

John Buchan, Myth and Modernism 3.10.2010

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The extraordinary curiosity that we find in much modernist literature about myth, and the way myth erupts into, collides with, or can be discovered in modern lives, is a subject on which much critical ink has been spilt. But the operative word is “modernist”. This palaver about myth is a preoccupation routinely attributed to modernism, perhaps even constitutive of modernism. It is not, however, confined to writers of the modernist canon. This essay considers an instance of mythical writing in the fiction of a writer who, if he finds a place in the history of modern literature at all, is never, as far as I know, grouped among the modernists, the vanguard of modernity. In fact in many respects, John Buchan is just the candidate you might call upon to portray modernism’s archetypal and necessary opposite or other.

While it is easy enough to line up those writers who belong to the modernist canon, Eliot and Joyce and Woolf and so on, I have found it increasingly difficult to convince myself that I know where the border actually runs between the modernist enclave and its modern hinterland.¹ The modernists do tend to be treated, by friends and enemies alike, as the aristocracy of modern literature, and either admired as the highest attainment of the culture, or dismissed as an effete irrelevance. There is certainly a residue in this discussion of the “brow” wars of the first four decades of the twentieth century – that is, the decades of high modernism – so that modernist writing might be considered to be an island of highbrow work, of a demanding intellectual content and consequently a limited breadth of appeal, poking up in the middle of the placid stream of more easy-going, “nice” and popular stuff that people read for pleasure.² The difference is beset with snobbery in both directions, the scorn of the highbrow for the simple-minded, and the contempt of the majority for the effete and futile.

Certainly we might expect to find in modernist writing an artistic self-consciousness, a radical questioning of inherited forms of expression and representation, a willingness to experiment and take aesthetic risks, an impatience with the protocols of romantic and realist writing which had established themselves as the period style of Victorian literature. But even taking some such parameters, vague enough in all conscience, as the features of family resemblance by which we might define the term modernist, still the boundary between modernist and just

¹ Peter Childs’ useful introduction *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000) is fairly typical in beginning with a discussion of the words modern, modernism and modernity.

² See the discussion in Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 110-36. Martin Green writes of the academic dismissal of the “nice” values of Buchan and his like as simply “the code of the gentleman class”, and their stigmatization as belonging to the middlebrow or lowbrow. Martin Green, *A Biography of John Buchan and His Sister Anna* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) iv-v. In a speech in February 1939, Buchan placed himself in the category of “high-lowbrow”. See Andrew Lownie, *John Buchan: The Presbyterian Cavalier* (London: Constable, 1995) 296.

modern remains an embarrassment. And there are always problematic cases who roll or squeeze or get trapped under the gate, or who blithely slip back and forth across the border. Both Yeats and Bernard Shaw became modernist writers, arguably, though they did not start out as such. T. S. Eliot, on the other hand, might be said to have moved away in later work from the thoroughgoing modernist positions with which he was identified by readers of his earlier writing. And I do think there are bad consequences for reading if we insist on segregating modernist writing (highbrow, difficult, experimental, radical, serious) from its contemporaries. It encourages us to think they inhabit and respond to a different world. A great deal of more recent critical work on modernism has been concerned to reintegrate its productions into the culture – the ordinary culture – of its time, to see it respond to cinema, advertising, mass tourism and so on. And we can also benefit from the realization of how much popular writing, like John Buchan’s fiction, shares with its high-cultural modernist contemporaries. I want to look in this paper at how one Buchan novel, *The Dancing Floor* (1926), presents a trope familiar to students of modernism, that of the presence, or representation, of ancient or primitive myth in a contemporary setting, and in particular in two narrative figures, of epiphany (the appearance of the divine on earth) and apotheosis (the transformation of the human into the divine).³ First though, I need to say a little about the intellectual milieu in which Buchan developed as a writer, and to make the case for his being very much a part of the project of intellectual modernity in his time.

In three years at Glasgow University he may have been, as he remembered, “wholly obscure”,⁴ but this was largely because he was reading ferociously – and already writing seriously. He came to Oxford in 1895 well grounded in the classics and philosophy, to begin a university career there that would include the Newdigate Prize for poetry, and the Presidency of the Oxford Union. Among his interests and studies were some specifically modernist straws in the wind. Glasgow had just made the imaginative appointment of the twenty-three year old Gilbert Murray to succeed Sir Richard Jebb in the Chair of Greek. Janet Adam Smith speaks of Buchan’s hero-worship of Murray.⁵ There were only six years between the freshman and his professor, and they were to become lifelong friends.

