

REASSESSING JOHN STEINBECK'S MODERNISM: MYTH, RITUAL, AND A LAND FULL OF GHOSTS IN *TO A GOD UNKNOWN*

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ABSTRACT. *The aim of this paper is to reassess John Steinbeck's presence and significance within American modernism by advancing a myth-critical reading of his early novel To a God Unknown (1933). Considering the interplay between this novel and the precedent literary tradition and other contextual aspects that might have influenced Steinbeck's text, this study explores Steinbeck's often disregarded novel as an eloquent demonstration of the malleability of myths characteristic of Anglo-American modernism. Taking myth-ritualism—the most prominent approach to myth at the time—as a critical prism to reappraise Steinbeck's own reshaping of modernist aesthetics, this article examines recurrent frustrated and misguided ritual patterns along with the rewriting of flouted mythical motifs as a series of aesthetic choices that give shape and meaning to a state of stagnation common to the post-war American literary landscapes, but now exacerbated as it has finally spread, as a plague of perverse remythologization, to the Eden of the West.*

Keywords: John Steinbeck, Modernism, myth-criticism, myth and ritual, American literature, *To a God Unknown*.

EL MODERNISMO DE JOHN STEINBECK: MITOS, RITOS Y UNA TIERRA LLENA DE FANTASMAS EN *TO A GOD UNKNOWN*

RESUMEN. *El objetivo de este trabajo es revisar la relevancia de John Steinbeck como autor modernista a través de una lectura mito-crítica de su novela To a God Unknown (1933). Tomando en consideración las intersecciones entre el texto de Steinbeck y la tradición literaria que le precede, así como otros aspectos contextuales significativos, este estudio explora un texto poco considerado hasta ahora para demostrar que la novela de hecho constituye una demostración elocuente de la maleabilidad de los mitos tan típica del modernismo anglo-americano. Para ello, este artículo emplea el mito-ritualismo (la escuela mito-crítica más prominente en aquel momento) como prisma crítico para examinar los recurrentes ritos fallidos y los patrones míticos reinterpretados que en la novela dan cuenta de un estado de degeneración propio del paisaje literario modernista en los Estados Unidos, un estado que aquí se ve exacerbado por haber alcanzado, por fin, como si de una plaga re-mitologizante se tratase, el Edén del oeste americano.*

Palabras clave: John Steinbeck, modernismo, mito-crítica, mito-ritualismo, literatura de los EE UU, *To a God Unknown*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Most of John Steinbeck's major works, such as *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), or *East of Eden* (1952), give account of a remarkably well-known use of traditional myths that refuses to take for granted any sense of truth that might be imbued in those myths—what Pugh defines as a “sense of ‘naturalness’ that corresponds to the version of reality promoted by accepted myths and masterplots” (Pugh 2006: 74). Over the decades, this reluctance to take myth at face value has attracted a significant amount of critical debate, which mostly has focused on exploring how, in order to challenge an unquestioning acceptance of traditional myths as natural narratives, Steinbeck's major novels tend to reinterpret and *rewrite* myth by combining and superimposing divergent mythical templates. An illustrative example of this might be found in the juxtaposition in one single narrative of different tropes and motifs from the Old and the New Testaments in *The Grapes of Wrath* (the Flood, the Exodus, and Jesus Christ's Sacrifice), or in the coalescence of the Exile of Eden, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and varied pagan esoteric myths in *East of Eden* (Pugh 2006: 74). In the earlier and much less often critically considered *To a God Unknown* (1933), however, the process of mythical representation—fundamentally influenced by the principles of

myth-ritualism dominant in Anglo-American literature in the nineteen-twenties—is observably more straightforward and, yet, as this study aims to demonstrate, also undermines the ‘naturalness’ of dominant mythical narratives in a way that calls for a reappraising of Steinbeck’s use of myth within the context of American modernism.

