

Gualberto Valverde, Rebeca (2021). *Wasteland Modernism: The Disenchantment of Myth*. Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València.

The present volume seeks to reassess, from a myth-critical perspective, a corpus of six novels that can be categorized as “wasteland modernism”. In *Wasteland Modernism: The Disenchantment of Myth*, Rebeca Gualberto analyzes how said novels rely on the wasteland myth to represent the chaos, order and worldviews of the postwar world. However, as Gualberto aptly notes, in reshaping this myth, “myth is fractured to an almost complete disintegration”, which opens up new possibilities for imagining a different world (2021: 15). Thus, this book provides a new critical outlook into the reinterpretation of the wasteland myth, as it reframes the “act of demolition” that modernist myth-making entails (Gualberto 2021: 16), addressing Saul Bellow’s concern about the darkness and pessimism of what he termed “wasteland modernism” (Gualberto 2021: 24).

The relevance of addressing the Breton Wasteland myth, also known as the Fisher King myth or the Holy Grail myth, seems particularly on point, for it is a myth that has been used throughout time to legitimize “the political institutions it narrated” (Gualberto 2021: 20). Allegedly deriving from an ancient fertility rite and theorized by literary critic Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) –which T.S. Eliot himself read when he wrote “The Waste Land”–, the myth explicitly connects the King to the Waste Land, positing the need for “communal regeneration and political restoration” (Gualberto 2021: 23). Gualberto’s volume thus performs a twofold function: on the one hand, it sheds light on the importance of the undoing of the myth in wasteland modernism; on the other hand, it provides a thorough revision of the “ideological function of myth itself”, as the author rightly assesses (2021: 23), dismantling “aprioristically natural” conceptions of the world by “revealing [them] as ideological” (2021: 23).

In the first chapter, Gualberto reads T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land” (1922), a “foundational text of wasteland modernism” (2021: 26) that rewrites the wasteland myth, turning a myth of regeneration and renewal into a myth of degeneration (2021: 31). Further, Gualberto argues that Eliot’s rewriting of the myth reverses its purpose: the actuality of the myth, that is, the renewal of the land, “enacts [the community’s] dissolution” (2021: 32). In Eliot’s actualization of the use of myth to give order to the chaos of reality, Gualberto argues that the restoration taking place at the end of the myth becomes an act of cruelty: “The violence that holds the socio-political order was brutally exposed, and there is no alternative to recognizing, then, the cruelty of April” (2021: 47). What is lost in the war is also lost in the belief in modernity and civilization: the renewal provided by the end of World War I is a barren one, saturated by violence from which the individuals living in the modern world cannot disentangle themselves.

Similarly, in Gualberto’s discussion of John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) in chapter two looks at how the novel’s view of reality, epitomized by the city of Manhattan, fragments and defies mythopoeia’s attempt to control modern communities. Linking modernity to the modern city, which is read as a Foucauldian heterotopia, life in the city is presented as a failure of civilization where contemporary individuals are alienated, dispossessed and dehumanized (Gualberto 2021: 51–52). Like Eliot’s “unreal city” full of corpses, Dos Passos’s city-dwellers lead a “lifeless, artificial form of existence that emblemizes an overwhelming aversion for life” (Gualberto 2021: 56). Love and reproduction are tainted by material success, which hinders the community’s flourishing and replaces it with fierce individualism and artificial lifelessness. Life in the wasteland of Manhattan is rendered meaningless, without redemption or renewal. Only the male protagonist, Jimmy, in moving away from Manhattan, is able to resist “the city’s mechanizing and dehumanizing forces” that would disintegrate “his self into the city machinery” (Gualberto 2021: 66) by fleeing to the past, as symbolized by his escape from society. This results in a sort of mythologization of the self through reveling in nostalgia and a search for fixed meaning that does not provide any answers either to the question of an alternative way of living in modern civilization.

In chapter three, Gualberto analyzes F.S. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as a delegitimization of the myth of the American Dream, positing wasteland mythology as the main countering force against America’s self-mythologizing. The novel lays bare that “America is the Wasteland” (Gualberto 2021: 154) as symbolized by Gatsby’s anti-climactic death. Though Nick, the narrator of the novel, tries to follow the traditional mode of romance structure to present Gatsby as a self-made man capable of “overcoming and transcending the moral and spiritual decadence of reality”, this use of myth, however, proves “fatal for the individual” (Gualberto

2021: 72). In his quest for his individual success, mimicking the pioneer's journey, Gatsby reveals himself to be as corrupt as the foundations of the American Dream itself, which can only be achieved through unproductive capitalism, illegally obtained money and superfluous materialism (Gualberto 2021: 75). Speculation, described as the suppression of the use-value of commercial goods, is at the heart of the community's degeneration in the novel (Gualberto 2021: 79). This economic unproductivity renders the community barren and sick, which eventually leads to the death of Myrtle, and then of Gatsby at the hands of Myrtle's husband, pointing to the impossibility of regeneration, for, in fact, it is the previously established wasteland what has allowed for "James Gatz to become Jay Gatsby" (Gualberto 2021: 86). Even if Nick, the narrator, attempts to save Gatsby from the moral decay of the community through storytelling, the novel upends the meaning of myth-making, revealing it to be a strategy to impose a false view upon a world beyond redemption.