³ It will be clear that, at least till near the end of this paper, I am using “myth” in a different sense from David Daniell in his discussion of Buchan’s “ability to create myth”. See David Daniell, *The Interpreter’s House: A Critical Assessment of John Buchan* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1975) 1-17. My sense of “myth” here is that of a story of an ancestral or communal hero, in relation to the natural and supernatural world, while by “ritual” I mean here the iterative enactment of a belief about the relation between a community and the natural and supernatural world.

⁴ John Buchan, *Memory Hold-the-Door* 1940 (London: J. M. Dent, 1984) 33.

⁵ Janet Adam Smith, *John Buchan: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 42.

Murray would become, along with Jane Harrison, one of the leading exponents of the anthropologisation of classical studies, about which I shall have a bit more to say later.⁶ It was an important trigger for the modernist use of myth, Murray's and Harrison's excavation of fertility myths and rituals beneath sophisticated literary texts also having its influence on the work of others, including the theosophist Jessie L. Weston on versions of the Grail legend, preserved, as every student knows, in the rather ironic amber of Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*. The momentum for all this work had been set off in large part by J. G. Frazer, the first edition of whose *The Golden Bough* had been published when Buchan was fifteen. Frazer was another son of the manse, who preceded Buchan in his academic progress, if that is the word, from Scotland to England. *The Dancing Floor's* indebtedness to *The Golden Bough* was obvious enough to have been remarked by contemporary reviewers, though Michael and Isobel Haslett caution that the novel owes a greater debt to Murray and Harrison than to Frazer. But it was not just the continued presence of myth and the irrational that Buchan learned from Frazer. Christopher Harvie, citing a famous observation by the anarchist Lumley in *The Power House* about the wafer-thin division between civilization and barbarism, notes a strongly precedent sentiment in Frazer.⁷

It is not our business here to consider what bearing the permanent existence of such a solid layer of savagery beneath the surface of society, and unaffected by the superficial changes of religion and culture, has upon the future of humanity. The dispassionate observer, whose studies have led him to plumb its depths, can hardly regard it otherwise than as a standing menace to civilization. We seem to move on a thin crust which may at any moment be rent by the subterranean forces slumbering below. From time to time a hollow murmur underground or a sudden spirt of flame into the air tells of what is going on beneath our feet.⁸

This is a proto-modernist sentiment that would be endorsed by Conrad and Thomas Mann, Freud and Picasso, as well as by John Buchan.

Buchan's early and lifelong association with Gilbert Murray gave him access to a teacher and intellectual role model who was not only learned in Greek and Latin, but was a classicist of a particularly modernizing kind. This was not all. Later in life, Buchan felt that the long

⁶ At the same period the traditionally textual and linguistic study of the classics in Britain was making room for important developments in archaeology. See Mary Beard, *The Invention of Jane Harrison* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000) 32.

⁷ "You think that a wall as solid as the earth separates civilization from barbarism," Lumley tells Leithen. "I tell you the division is a thread, a sheet of glass." John Buchan, *The Power House* 1916 (Edinburgh: B&W Publishing, 1993) 38.

⁸ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged edition, 1922 (London: Macmillan, 1987) 56. See Christopher Harvie, "'For Gods are Kittle Cattle': Frazer and John Buchan", *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination: Essays in Affinity and Influence*, ed. Robert Fraser (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990) 255-56.

perspectives of classical studies taught a kind of humility. “I lost then any chance of being a rebel, for I became profoundly conscious of the dominion of unalterable law.”⁹ But Murray did not share this view. The young Murray was a radical (later a liberal), a friend of Shaw and William Archer, and preached the greatness of Ibsen at Glasgow. Ibsen too was one of the godparents of modernism for writers in English: consider the importance of the discovery of Ibsen for the young James Joyce. Buchan, surprising as this may seem, took up Murray’s enthusiasm for Ibsen, and founded an Ibsen Society at Oxford. There is some jocular foreshortening of the Society’s history in *Memory Hold-the-Door*, where its founder reports that the Society got on well until a reading of *Ghosts*, Ibsen’s play about syphilis, was arranged, “upon which the members in disgust rejected the name of Ibsen and turned themselves into a dining club called the Crocodiles”.¹⁰ The enthusiasm for Ibsen may not have been long-lived, but it is another indication that Buchan became a writer in the intellectual crucible of modernism, open to the books and ideas that were to produce a startlingly original generation of authors, artists and thinkers. The path he took may have been very different from the ones that were to lead to *Ulysses* or *Back to Methuselah*.¹¹ But it would be a mistake to assume – and this usually is the assumption, I believe – that he knew and cared nothing about the intellectual forces that were shaping Irish and Anglo-American modernism.