As one of the earliest novels published by John Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*—the story of a man who moves to California to establish a homestead and, after a terrible drought, sacrifices his own life to ensure the prosperity of his land—gives account of a particular view of American life characterized by a “closeness” to the extremely pessimistic view expressed in the works of those who Warren French eloquently described as “the Wasteland writers” of the nineteen-twenties (1975: 51). French used this label to refer to “the fictional chroniclers of the Lost Generation” (51), meaning authors such as Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner, whose novels from the previous decade were highly influenced, symbolically and ideologically, by T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), and which, perhaps more significantly, contributed to a representation of the post-war Zeitgeist as a literary fiction mostly characterized by a “widely prevalent world-weariness” (French 1975: 51). Even though Steinbeck would later on become progressively separated from these writers, artistically speaking, as his career expanded in the following decades, in the early nineteen-thirties the interplay between Steinbeck’s writing and the literary trend that years later Frank Kermode would define as “wastelandism” (1967: 113)—and Saul Bellow would denounce in his novel *Herzog* declaring “the commonplaces of the Wasteland outlook” (1965: 81)—constitutes a significant trait of Steinbeck’s modernist aesthetic that deserves new critical attention. Hence this article reassesses Steinbeck’s *To a God Unknown* as a “mystical tragedy” (French 1975: 179), “[a] product of the pervasive mentality of the Waste Land years of the 1920’s” (170) that represents the story of “[an] America turned wasteland in the Depression era” (Post 1993: 8). On this basis, this essay will precisely probe into the mythical mechanisms that configure this particular image of an American wasteland. Taking into consideration the influence of the immediately precedent literary tradition, but also Steinbeck’s personal contact with myth-critic Joseph Campbell, to whom he read selections from his draft of *To a God Unknown* (Simkins 2007: 13), this article will then explore Steinbeck’s often disregarded novel as an enlightened demonstration of the malleability of myths as “dynamic shapers of consciousness” (Pugh 2006: 74). Such mythical malleability, as will be explained, is typical of modernist literature and cannot be fully understood without considering the influence of myth-ritualism, the most prominent school of myth-criticism at the beginning of the past century and which serves in this study as a critical prism to reconsider Steinbeck’s presence and significance within American modernism.

2. FROM RITUAL TO DISJOINTED ROMANCE

As briefly mentioned before, myth in Steinbeck's novels often operates not as an immovable master narrative, but as an "adaptive narrative" (Simkins 2007: 13). This reveals a critical thinking towards myth that understands that, to control, order, and give shape and significance to the anarchic and futile contemporary world, paraphrasing T.S. Eliot (1952: 426),¹ myth cannot simply be retold: it has to be adapted, that is, rewritten. The 'naturalness' of myth is effectively undercut. Myth is instead revealed as a discursive strategy "fundamentally about the transformation of chaos into harmony" in a way that "includes all the axiological and ethical aspects of life" (Meletinsky 1998: 156). For it was modern ethnology that demonstrated that mythopoesis is an act of symbolic codification, representation, classification and reinterpretation of reality (1998: 116). This vision coincides with Post's argument that Steinbeck's novel develops the notion that humankind's account of myths is necessarily transformative and in constant evolution, because all stories are built by arranging a fixed set of disjointed images in different, changeable ways (1993: 8). But this recognition of the malleability of myth is inextricable from Steinbeck's literary context. As this essay claims, it is the modernist remaking of myth that exposes that, as Manganaro insists, myth is a cultural fabrication for it "expresses the culture within which it works" (1998: 153). The malleability of Steinbeck's myths is the malleability of modernist art, with its emphasis on change and disjunction. The modernist writer "makes myths, which in Eliotic terms means he shapes them actively, suppressively, orderingly, out of cultural material rather than simply expressing or mourning them" (Manganaro 1998: 163).

The use of myth in modernism, specifically as it concerns the efforts of the 'wasteland writers,' is then an active process of myth-making, and Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown* participates in the process. Looking closely to the mythical structures of the text, the disjointed images that are reshaped and set in a new order to make the myth anew may indeed be identified with the mythemes that make up the Waste Land myth. These mythemes are motifs such as the blighted land, the maimed king, the knight, or the Grail, which are decomposed and reassembled in the text into a multitude of ambiguous symbols that, as will be explored, give shape to the typically modernist myth-ritualistic narrative that we find in the 'wasteland novels'.

In Arthurian mythology, there is a Maimed King that governs over the Waste Land. The character, often known as the Fisher King, appears for the first time

¹ T. S. Eliot theorized his "mythical method" in the essay "Ulysses, Order and Myth," where he argued that the use of myth in modern literature was "simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (1952: 426).

in the earliest extant version of the Grail myth, the *Conte del Graal* of Chrétien de Troyes, an unfinished courtly romance composed probably between 1175 and 1190 (Loomis 1992: 28). This Maimed King has been wounded between the thighs and has become sterile. Due to the mystical, sympathetic connection between the king and his kingdom, his sterility has spread to the land, and so for the land to be restored, the young Grail Knight must relieve the king by either finding the Grail or the meaning of the Grail. In later versions of the tale, as critic Northrop Frye explained in his studies of medieval romance, the pursued healing of the king is displaced into a narrative of dynastic succession (1976: 12) about “the replacement of an aged and impotent king by a youthful successor” (12). At the beginning of the twentieth century, it is worth noting, this narrative of dynastic succession that structures the myth of the Waste Land had become inextricably bound to the principles of myth-ritualism as advanced by the anthropologist James. G. Frazer.

