Peer Gynt peels an onion

By GERALD O'GRADY

My essay may be more easily read if I explain the genesis of its two parts. I was unaware of it, this led me to discuss the two elements of a literary work, its form and its content.

In retrospect, I can see that this was the natural result of my attempting to discuss two terms which freshmen usually find difficult to grasp, symbol and myth. Finally, since it is the business of every discourse in the humanities to define man, this accounts for my concern with the problems of identity and nothingness in both parts, and explains my title.

I. HOW-FORM-Symbol

Perhaps the most widely accepted definition of man among those doing creative work in the humanities and social sciences is that of symbol-maker. Etymologically, a combination of the Greek sym-+ballein, symbol means "to throw with," and the best brief definition seems that of the Chicago architect, Louis Sullivan, who called it "a snowball with a rock in it."

What Sullivan did was to perceive the relationship between the idea of a process (throw with) and a concrete object which embodied it (snowball with rock) and to link them up; and this points to the fact that symbol-making depends on man's ability "to perceive similarities among dissimilarities" (Aristotle), to select or abstract them from their contexts, and to associate them. Symbolization—abstraction and association—is the process by which we formulate our experience of the world, whether it be the interaction of physical elements or the conflict of human motivations.

Language Is Symbol

Despite a persistent popular (and occasionally academic) belief to the contrary, most researchers now recognize that language, too, is a unique attribute of man, what biologists call a species-specific form of behavior. This recognition substantiates the definition of man as symbol-maker, because language is fundamentally a symbolic process. The meanings of the spoken sounds or written markings which we call language are dependent upon our accepting their logically arbitrary but culturally determined associations with referents in our world of things.

To oversimplify for the moment, words are the sounds of things. The little noises which words physically are bestow a conceptual identity on the things they signify; and it is this identifying, this abstracting and naming of an object, event, quality, relation, or what not from the total flux of existence around us, which not only permits, but prompts or even forces us to control this experience and to communicate it to each other.

The Foaming Cleanser

This process of symbolization, as it applies to how language and literature operate, can be illustrated, first, on a very simple basis, arising from the physiology of articulation and dealing with the naming of kitchen cleansers, and, second, on a much more complex level, arising from our total experience of life and dealing with an extended and involved literary work.

Ajax, the cleanser, depends for its appeal on what some poet in calling a "subliminal persuasion," but what a little analysis reveals as a simple process of abstraction and association, that is, symbolization. What we do, I think, is abstract the harsh, grating "j" and "k" sounds from Ajax and associate them with the sounds generated by its frictional cleansing process, abstracting this aspect, function, from Ajax's appearance, color, smell and other qualities.

We do the same, it appears, with its competitor, Spic and Span, abstracting the sibilants (s) and the labial explosives (p), and associating them with the swelling and swabbing heard in the product's use. It is also possible that we associate the clipped precision of articulation and the metallic ring of the nasal in "Span" with the quality of neatness or cleanliness itself. The very movements which our mouths go through in pronouncing the names of these products draw our attention to the services they perform for us.

Doctor Zhivago

My second example, while more complex, is less dependent than was the first on what may have seemed rather subjective associations. Boris Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago" has been wrongly interpreted by the majority of reviewers, I think, as a book whose meaning is primarily political and historical. If properly read by abstracting the unifying note of its central character's shifting social roles, we can see that it is really a consciously artistic shaping of our total life experience.

His name, Zhivago, is Russian for life, and he is not only a doctor whose business it is to keep the body alive, but a poet bent on recording and preserving the life of the spirit. During the period of his retreat from Moscow, he is a farmer who brings forth life from the soil; most importantly of all, he is the progenitor of human life, siring children by three different women who together represent the varying social classes of his mother Russia.

The repetitive imagery of flowing water and flowering trees, a lyrical paean to cosmic life, we abstract it and associate it with the roles of the hero, provides a final clue that the novel is properly named.

Kenneth Burke

It might be well, in this connection, to mention Kenneth Burke's proposal that language be viewed, not directly in terms of word-thing relationship, but roundabout, by thinking of speech as the "naming" of complex non- verbal situations, somewhat as the title of a novel does not necessarily name one object, but sums up the vast complexity of elements that compose that novel, giving it its character, essence, or general drift.

The title "Doctor Zhivago" is a perfect illustration of this

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Burkean notion which, one might notice, attempts to warn us about the dangers of abstraction and association, the very processes of symbolism which are rooted in the operation of language itself.

Nigger, Kike

When Juliet asked Rosencrantz, "What's in a name?" Shakespeare knew that the answer was tragedy; and so did James Joyce when he purloined, "Who gave you that numb7?" for giving a name to a man is a nugatory boost from which he never recovers. Labels like nigger, kike, communist, extremist well illustrate the thought control provided by abstraction, for we readily forget the context of common humanity we share with those so abstracted and named.