Another of the creators or facilitators of modernism he seems to have found for himself at Oxford. His tutor was the college chaplain Dr Bussell, and Buchan was to recall how he delighted in surprising him, “for from Nietzsche, whom I had just discovered, I would quote extracts in my essays which were a little startling to a clerk in holy orders”.¹² In Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* he would have read about the dialectic of the Apollonian and Dionysiac, Nietzsche’s view of tragedy as myth’s counter-attack on the Greek faith in reason, and the struggle between the forces of the Athenian civilization and those of a much more ancient cult of ecstasy, abandon and terror. It is a theme – itself a myth – that is played with several variations in *The Dancing Floor* and elsewhere in Buchan’s fiction.¹³ Here again we can watch him imbibing from one of the most intoxicating shaping sources of European modernism. Later, according to Catherine Carswell, Buchan was to read all the standard texts of German psychoanalysis – which means Freud and Jung – with attention and respect.¹⁴ He also read widely in French, and declared that in style his first models included Flaubert and

⁹ Buchan, *Memory Hold-the-Door* 36. He is remembering Meredith’s phrase, “the army of unalterable law”, which so depressed George Orwell. The phrase is repeated in T. S. Eliot’s poem “Cousin Nancy”.

¹⁰ Ibid 50.

¹¹ He makes a case against that anti-Victorian literature and taste, which we might call modernism, in John Buchan, *The Novel and the Fairy Tale* (London: The English Association, July 1931) 3-6.

¹² Ibid 49.

¹³ In the novel *Witch Wood* (1927), there is a struggle between a licentious pagan cult of nature and a repressive official Scots Calvinism.

¹⁴ Harvie, ““For Gods are Kittle Cattle”” 262.

Maupassant.¹⁵ As for the English aesthetic, Buchan was himself writing for such varied periodicals as *The Yellow Book* and *Blackwoods Magazine* while still a student. As reader for the publisher John Lane as early as 1896, and with his lifelong work as a publisher, he was constantly exposed to new work.

Martin Green has described how, entering university to study literature immediately after the Second World War, he quickly learned to keep quiet about his enjoyment of the work of John Buchan and his sister Anna. In an intellectual climate and institution dominated by F. R. Leavis, he was soon “inducted ... into the quite different ethos of modernism”.¹⁶ Green describes the difference as ethical, while regretting the dishonesty into which the Leavisite orthodoxy had manoeuvred him. My point is a different one, and is that the intellectual and aesthetic environment that produced the modernists and Buchan was, in most important respects, a shared one, and the dichotomy between them, with its attendant snobberies mentioned before, is false and unfortunate. I will now turn to the question of myth, as an important preoccupation of the modernists, and of Buchan, and investigate how this works itself out in the instance of *The Dancing Floor*.¹⁷

The Dancing Floor begins with the friendship between Edward Leithen and Vernon Milburne, an admirable young Englishman of a familiar type: a gentleman, scholar, athlete and soldier. Vernon has become convinced, by an annually recurring dream he has, that a moment of destiny awaits him on a particular date. The date finds him, and Leithen, on the Aegean island of Plakos, where a young Englishwoman is besieged in her own house by the peasants of the surrounding district. (“I am having trouble with my tenants,” is her haughty understatement of her predicament.)¹⁸ Her late father had led a depraved life, and the peasants are convinced she is a witch, and her family are responsible for their poor harvests and other misfortunes. Superficially orthodox Christians, the islanders still cling to much older and darker beliefs, and their determination to destroy the witch leads them to re-enact a pagan ceremony, in which a male and female victim are consecrated and sacrificed to imitate and thereby magically induce the resurrection of the god and goddess, and ensure the return of fertility and good fortune. The girl, Koré Arabin, will be the female victim.¹⁹ But the ancient ritual preserved in folk memory in the island is also, happily, known to Vernon Milburne through his classical researches, and this knowledge enables him, in the climax of the story, to turn it to his own

¹⁵ Buchan, *Memory Hold-the-Door* 37; 41.

¹⁶ Green, *A Biography* iv.

¹⁷ For a study of both the metaphysical and the political aspects of myth in modernist thinking, see Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁸ John Buchan, *The Dancing Floor*, 1926, ed. Marilyn Deegan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 175. Hereafter *DF*.