Of all the schools of thought that have analysed Arthurian mythology, the most relevant for understanding early twentieth-century literature is the ‘myth and ritual’ school. This school, also known as the school of the Cambridge Ritualists, was formed by a group of classical scholars who, in the decade before First World War, applied James G. Frazer’s theory of myth and ritual to classical mythology and early forms of classical drama (Segal 1999: 49). Some years later, a pupil of the Cambridge Ritualists, Jessie Weston, applied the myth and ritual theory to the study of the Grail Legend in her seminal book *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), which influenced T. S. Eliot’s representation of the Waste Land myth in *The Waste Land* and thus conditioned how the myth would feature in Anglo-American literature in the following decades.

The main claim of myth-ritualism in general terms is that “literature harks back to myths that were originally the scripts of the key primitive ritual of regularly killing and replacing the king in order to ensure crops for the community” (Segal 1999: 44), a notion that Weston applied to her studies, bringing about a critical revolution in the field of Arthuriana. For the first time, in Weston’s book the story of the Grail was critically dissociated from Christianity, reverting the ideological turn entailed by the medieval (Holy) Grail, a sign of the “revolution in mythology” brought about by Christianity (Hocart 2004: 26). The suggestion instead that the medieval myth of the Waste Land was in fact the literary evolution of an ancient fertility rite sprang, of course, from Frazer’s extraordinarily influential *The Golden Bough* (1890), in which the anthropologist argues that myth emerges as the narrative transposition (as either a script or an explanation) of ritual ceremonies. The primeval ritual described by Frazer is a rite during which the tribal king is sacrificed by the tribal community when he falls ill or when his strength diminishes (Frazer 1963: 308-329). This sacrifice, magically bound to the passage of the

seasons, is aimed to warrant the restoration of the crops in springtime, since, according to Frazer's hypothesis, tribal cultures held the belief that the fertility of the land depended upon the strength and vigour of the king.

The aim of the ritual was to prevent the aging, sickness, and natural death of the king, which would be calamitous for the land and the tribe, as the body of the king was believed to contain the spirit of vegetation. This is what Robert Segal defines as "second myth-ritualism," separating in two stages Frazer's hypothesis. According to Segal's explanation (1999: 39), in a first stage of Frazer's anthropological studies, myths in ancient, tribal cultures are presented as describing the life of the god of vegetation, and rituals are dramatic enactments of such myths that operate on the basis of homeopathic magic; that is to say, practical magic that follows the principle that "like produces like" (Frazer 1963: 14). In this view, fertility rites observed by men in ancient civilizations are in fact the dramatic representations of the phenomena that they were trying to facilitate for, as Frazer writes, "it is a familiar tenet of magic that you can produce any desired effect by merely imitating it" (377). From this standpoint, rituals are understood as means to control the god of vegetation and not to manipulate vegetation directly (Segal 1999: 39-40). In the second stage of Frazer's myth-ritualist hypothesis, however, the figure of the divine king is introduced. Whereas in the first stage the tribal king had played the part of the god of vegetation during the celebration of homeopathic rites, in Frazer's second version of myth-ritualism the king is himself conceived as divine, since it is believed that the vegetation god resides in him. The regenerative ritual that results from this belief is the sacrificial killing of the divine king. Myth is thus regarded as the "script" of ritual (Segal 1999: 44), and not as a story explaining the beliefs that support the ritual. In successive times, according to myth-ritualism, myth—understood as the script of the sacrifice ritual, that is, as existing *after* the ritual—undergoes a gradual narrative evolution, from describing a ritual in origin to eventually developing literature, in general, or the Waste Land romances, in the specific case of Weston's hypothesis. Romance, a typically medieval literary 'mode' the matter of which is "the victory of fertility over the waste land" (Frye 1971: 193), focuses then on the topic of healing the king or, eventually, of 'killing the king.' In Segal's words, "'The king must die' becomes the familiar summary line" of this chivalric adventures (Segal 1999: 44).