Our own society is also faced with a totally opposite problem.

It is changing so rapidly and becoming so complex that we can no longer make the abstractions necessary to identify and define our positions in it; the traditional labels of humanist, liberal, etc. are notably inadequate. The sudden advent and popularity of the TV panel shows of the "Who Am I?" and "What's My Name?" variety seem a cruelly unconscious parody of our six-sided stance on the edge of Sartrean mea.

"I'm Nobody Too"

It is one indication of his profundity that each of the tragedies of Arthur Miller, who specializes in a drama which is both social and psychological, involves a hero desperately defending his "name." The paradigm for our loss-of-identity crisis, about which more below, seems to be Sara Teasdale's couplet: "I'm nobody, who are you? I'm nobody too." The moral is that the loss of the ability to symbolize leaves man undefined and without meaning.

If it is now somewhat clear that symbolization creates the forms by which we control and communicate our experiences, and that this is how literature works, we can move along to the what of literature, the context which fills the form, and turn to a second difficult term, myth.

Its original Greek meaning was word or speech, it is related to the word for mouth, and it thus has its origin in human communication through language. The best brief definition is that of the eminent Harvard psychologist, Jerome Bruner: "myth is the externalization of our experience by embodying it in plot and characters."

Utter, Outer

If we can agree that one of the core experiences in each of our lives is the continuing revelation of oneself to oneself, we can readily recognize that language, the power of each of us to utter (originally the comparative degree of the adverb sol) or to externalize his own experience, makes it possible for each of us to perfect or complete himself, to make his identity more totally human, by sharing in the myths (externalized experiences) of others.

One of the best quests for identity in all of literature and thus a true myth for modern man occurs late in the fifth act of Henrik Ibsen's "Peer Gynt." After having traveled all over the universe and having been employed in all kinds of work and played all kinds of roles, Peer finds himself alone in an onion patch in his Norwegian homeland. Picking an onion, he fastens on it as a symbol of his own identity, and utters hisparable of life:

"Now then, little Peer, I'm going to peel you.
(IHe takes an onion and peels it layer by layer.)
The outermost layer is withered and torn;
That's the shipwrecked man on the upturned keel.
Here, mean and thin, is the passenger.
But it still tastes a little of old Peer Gynt.
And inside that is the digger of gold.
Here's the student of history, short and tough;
And here is the prophet, fresh and juicy;
This layer now that curls up so softly
Is the sybarite living for ease and pleasure.
(He peels off several layers at once.)
What a horrible lot of layers there are!
Surely I'll soon get down to the heart.
(He pulls the whole onion to pieces.)
No—there isn't one. Just a series of shells
All the way through, getting smaller and smaller.
(He throws the pieces away.)"

Through plot and character, Ibsen has externalized the recurrent human endeavor to uncover the uniqueness of self amid the variety of assumed roles each of us acts out. The notion that still exists in the mind of many freshmen, that this is fiction and not fact, and therefore untrue, must be countered with the remark made by Richard McKeon on the occasion of the novelist Thomas Mann's eightieth birthday: Mann's story (myth) of "Joseph and His Brothers" was true, the Chicago philosopher said, not because it ever happened, but because it happened because it became so often.

If one insists on interpreting this remark literally and replies that our Peer's encounter with annihilation is an experience unknown to him and his peers, we might ask him to reserve his judgment of "not truly human" until he has pondered the anthropologist Joseph Campbell's "The Hero With a Thousand Faces." "In his life-form, the individual is necessarily only a fraction and distortion of the total image of man. He is limited as either male or female; at any given period of his life he is again limited as child, youth, mature adult, or ancient; furthermore, in his life-role he is necessarily specialized as craftsman, tradesman, servant, or thief, priest, leader, wife, nun, or harlot; he cannot be all. Hence the totality—the fullness of man—is not in the separate member, but in the body of the society as a whole."

Granted that the student has never shared thoughts similar to those of Peer Gynt, he should at least grasp that this is one possible mode among the totality of human experiences, and enlarge his own understanding of life by vicariously participating in this myth. No man is all, and literature's function in the curriculum is to supply the corpus of images, identities, models, patterns, and roles which enable each man to perfect his humanity.

If myth is an externalizing by mouthing, it strikes me that the activity of reading might be an internalizing by the same process, a cannibal-like activity in which we nourish ourselves on our common nature and assimilate more of human kind to ourselves. If I were to recommend a literary diet of "Breakfast at Tiffany's" "Naked Lunch," and "Dinner at Antoine's," one would readily understand that I was talking symbolically. Yet Ernest Hemingway's last book is named "The Finest Hours" and our last for life makes all of us Oliver Twists, asking for more.