¹⁹ Koré’s given name, meaning maiden, is also the title of the goddess Persephone, who spends half the year in the kingdom of death. Her annual return from the underworld signals the renewal of growing things in spring.

ends, saving the life of the girl he has come to love. The islanders, convinced that their ritual has indeed stirred the pagan gods back to life, are driven back terrified into the arms of the church, while the English characters escape unharmed.

Vernon defeats the peasants by, in effect, giving them what they had asked for, an epiphany. He takes the part of the sacrificial priest-king, who in the ritual must marry the goddess and be sacrificed with her, and it is the vision of these two, emerging dramatically from the flames of the burning house, “from a belt of blackness between two zones of raw gold” (*DF* 207), that so successfully spooks the locals and puts an end to their insurrection. Fertility rituals and the sacrifice of a temporary king place us in the middle of the ancient world investigated by Frazer.²⁰ The idea that for ordinary Greeks, spring and fertility rites were a much more vital part of religious life than the Olympian gods, was the thesis of Jane Harrison’s *Themis* (1912) – which included a chapter by Gilbert Murray, which he revised in 1924, a year in which he was a regular visitor to Buchan’s home, and also the year in which Buchan began to write *The Dancing Floor*.²¹ “The anthropologists,” it has been said, “rescued the major cultural production of primitive societies – myth – from the view that saw these ancient narratives either as the quaint decorative brio of simple folk or, if they were Greek, as the narrative mirrors of heroic society. Instead myth, and not just the myths of the Greeks, was reconceived as the narrative thematics of prerationalist cosmologies that provided an account of the relationship between the human and the divine.”²² Vernon Milburne in the novel is an anthropological classicist of the Harrisonian or Murrayite stamp, dismissing the Olympian gods as “that noisy, middle-class family party”: “Terror and horror, perhaps, and unspeakable beauty, too, and a wild hope. That was the Greek religion, not the Olympians and their burnt offerings. And it is the kind of religion that never dies” (*DF* 29).²³

In the Second Edition of *The Golden Bough* Frazer had proposed a positivistic view of human progress: the Age of Magic gave way to the Age of Religion, which was succeeded in turn by the Age of Science.²⁴ This is the kind of grand linear narrative that modernism was to twist and negate again and again, and indeed Frazer’s own work exposed the primitive strata of feeling

²⁰ “Ritual is the utterance of an emotion, a thing felt, in *action*, myth in words or thoughts.” Jane Harrison, *Themis*. See Robert A. Segal, *The Myth and Ritual Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 71-72.

²¹ Michael and Isobel Haslett, “Buchan and the Classics”, *Reassessing John Buchan*, ed. Kate Macdonald (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009) 23-24.

²² John Xiros Cooper, *T. S. Eliot and the Politics of the Voice* (Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press, 1987) 89.

²³ This pagan belief and practice is also in contrast to an Orthodox Christianity on Plakos which has become demoralized and defeatist. Yet the unexpected outcome of the story is to engender a revival of the Christian religion on the island, as if (to quote Foucault in a very different context) “in the complicity of the divine with sacrilege, some of the Greek light flashed through the depths of the Christian night”. Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998) 125.

²⁴ Magic and science shared, however, an assumption inimical to religion, that in nature one event follows another necessarily and invariably without the intervention of any spiritual or personal agency. Frazer, *the Golden Bough*, 49.

embodied in so much extant literature, and also suggested the possibility of a recreation of the primitive in modern cultural productions. For most modernists, history was not to be understood as the kind of steady or accelerating upward progression, in emancipation from and control of nature, that might be inferred from the history of technology. Modernity had not escaped its magical and brutal past, or the stories and images in which that past was remembered. History was not a straight line, but a matter of cunning passages, slippages, returns, blocks and cuts, survivals, recirculations, and the story of modernity could dissolve filmically into myth. The experience of empire and increasing knowledge of what they called primitive societies had taught Western observers about the co-existence of their modernity with prehistoric, mythic cultures and beliefs. The First World War, of course, convinced many that irrationality and barbarism were not confined to primitive peoples. Atavistic states of mind could punch a way through into modern behaviours and beliefs, as they so often do in Picasso's work, while myths – the myth of Oedipus for example – could also be invoked as a way of describing and making sense of behaviour. The mythic past was not dead. It was not even past. This is the context for modernism's fascination with reaching back across history to myth.

