

Maximilian Levine

Professor Viau

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How to Modernize an Ancient Myth

To recast a myth into a modern light the first and most important question we must ask is “what does this myth mean?” and secondly “what does this myth teach?” Then we take this core idea and plant it in a modern setting. The details of the myth are less important; whole characters may not make the jump. Of most import are the themes and lessons.

In the *Popol Vuh*, for example, in the story of Hunahpu and Xbalanque, the story is about demigod twins who play a Mayan ball game and are challenged by the Death Lords to survive dangerous houses and play the game underground in Xibalba. But the story in essence imparts the importance of the sport of the Mayan people, as well as, more generally, teaching perseverance against adversity. (Tedlock 91-142)

But what does it mean to modernize a myth? Why not just read the myth as it was written, think about the context and culture of the people who produced it, and then from there determine what the myth means—all the while being a modern person! There is great value in doing that, and that is a primary activity in academia.

However, consider that the myth was likely translated from an ancient language into English, and that thereby there has already been a reinterpretation of the myth.

Language dramatically changes the way one thinks. Whichever language one first learns will forever influence the structure of one's thoughts. Chinese, for example, is genderless, and as a result, the translator of the *Tao Te Ching* had to choose what gender pronouns to use (Tzu 3). Language can have more dramatic changes than that: one tribe in the Amazon can't conceive of the concept of time itself, because their language lacks the relevant vocabulary (Palmer). In *City of Glass*, a child is locked in a room without human contact because his father believes that he will learn "god's language," but when he finally escapes, he has words only he knows the meaning of, and "was not all there in the head" (Auster 17). Clearly language is vital and pivotal to human thought, and so translating a work to a different language is no small change to its substance.

The language of the modern era not only antiquates that of the past, but some concepts we have actually lost. In America, we like individualism, but an ancient Roman would not believe that he had free will; he would believe that his body is controlled by the whim and forces of the gods, and would probably be called schizophrenic nowadays (Beck). Consider, for example, when Hercules wishes to stay with his new mistress—

Great labors were awaiting his mighty arm, however; and the gods, at the appointed time, freed him from his bondage to the Lydian queen, and bade him go forth and do all the good in his power. (Guerber 229)

How would this deeply ingrained fact of consciousness add drama to the myths in which gods play a central role interacting with humans? Remember that at this time these myths would have made up a person's cosmology—they would have believed in them as hard facts. And to successfully recast a myth into the modern era, the myth must be made equally believable to us now.

But as much as we have lost, we have gained a lot more: life in the modern era is more complex than the past. There are more people alive today than all of the past combined, meaning that we have a surplus of unique individuals—all of whom we are placed in indirect contact with through globalization. And at the center and supporter of all of this is technology, which will be the primary element lacking that will need to have a stronger voice in a modernized myth.

Here it will be argued that machines are a malignant force (and not like in *The Terminator*, although that does add another dimension that could be reconciled with this one). Machines are stagnation. In *Star Wars*, the Empire is a soulless entity that is driven by inertia, the same way a rock drifts through space. And of course, the personification of this entity, Darth Vader, is “more machine than man,” and in Luke's confrontation with him—in which he is offered to join the Empire—he loses his hand and has it replaced with a machine one. (Lucas 2:00:30)

The creator of *Star Wars*, George Lucas, was one of the first to attempt to make a modernized myth, and was inspired by Joseph Campbell's work in comparative mythology. Joseph Campbell wrote at the end of his seminal book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, that the biggest problem humans have in the age of reason is to come up with a modern myth that will engage our psyches as powerfully as the myths did for the ancients (Campbell 333-7). Lucas followed the common patterns that Campbell had discovered in myths around the world in order to write his story. Lucas used technology and futurism, careful not to do anything that our modern sensibilities would reject (albeit still with a mysterious "force"—more on this later) thereby fully engaging our modern psyches in a myth. There are many other modern attempts at the hero's journey, such as *Spirited Away* and *Alice in Wonderland* (the latter mixes mathematics into a dream, thereby giving a modern feel, although the former uses the antiquated idea of spirits and thus doesn't escape being seen as fiction). And if we want the same of the ancient myths, we must similarly translate them into modern language.

Other than following the mythic structure, Lucas brought some of the missing elements that need to be incorporated in any such translation, such as diversity of life, the continued but oft ignored presence of the unknowable, and machine as stagnation (Tzu).

The ancients dealt with evil machines in the form of tyrannical governments whose only reason for being in power was that they had been in power, and have

thus become soulless: “The effect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world” (Campbell 32). Such a government has become mechanical, because true good and life is dynamic and fair; the role of the hero is to find that fire of life, overthrow tyranny, and refill the world with the spirit of life. The new ruler will lose his spirit, and the cycle will continue.