3. THE KING MUST DIE

'The king must die' could certainly summarize the plot of *To a God Unknown*. The novel opens with a scene of quasi-royal succession between a father and his son, Joseph, that, by describing a moment of genital contact between both

characters, suggests a transaction of sexual potency: “Come to me, Joseph. Put your hand here—no, here. My father did it this way. A custom so old cannot be wrong. Now, leave your hand there!” He bowed his white head, “May the blessing of God and my blessing rest on this child” (Steinbeck 1979: 3). The “white head” of Joseph’s father indicates a succession very close to Frazerian principles, in which the old ‘king’ is transferring the spirit within him to a vigorous successor. The fact that the scene focuses on the transference of sexual potency is indisputably Frazerian too, for as Frazer hypothesizes, “the fertility of men, of cattle, and of the crops is believed to depend sympathetically on the generative power of the king” (1963: 313). This sympathetic identification between the king and his land is all-pervading in *To a God Unknown*, but also, as will be explained, heavily misplaced. Joseph realizes: “His father and the new land were one,” (Steinbeck 1979: 6); and, not much later: “My father thinks he is almost a god. And he is” (12).

Joseph’s father is indeed mythically characterized as a man-god that Frazer would describe as “a human being endowed with divine or supernatural powers” (Frazer 1963: 106). As a priest, or as God himself, he anoints Joseph right before he dies, and so Joseph inherits his father’s ‘divinity’. Mystically connected to the land, the ties that bind him are explicitly described in sexual terms: “As he rode, Joseph became timid and yet eager, as a young man is who slips out to a rendezvous with a wise and beautiful woman. He was half-drugged and overwhelmed by the forest of Our Lady. There was a curious femaleness about the interlacing boughs and twigs, about the long green cavern cut by the river through the trees and the brilliant underbrush” (Steinbeck 1979: 4). The image of a “long green cavern” eloquently establishes the tone of a series of increasingly sexualized descriptions—e.g., “as he looked into the valley, Joseph felt his body flushing with a hot fluid of love” (7)—that culminate in a clear act of fecundation:

He stamped his feet into the soft earth. Then the exultance grew to be a sharp pain of desire that run through his body in a hot river. He flung himself face downward on the grass and pressed his cheek against the wet stems. His fingers gripped the wet grass and tore it out, and gripped again. His thighs beat heavily on the earth.

The fury left him and he was cold and bewildered and frightened at himself. He sat up and wiped the mud from his lips and beard (...) He tried to remember exactly what had happened. For a moment the land had been his wife. ‘I’ll need a wife,’ he said. ‘It will be too lonely here without a wife.’ (9)

Despite the exuberant sexuality of the description, it may be helpful to remember that, according to the principles of ritualistic sympathetic magic, the divine king is not meant to literally fertilize the land. On the contrary, the divine king must be able to reproduce his own kind, so that his reproductive capacity can

be transferred by the law of similarity (Frazer 1963: 12) to the crops and cattle. This circumstance reveals that, in spite of the clear identification between Joseph and Frazer's divine king, and despite the insistent sexualisation of Joseph's connection with the land—at times a bit forced and awkward, which might suggest some form of irony—the rules of the homeopathic magic that supposedly sustain the mythical sympathetic connection between the king and his land are flouted:

When he walked bareheaded through the fields, feeling the wind in his beard, his eyes smouldered with lust. All things about him, the soil, the cattle, and the people were fertile, and Joseph was the source, the root of their fertility; his was the motivating lust. He willed that all things about him must grow, grow quickly, conceived and multiply. The hopeless sin was barrenness, a sun intolerable and unforivable. (Steinbeck 1979: 27)

The fact that Joseph intends to will things into happening facilitates his identification with a kingly figure, but ironically his desire contravenes the character's ritual function. He cannot *will* the land and cattle to be fertile. He can only be the source of that fertility by means of action, and not desire: he must be fertile himself. His lust and passion are otherwise sterile and misplaced. As Post explains, "Joseph is preoccupied with the mystery of propagation throughout the course of the novel, but his thoughts are primarily concerned with the land's regeneration rather than his own generative desires" (1993: 62). The effect of this preoccupation is counter-productive. Demonstrating Joseph's failures in sympathetically connecting with his pasture, it is in those scenes that exacerbate the buoyant fertility of Joseph's land that the text highlights the character's sexual impotence: "One day Joseph stood by the pasture fence, watching a bull with a cow. He beat his hands against the fence rail; a red light burned in his eyes. As Burton approached him from behind, Joseph whipped off his hat and flung it down and tore open the collar of his shirt. He shouted, 'Mount, you fool! She's ready. Mount now!'" (Steinbeck 1979: 28).²