In viewing myth as something to be transcended or grown out of, Frazer showed the Enlightenment roots of his training. For thinkers of the Enlightenment, myth was part of superstition. It is Romantic writers who began to think of myth not as something quaint or dangerous to be left behind, but as something it might be useful, even redemptive, to recover, something that might provide a new and more vital way of knowing the world. "Nineteenth-century investigations of myth oscillated between these two traditions, of the eschewal and the renewal of myth," says Steven Connor, and he traces these two modalities forward into the modernist use of myth.²⁵ Both are present in Buchan's use of myth in *The Dancing Floor*. To place this practice in the context of mythical writing by his modernist contemporaries, I give here a brief reminder of four moments of myth in canonical modernism, though not in chronological order.

First, the Queen of the Woods passage towards the end of David Jones's long narrative poem of the First World War, *In Parenthesis*, published in 1937. The story follows a company of soldiers from their embarkation for France to their participation in a catastrophic attack on German front-line positions in a wood, in which most of them are killed. In what may be a hallucination in the mind of a wounded survivor, a tutelary deity, the Queen of the Woods, garlands and blesses the bodies of the dead of both nations. In their anabasis the soldiers have moved further and further from home, and deeper and deeper into the nightmare world of modern war; here at the end of their story, their lives and their bodies are made beautiful, and meaningful, by a mythic white goddess who is at the same time mother and lover, natural and

²⁵ Steven Connor, "Modernity and Myth", *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, ed. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 252.

sacred, local, Nordic, and Catholic. Here myth delivers an epiphany which redeems the futility and anarchy of the worst of all modern scenes, the Great War battlefield.

A more familiar instance is the hypotextual presence of Homer's Odysseus story in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). When Leopold Bloom escapes from an increasingly aggressive drunk in a Dublin pub, the scene is given as an apotheosis that evokes not only Odysseus' flight from the enraged Cyclops, but also the ascent to heaven of the Biblical prophet Elijah, in II Kings chapter 2. Bloom ascends "to the glory of the brightness at an angle of forty-five degrees over Donohoe's in Little Green Street like a shot off a shovel", trailing clouds of heroic and mythic glory that create a brilliant comedy of disproportion – the mock-heroic – but at the same time do actually place him in an order of bravery, integrity and resistance which might accurately be reported as heroic, a hero, of his time and place, on the way to becoming a myth of his own. T. S. Eliot praised what he called Joyce's discovery of the "mythical method" of maintaining a parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Bloom and Odysseus. The traditional novel, Eliot seems to suggest, is no longer capable of dealing with modern history, because modern history is such a mess; hence the quasi-scientific discovery of the mythical method is timely and necessary. "It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history."²⁶ Eliot had already drafted his own version of that panorama in *The Waste Land*, and was to draw attention to the presence of Frazerian vegetation ceremonies (as he quaintly called them), and the Grail legend, in the poem. The fragments of myth scattered about the landscape of *The Waste Land* are all ambiguous or incomplete epiphanies, and certainly do not serve to confer shape and significance on contemporary experience. Rather they function, like half-decipherable archaeological fragments, as a constant reminder of earlier communal stories and structures of belief that might once have performed this cultural function. In other words, myth in *The Waste Land* seems to play a role virtually opposite to the one assigned to it in Eliot's essay on *Ulysses*, emphasizing instead the contemporary world's inability to make significant or useful connection with the kind of myths that once upon a time gave life its meaning and shape.

A final classical example is that of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912). The highly respectable and successful Gustav von Aschenbach becomes obsessed with a beautiful young boy encountered in a hotel in Venice, an obsession that incapacitates and eventually kills him. Aschenbach is inclined, at first, to see his passion for Tadzio as an example of the Platonic love of a master for a disciple, but the narrative and especially Aschenbach's dreams make clear that he is in the grip not of philosophical precedent but of myth: the orderly and responsible world of the middle-aged writer has been invaded from within by the terrible forces of Dionysiac

²⁶ T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth", *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975) 177.

abandon and madness. The novel offers two ways of looking at this. You can feel that Aschenbach in a moment of self-indulgence has fatally surrendered to anarchy and folly and betrayed everything his work stood for. Or you may think that, after a lifetime of pompous bourgeois respectability and dreary moralizing realism, Aschenbach, admitting his long-repressed Dionysiac nature, in his last days has finally learned to live a full Nietzschean life of passion and risk. We are back with the two attitudes to myth, the Enlightenment idea that myth is not consistent with modernity, and the Romantic idea that it is still latent, dangerous and exciting, and can offer access to a more authentic life.

