

Losada, José Manuel, *Mitocrítica cultural. Una definición del mito.* – Madrid: Ediciones Akal, 2022, 828 págs. ISBN 978-84-460-5267-8

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This work is the result of more than fifteen years of research on and around myth and it does not just constitute a tool for the definition and analysis of the mythological phenomenon, but it also outlines a methodology of its own (cultural myth criticism, which, as expressed by Prof. Losada, has to be “nomothetic, historical, philosophical, connected to the numinous or divine, and philological”) in order to avoid a perpetuation of ambiguity, reductionism and failed hermeneutics (social mystifications) which could be present in prevalent studies on the subject up to the present day. Also, the book takes a stand as a source of resistance and open front against the great menaces brought about by the neoliberal system: globalization, disappearance of alterity, relativism, dilution of narrative and the subsequent dismantlement of the community. As an answer to these challenges, Prof. José Manuel Losada (Universidad Complutense de Madrid) proposes an analysis of myth which posits itself as a bulwark of transcendence: “myth is only myth when it includes absolute and sacred transcendence both in the dimension of the character and in its time-space coordinates within the fictional universe.” (Prologue) Narrative, community, ritual, myth... none of it may take place outside the acceptance of an alterity which cannot be reduced to be the object of consume.

The book is divided in two well-defined parts: an introduction, divided itself in two sections (a reflection on the relationships which myth establishes with transcendence, culture, and hermeneutics; and an analysis of how the postmodern phenomena of globalization, relativism and immanence affect the study and understanding of myth and also lead to its distortion, Chapters 1 and 2); and a detailed study of all elements which can be considered constituent parts of the definition and conception of myth, which spans chapters 3 to 11. “Myth and Narrative” (chapter 3) analyzes relevant parameters in the history of Western literature: form, allegory, time, reality in a remarkable *tour de force* with tradition which leads us to a challenging reading of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer’s Night Dream* which is, ultimately, a reflection on the requirements of narrative and storytelling in relationship to the mythical world of transcendence. “Referential Function of Myth” (Chapter 4) moves from form and structure to functionality, where Losada gives an account of the main functional patterns of myth according to traditional schools of interpretation (etiology and teleology) in order to move to a bold reflection on their compatibility with the particulars of present-day societies which seem to produce different forms of ephemerality. The next chapters (5, 6 and 7) deal with some constitutive elements of myth: symbol and image (5), characters (6), and extraordinary events (7). Here Losada undertakes an ambitious and multiheaded approach: he gives an account of the *status quaestionis* of these, at times problematic and hazy, elements of analysis, but at the same time proposes a line of interpretation which creates a taxonomy according to transcendence values: such is his reading of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion* (and in particular of the intertextual romance of Beren and Luthien), whose interpretation is set in motion against the framework of angelic fall in its rich Judaeo-Christian manifestations. His approach leads to tensions in the world of myth which the author is well aware of, like the connection between magic and myth and what is the role of the wizard and the magic itself in a mythical narrative, such as in the multiple iterations of Merlin from Geoffrey of Monmouth to 21st century action films, but also in classics such as *MacBeth*’s wyrd sisters and in authors which have a paradoxical relationship with myth, such as H.P. Lovecraft and his rendering of a magical summoning in “The Festival.” This interest in surveying authors and works which have a conflicted connection with myth on a theoretical level is also manifest in his approach to Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and an important reflection on how this “universal” of Spanish Golden Age literature should actually be read as an exercise on de-mythification. Aptly, this concept is treated in Chapter 8, “History, Mythification, and De-Mythification”, which works as a transition point in the middle of Part II, which then moves to deeper reflections on the structure of myth (Chapter 9) and its connection to, in the author’s model, its ultimate *raison d’être*: cosmology (Chapter 10) and eschatology (Chapter 11) as two sides of the same coin. These last two chapters lead in turn to the final conclusions of the book, which are a very personal and clearly engaged essay on the author’s

side. They make manifest that his vision of myth (and the proposed analytical discipline of myth criticism) is built upon a defense of transcendence as its moving principle and operating basis. This implies following a very narrow path, where certain cultural approaches are seen as divorced from myth by reasons which may seem opposite and paradoxical (for instance, both idealism and relativism in their more radical formats) and, ultimately, to an ambitious reflection which does not only involve the subject matter itself, myth, its manifestations and its academic analysis, but also a wider criticism of culture and society of the last hundred years or so, from scientific positivism to postmodernity.

Losada's aim and principles are clear and well-defined, although it is possible that some of the paradoxes and inner tensions could have been traced in more detail or acknowledged in references to other specialized works in academia. For instance, most magical systems are connected in turn to a form of cosmogony and cosmology, but his angles of approach seem to isolate the manifestations of mythical vs. non-mythical in this respect, against the world view of many traditional societies. This is just a particular manifestation of a more extensive philosophical and anthropological problem, how 'transcendence' is to be defined and to wonder whether it is a useful cross- and trans- cultural concept or, on the other hand, it should be circumscribed to the historical concept of transcendence in Western and Judaeo-Christian transcendence, where there is a modicum of conceptual clarity. In cultural worlds where animism, spiritualism, and pantheism play a role (present or traditional), for instance, some of Losada's statements would have to be culturally contextualized.

Nevertheless, the book is an epic enterprise of scholarship which at times feels like a deep academic essay but at times also acquires the usefulness of a cyclopedia, not in the traditional sense of reference work (although there is an extensive list of works treated which can be very useful in this sense, and Losada does not shirk from including and treating manifestations of very contemporary "popular culture", such as TV series, commercial sci-fi movies or cartoons and video games alongside literature and more "classic" filmmaking), but perhaps as a sort of navigation chart where "hic sunt dracones" is duly illuminated.