In the past, the diversity of life was represented through various animal characters. In the *Popul Vuh*, jaguars, rats, caimans, macaws, and other animals are humanlike in their characterization: “[These] were the names of the animals who brought the food: fox, coyote, parrot, crow...And these were the ingredients for the flesh of the human work” (Tedlock 145-6). In the Choctaw myth, “Grandma Spider Steals Fire,” humans play a very minor role and animals are more involved in what is usually considered a human trait, fire (“Grandmother Spider”). Today, talking animals would detract from the culpability of a story, but luckily we have a perfect alternative—foreigners. This fact was foreseen ironically in one of the most ancient myths, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*: rather than have talking animals, Enkidu is a man who was born in the wild and has animal tendencies, yet he is still a man: “His whole body was shaggy with hair...He ate grasses with the gazelles, and jostled at the watering hole with the animals” (Kovacs 6). Enkidu is a foreigner, but quickly joins Gilgamesh as a human. Where a diversity of animals were once present in every ancient culture (and are sadly diminishing today), there are now a diversity of

humans with different cultures interacting. Therefore, in the modernization of an ancient myth, it makes sense to replace a character's difference in species with a difference in culture (or another sentient being).

Finally, there is the recurrent idea of the unknowable. In the *Tao Te Ching*, this is called the "Tao" for lack of a better term, but "the unnamable is the eternally real" (Tzu 1). In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the main speaker, the god Krishna, takes on this aspect, referring to this unknowable as himself: "I know all creatures that have been, that now exist, and that are yet to be, but, Arjuna, no one knows me" (Miller 76). And in the bible, Matthew advises to place more focus on this than life itself: "Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth...But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven" (NIV, Matthew 6:19-34). In the modern day, this idea most endures. Despite science giving us increased understanding of much of the world, we still don't know why we are here. Ultimately, by skirting around the edge of this truth, that is what myth has always tried to teach, and for the moment that is what it will continue to try to teach.

Hopefully this paper has helped in the ongoing effort of producing literature with real meaning, that speaks just as well subconsciously as consciously to the psyche. When one reads or watches a work that is informed by these ideas, and the experience isn't marred by an obvious self-confliction or impossibility, then one knows that this is so, and it may enter into one's dreams and inform more than just conscious knowledge. Also it makes a story just plain beautiful!

Reinterpretation of the *Popol Vuh*'s Hero Twins (Tedlock 91-142)

The story does not take place in some remote jungle somewhere; the city is modern and similar to the one you live in. The story, however, takes place under a totalitarian regime in which any crime is punishable by death [those Xibalbans *were* a bit harsh]. A convict can stay alive in the prison system, however, if they are successful at playing the royal family's favorite sport, basketball [the Mayans sure took *their* sport seriously]. One such convict was Hun Hunahpu.

If you were good enough at the sport, you could voluntarily go to jail and compete for honor and money, and that's why Hun Hunahpu was there. But the royal family, who were called the Xibalbans, became angry with Hun Hunahpu. He was being insolent—he was the best basketball player they had ever seen, and he knew it. So they had him killed through the usual method: through a strange clause in the criminal contract, they had him cast into the gauntlet of challenges that were said to “prove the [victim's] morale.” But not before saving his genetics. One of the royal daughters got too close to the human simulator that was playing Hun Hunahpu's genes like an old film movie and became pregnant. She was to be killed, but, on the guillotine, she swapped out her own head for a basketball, and no one was the wiser.

The resulting twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, were allowed a life of ease in the royal family, though the Lords of Xibalba watched them with suspicion. When the twins eventually found out about their heritage, they ordered a peasant to bring

them some basketball equipment. The twins distracted their mother while the peasant snuck the items into the twins' courtyard. The twins began to practice, and discovered that they had their father's talent. But soon they found themselves incarcerated for the crime of playing basketball, and then they were put into the trials that no one had yet survived:

For the first trial, they had to shoot hoops in the dark. But their aim was sure, and they passed the test.

For the second trial, there were spikes all over the room so that if they missed the balls would deflate. But their aim was sure, and afterward their balls weren't deflated, and they passed this test too.

For the third trial, it was a room that was not only freezing cold, but there was slippery ice everywhere, but the twins were so amazing that all the ice melted. The rest of the trials progressed in a similar manner.

The Xibalban Lords got angry and outright killed Hunahpu, replacing the basketball with his head. But his brother continued to play without breaking a sweat. Then it turned out to be only a trick, and the basketball was not Hunahpu's head but was merely painted with his visage, and Hunahpu was really still alive. They had both passed the tests and were allowed to live!

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