The Dancing Floor begins in a world as comfortably upholstered as that of Aschenbach: the world of the English land-owning and governing classes in the years before the Great War. This version of civilization has, however, its discontent. Young Vernon Milburne confides in Sir Edward Leithen the uncanny recurring dream which has convinced him that some dangerous ordeal awaits him, years hence. This business of the dream is recounted in the realistically described world of an English country house in bad weather, familiar from countless realist novels, but of course we recognize the portentous dream as a signal that there is an intersection here with a different kind of story. Dreams do not come true in the real or realist world but they invariably do in the world of magic. Vernon's dream, whose prophecy he never doubts, has unsettled him. He must await its outcome. And so although he goes to school and university, and later to war, he is aware that there is something more important in store for him, and this leaves him aloof and mildly depressed, impatient with the inadequate satisfactions of modern experience and what it has to offer. Like Beckett's tramps (whom he does not otherwise resemble), he is not living but waiting, possessed meantime with a "sense of failure and waste".²⁷

The journey from England to the Greek island of Plakos is the usual passage from the familiar to the exotic, undertaken by the hero of romance. On Plakos, as is clear to the reader long before Vernon knows it, his destiny awaits him. Here he will grapple with the deadly threat of a population intent on murder in the name of an ancient belief. Yet although Vernon will enter quite literally into the pagan ritual and become a part of it, he will do so in a process that might be described as a demythologization, deconstructing the myth through enacting it: in other words, he approaches the ritual as an anthropologist, and participates in it not as a believer, but as a performer – that is, as a modern man.

The men of Plakos have beliefs. They believe not only that Koré Arabin is a witch, but also that in sacrificing her, according to their immemorial ritual, they can ensure good harvests and future prosperity. Their distress and their grievance are treated with respect. They are indeed in trouble, half starving, and they have been abused for years by their depraved landlord, Koré's

²⁷ Marilyn Deegan, "Introduction", *DF* xxii.

late father. None of this, however, makes their proposed action appropriate or excusable. There might, to be sure, be other ways of looking at what they do. Their hostility to the Arabins could be seen as a rudimentary anti-colonial rebellion, in which their mobilization of the ancient ritual might be construed in terms of what Michael Herzfeld has described as structural nostalgia.²⁸ But since of course we observe the events on Plakos through the eyes of the always lawyerly and level-headed Englishman Leithen, readers are never allowed to forget that the ritual is a murderous superstition born of ignorance. In this case the survival of mythic beliefs confers no dignity on the sullen peasants and reveals no truth about their situation. The myth of Odysseus was true of Leopold Bloom, in a comic-ironic way and even though he was unaware of it; the Queen of the Woods in *In Parenthesis* might be a hallucination, but there was a poetic truth to her ministrations. The story of Oedipus was invoked by Freud to allegorise what he considered a fact of psychic development. But the fertility rituals on Plakos are simply a misprision, a helpless error born of ignorance. As an observer Leithen of course is completely estranged from such thought processes: that kind of mythic belief is literally unthinkable to a modern man.

What is enacted on the Dancing Floor is a defeat of magic by modernity. For the English characters, it is a question of resisting the power of the apparently supernatural or fatal, and asserting a kind of vigorous agency very familiar in Buchan's adventure fiction. The effect of the prophetic dream on Vernon has been a disabling one, imprisoning him in the existential limbo of a strong fatalism. Koré Arabin too seems strangely apathetic. She sleepwalks into danger, taking no action to protect herself, apparently acknowledging an obscure need to atone for the sins of her fathers. "One must pay for one's race as well as for oneself," she says (*DF* 176). Even Leithen, though no fatalist, comes under something like a magic spell on Plakos, and can do almost nothing to help.

The primitive world is one of helplessness before circumstances. But modernity, as Buchan understands it, is a matter of taking things in hand, and having faith in yourself. Faced at last with the crisis he has long awaited, Vernon Milburne mobilizes to defeat it the equipment conferred on him by a public school education – the chivalrous masculinity that leads him to offer his services to Koré in the face of her rejection; the athletic prowess that enables him to win the race and so become a decisive player in the ritual; and of course the classical-anthropological learning that acquaints him in advance with the ritual and enables him to manipulate it, appearing dramatically alongside Koré in the guise of immortals, to the consternation of the peasants who invoked them. For the myth was false, and so the epiphany is also false, a theatrical trick played on the natives by people of superior cultural knowledge, like the impressive eclipse of the sun for which the white men take credit in *King Solomon's*

²⁸ Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2005) 147-82.

Mines. Here in the last corner of Europe, the most backward and oriental quarter of the Mediterranean, the long reach of modernity asserts its power and knowledge.

