of myth as a cultural expression, but it is no comprehensive theory (119). In juxtaposing Barthes' cynical readings of the signs around him, in mid-twentieth century Paris, with Eliade's prejudiced faith in the transformative powers of (certain) mythic narrative as ritual, both the critical and creative aspects of myth can be maintained alongside one another. This is the book's strength, which would have seemed much more palatable if its agenda were set at the more humble level with which it ends: seeming disagreements amongst myth theorists can often be explained with recourse to the assumptions about myths' ultimate value that are brought to their theoretical schemas. At this level, *How to Read a Myth* passes its modest test.

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