Everyone is also sick in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), as Gualberto argues in chapter four. The story of an injured soldier returned from war turned impotent pinpoints the community's ailments. Conventional sexuality is defied and distorted, hindering, according to Gualberto, any capacity for love, that is, for regeneration, which is "the real war wound" (2021: 93). Most of the community, however, seems "quite content in their disenchantment", signaling that "resignation might be the only appropriate response to sickness" (Gualberto 2021: 93). The solely seeming exception is Jake, the male protagonist, who, in the face of his impotency, is not able to imagine a different sort of relation to women that does not entail heterosexual intercourse (Gualberto 2021: 94). Again, a nostalgic dissatisfaction in the attempt to retrieve an irrecoverable past thwarts any opportunity to reconstruct a broken community. This turn to the past and the primitive can be observed in the bullfighting ritual, whose origins dwell in fertility and marriage rites (Gualberto 2021: 99). However, in the novel, the alleged purposes of bullfighting remain unrealized: Brett, the promiscuous woman, underscores Jake's impotency, and the "aestheticized violence" of the bullfight is undermined by its sheer cruelty and its futility. Therefore, ritual is transformed into a "mere performance" (Gualberto 2021: 108).

The Wasteland myth is revisited in the American West, as John Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown* (1933) exemplifies, following the tradition of "wasteland modernism" from the nineteen-twenties. In this fifth chapter, Gualberto examines the ambivalent way that Steinbeck portrays post-depression America, subverting the ideal of renewal in the myth whilst attempting to restore myth as a narrative framework (2021: 113). Indeed, from an ecocritical standpoint, myth-making is unveiled as a tool of control to justify man's domination over nature and over woman's sexuality, as the protagonist of *To a God Unknown* repeatedly fails to restore fertility to his barren land and to himself (Gualberto 2021: 118). In fact, the occupation of the West changes it into a Waste Land where death pervades everything, as symbolized by the transformed Native American fertility talisman that becomes "a terrible talisman for death" (Gualberto 2021: 121). At the end, sacrificial death results in quite an ambivalent stance at renewal, signaling that human redemption is impossible and ritual has become empty of meaning and transcendence.

Finally, the sixth and last chapter, on Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936), brilliantly ends this volume by offering an accurate analysis of the Left Bank writer's masterpiece. In *Nightwood*, values from the past collapse, as exemplified in the text's engagement with tradition through transforming it (Gualberto 2021: 131). Gender, like myth, is undone in *Nightwood*, subverting and transforming it in an attempt to "recover... the pre-symbolic, gender-free chaos that preceded the symbolic classification of the world carried out by mythology" (Gualberto 2021: 133-34). Therefore, in revising narrative, historical and discursive conventions through the literary imagination, Barnes disassembles the "a-priori meaning" of myth "as the expression of a natural cosmos" (Gualberto 2021: 134). Thus, as Gualberto explains, the ideological function of myth, as a culturally constructed narrative, is unveiled and refuted. Indeed, Gualberto's analysis goes further to explain how Barnes refuses, in her rewriting of the wasteland myth, to portray a sense of nostalgia for an irrecoverable lost world, unlike her male modernist counterparts (Gualberto 2021: 157). Rather, the values of the old world are desecrated and exposed as useless, displaying an act of destruction against the remains of structures mourned for in the previously analyzed novels.

Thus, Gualberto carefully details how primitive myth is gradually dismantled in wasteland modernism, following a "decentering of authority and solidity" (2021: 149). As she explains, the chaotic representation and fracture of primitive myth expresses "the disenchantment of modernity, America, and the ideal of civilization itself" (2021: 150). Though only *Nightwood* celebrates the end of the previous order, further insight on nostalgia, as a reactionary or transformative affect (Bonnett 2010: 2) may broaden the discussion of the selected corpus. As Longenbach claims, apocalyptic portrayals of the world were not entirely modernist, but modern, and "modernist myths of final things often go hand in hand with moralities of final solutions" (1989: 844), even if such solutions are those of hopelessness with regards to the present. Thus, an ideological consideration of the value of nostalgia, as a (re)generative affect itself, may complicate the author's thesis in search for new modes of representation. Was there really a past to mourn for? And if so, who can mourn it and why? If the disenchantment of myth fosters no new mythopoeia, or does not allow for alternative worldviews, is community necessarily, irreparably broken, or can we find new spaces to live?

The "disenchantment of myth" (Gualberto 2021:43), understood as a negative affect, may propel political momentum, as critical theorist Sianne Ngai argues (2005: 5). However, disenchantment, like other negative

affects, also runs the risk of being romanticized, as it may present itself in an ambivalent form, generating passivity at the same time than resistance (Ngai 2005: 4). Following Paolo Virno, Ngai warns that “sentiments of disenchantment”, once thought to be radical, have been “perversely integrated . . . into contemporary capitalist production itself” (2005: 4). Thus, negative affect may actually be more functional than oppositional, in particular if considered in relation to nostalgia for a lost golden past—which, perhaps, was never there in the first place.

Marvelously written and meticulously documented, this book is a great addition to both Modernist studies and Myth-criticism, as it portrays a new way of looking at myth in a historically grounded way. Gualberto masterfully displays a vast literary knowledge that goes beyond Modernism in her discussion of the selected corpus in dialogue with tradition. I look forward to reading Gualberto’s future research on Modernism and some of the themes that are touched upon in this book but not fully developed, such as time and historicity, nostalgia, and the depiction of sexual violence in modernist works (2021: 42) in relation to myth and myth-making as a way to make up for a lost past (whether imagined or not). In sum, this is a solid, excellent first monograph, which contains the kernel of many great books to come.

## References

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