My argument at this point is, then, that this is an Enlightenment tale. The myth on Plakos does not confer meaning or dignity, nor does it open a road to a more authentic, vivid or natural form of life. It is a squalid and dangerous regression, to be discredited, defeated, and transcended. For the Greeks and the English too, myth has to be demystified, its stifling power broken, for a satisfactory version of modern life to begin. As for the needs of the peasants, Leithen can see that only one myth is necessary on Plakos, and that is the myth of Christianity, enshrined in the rival ritual of Easter week. In the end the terrified peasants are shown flocking back to the church, the authority of the priest, and the law-abiding orthodox behaviour he enjoins.

This however is not the end of the story, or even of the myth. Modernism had turned to myth in no antiquarian spirit. Myth was not simply non-modernity, but might offer an insight into modernity or a critique of it. *The Dancing Floor* is a novel about modernity, that shows a lively interest in the post-war state of the nation. Buchan made two important structural changes when he decided to expand his preposterous story “Basilissa” (1914) into the novel *The Dancing Floor*. First, he introduced the reflective Leithen as chief narrator. Second, he gave Koré Arabin a dark family history, and detailed her life in England before her fatal return to the Arabin house on Plakos. She is no longer the romantic princess awaiting rescue on her island, but an English girl with a past, who has got into a kind of trouble that becomes the focus of the middle part of the new story. (A further important change to the original story is that most of the action of *The Dancing Floor* now takes place after the First World War.)

To compress here what is quite a complex representation, let me suggest that Koré’s ancestry, which we learn about as Leithen does (who is, you might say, the orthodox priest of a certain kind of Englishness), suggests a cultural history which produces a dangerous version of modernity. Though Leithen assumes from the name that Arabins are of Levantine – that is, Jewish – origin, he is immediately corrected by Folliot: the Arabin family is “a most ancient English house” (DF 42), with land in Essex.²⁹ Koré’s grandfather, Tom Arabin, was a romantic rakehell, a friend of Byron and Landor, who bought Plakos and made it the refuge of “every brand of outlaw, social and political” (DF 42). His son Shelley Arabin, the girl’s father, was more than just scandalous. A contemporary of Baudelaire and Swinburne, writer of anti-British political pamphlets, wife-abuser, he appears to have been a sadist, pornographer, paedophile and possibly murderer. Details are necessarily vague, but he is described as “a connoisseur and

²⁹ Leithen seems to have forgotten that the scholarly English clergyman in Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* is called Francis Arabin.

high priest of the uttermost evil" (DF 45). Here we have a narrative of romanticism turned in on itself, and become diseased, septic, decadent.

Leithen is careful to insist that Koré Arabin is not as bad as her forebears, yet she creates a bad impression on both him and Vernon Milburne when they encounter her in England. She may be a beauty, but she is a girl gone wrong. Leithen's first description of her, dancing at a party, emphasizes the immodesty of her dress, the artificiality of her make-up, as though "some imp had inspired her to desecrate the gifts of the Almighty," so that her appearance gives the impression of "an outrage perpetrated on something beautiful, a foolish ill-bred joke" (DF 49). Vernon is disgusted at the sight: he calls her tawdry. She is dancing with a Jew, to jazz music provided by a negro singing "gibberish". "This was not, like a pre-war ball, part of the ceremonial of an assured and orderly world," Leithen comments. "These people were dancing as savages danced – to get rid of or to engender excitement. Apollo had been ousted by Dionysus" (DF 49).

Koré Arabin is, or seems, wild, *déracinée*, aggressive and bad-mannered. She drifts aimlessly between country-house weekends and queer studio parties in Chelsea, "the feverish literary and artistic salons of the emancipated and rather derelict middle-class", and "dances given at extravagant restaurants by the English and foreign new-rich" (DF 88). Her patrimony comes from the bad Arabin men of the nineteenth century, but her restlessness is a product of the period immediately following the Great War, a time when even Leithen, who had been badly gassed on active service, confesses to a kind of alienation from his better self. "I seemed to be two persons, one self-possessed enough watching the antics of the other with disgust and yet powerless to stop them" (DF 38).

They were crazy days, when nobody was quite himself. Politicians talked and writers wrote clotted nonsense, statesmen chased their tails, the working man wanted to double his wages and halve his working hours at a time when the world was bankrupt, youth tried to make up for the four years of natural pleasure of which it had been cheated, and there was a general loosening of screws and a rise in temperature. (DF 47)

We have, of course, another bulletin from these post-war years in *The Waste Land*, with its demobbed soldiers looking for a good time, its despondent and apathetic men and its noisy and brittle women, its jazz bands and superstitions, its hedonistic youth, its loss of faith and direction, even its "clotted nonsense". Vernon Milburne, unable to begin his real life, and Koré Arabin, trapped in an artificial life, are the avatars of a generation caught in some kind of demoralizing spell, and viewed by the older Leithen, who is half in love with both of them, with "an immense pity" (DF 48). They are trapped in what might be called bad modernity, the modernity of *The Waste Land* and *Women in Love*, of *Death of a Hero*, *Vile Bodies* and *A Handful of Dust*.

And so if we view what happens on Plakos as essentially an English rather than a Greek crisis, it becomes clear where redemption is really needed. In trial and danger, and in the love that develops between them, both Vernon and Koré slough off the things that held them back – the lack of self-belief, the compromised and shameful past, her inauthentic pleasures and his morose passivity – and emerge purged and transfigured, as the past is consumed by flame behind them. For if the epiphany witnessed by the peasants on Plakos was false, the apotheosis seen by Leithen is a true one. When he sees the two youthful figures emerge from the burning house, he recognizes in them a figure, almost an allegory, that combines power with innocence, and fills him with hope. It is a vision of a brave new world.

I recognized my friends, and yet I did not recognize them, for they were transfigured. In a flash of insight I understood that it was not the Koré and the Vernon that I had known, but new creations. They were not acting a part, but living it. (*DF* 209-10)

This moment no longer has anything to do with Plakos, or ancient Greece. In the figure – almost like a statuary group – of these beautiful, powerful, and innocent young people, Buchan is creating a myth in which he can read a covenant for a national future. This ceremony of innocence and glory is a vision of a recovery of Englishness (or Britishness). On display here is the utopian embodiment of a culture emerging in confidence and strength from its recent tribulations, made new, coherent and forceful, and putting on its power again. So there is a real myth in *The Dancing Floor*, and it is the myth of the future, just that myth which is so painfully lacking in *The Waste Land*.

Though Eliot later took steps to distance himself from the idea that *The Waste Land* was a criticism in general terms of the contemporary world, its contemporary reception confirms that it did indeed distil a more than personal mood of cynicism and hopelessness and cultural defeat in the aftermath of the Great War.³⁰ The poem's deployment of what might be called broken myths – myths that have lost their operative authority and magic – was one of the ways in which it gave shape to this sense of confusion and loss. There is no need to suggest that Buchan's *The Dancing Floor* is in a deliberate and conscious sense a reply to *The Waste Land* and similar expressions of post-war cultural pessimism; rather, as the work of a serious and well-informed writer on a modern theme in the years after 1922, it could not help being in dialogue with the spirit of Eliot's dark modernism. Nor is it necessary to argue that in the mid-1920s Buchan believed that British power, success, and moral authority in the world was making or could make a complete recovery from the reverses of the War. At least one part of fiction is always desire. It can be said, however, that in the emergence of the iconic white-clad

³⁰ Eliot was reacting impatiently against a certain critical orthodoxy when he appeared to dismiss the poem's motive as "the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grudge against life; ... just a piece of rhythmical grumbling". T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber, 1971) xxxiii.

couple from the deadly flames of the house on Plakos, Buchan found a way of showing how such a recovery might be imagined.³¹

There are other moments of what I would call mythic apotheosis in Buchan's fiction, when a human hero is consecrated by something like a supernatural transfiguration.³² They are all moments of the triumph of goodness, but none is so thoroughly redemptive as this. At the very end of the story, on the boat taking them away from Plakos, Leithen watches as Koré and Vernon fall asleep on deck in each other's arms. "After that both seemed to be at peace, while the yawl ran towards the mainland hills, now green as a fern in the spring dawn" (*DF* 214). The new life guaranteed by their steadfastness and love is not behind them in Plakos, but ahead of them elsewhere in a modern future.

³¹ The British Empire was larger in the years after the Great War than it had ever been, but Buchan recognized how much it had been weakened. He was one of those who saw hope for the post-war future in a closer understanding and co-operation between the British and North American peoples, in view of their common ideals, experience and interests. See Peter Henshaw, "John Buchan, America and the 'British World', 1904-40", *Reassessing John Buchan*, ed. Kate Macdonald, 103-115. For a wider context, see Robert J. C. Young, *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) 196-241.

³² For example: the apotheosis of Sandy Arbuthnot in victory at the end of *Greenmantle*, of Peter Pienaar in the sky at the end of *Mr Standfast*, and the apotheosis of Mary Hannay, "a stern goddess that wielded the lightnings", at the end of *The Three Hostages*. See *The Complete Richard Hannay* 346-47, 654-55, 894.