Burton, Joseph's deeply Christian brother, believes that Joseph's worshipping of trees and other outwardly pagan practices are blasphemous and dangerous, and so he warns Joseph that he is behaving queerly, that people might think his interest in the bull's mounting might be personal, and that "the Scripture mentions

² The choice of the bull as emblem of fecundity is anthropologically justified. It is not incidental that Ernest Hemingway's celebrated 'wasteland novel' *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) recreates the degradation of bullfighting, a sacrificial rite of fertility, corrupted and stripped of all meaning once it becomes a form of vain entertainment for the spiritually malcontent characters of the novel. As anthropologist Pitt-Rivers explains, in the speciesist social construction of bulls they signify "the tireless coupling capacity attributed to animals" and combine "masculine moral virtues as well as the animal virtues that ensure fertility" (1997: 111, my translation). Bulls are thus emblems of sexual vigour and fecundity, and as such they appear recurrently in Steinbeck's text.

such forbidden things" (28). Far from denying such accusations, however, Joseph admits to them: "They might say I felt like the bull. Well, I do, Burton. And if I could mount a cow and fertilize it, do you think I'd hesitate? (...) If feeling could put a cow with a calf, I could mount a hundred. (...) Everything on the land is reproducing. I am the only sterile thing. I need a wife" (29).

The text states explicitly that Joseph is sterile, a circumstance that, in both ritual and mythical terms, can only result in the wasting of the land. Rama, Joseph's sister in law and a character symbolically connected to maternity and fertility, describes Joseph in clearly mythical terms as a divine figure: "there are men born outside humanity (...) Joseph has strength beyond vision of shattering, he has the calm of mountains, and his emotion is as wild and fierce and sharp as the lightning and just as reasonless as far as I can see or know (...) You cannot think of Joseph dying. He is eternal. His father died, and it was not death" (79). Joseph is eternal because, as an "incarnate human god" (Frazer 1963: 105), he mythically embodies the divine spirit that, would Joseph have an heir to succeed him, will live on after Joseph's physical death, as it has lived before him, incarnated in his father and in the great oak tree that Joseph identifies with his father's spirit throughout the novel.

4. A VIBRATION OF HORROR

It is significant that, even though the text insists on underlining Joseph's sterility, his ranch is not afflicted by his plight until his wife, Elizabeth, dies tragically in what once again constitutes a failed rite of fecundity. This tragic moment exacerbates to the point of no return the sexual and vital frustration she and, by extension, Joseph, had experienced since their foreboding wedding rites.

When Joseph begins courting Elizabeth, a character also mythologized and described as possessing a "preternatural knowledge" (Steinbeck 1979: 38), he finds her "tense to repel his attack upon her boundaried and fortified self" (51). Gradually, however, her reluctance starts to fade and, as her sexual desire awakens, she finds out that those thoughts that she thought were "foul and loathsome like slugs" (51) are in fact "light and gay and holy" (51). Elizabeth, like Joseph, also has fantasies of fecundity that, in her case, crystallize in Madonna-like images of herself, as she imagines her own body nursing Joseph, holding her breast to his lips and "pouring the hot fluid of herself toward his lips" (51). Fecundity and nurturing are once again misplaced. From the beginning of their courtship, in a narrative strategy that recurs all throughout the novel, the text raises expectations of life and fecundity, only to thwart them immediately afterwards. Soon enough, as Elizabeth daydreams of holy motherhood, her fantasies are interrupted by the

appearance of Benjy, Joseph's alcoholic brother, and she falls immediately and passionately in love with him. Right away, however, she suppresses her feelings in a self-harming act of sacrifice and makes the fatal decision to marry Joseph against her own desires. From this moment on, the wedding rites, teleologically oriented to ensure the couple's fecundity and, by mythical extension, the prosperity of Joseph's ranch, are doomed to lead only to frustration.

The wedding is held almost a year later, in winter, in a "sombre boding ceremony" (57), and in a church that "had so often seen two ripe bodies die by the process of marriage that it seemed to celebrate a mystic double death with its ritual. Both Joseph and Elizabeth felt the sullenness of the sentence. 'You must endure,' said the church; and its music was a sunless prophecy" (57). The description is quite terrible, as it corrupts a supposed ritual of fertility well beyond foreboding its futility by celebrating a "double death," an ominous prophesy corroborated when the characters' first sexual encounter is replaced by a mystical crossing of a mountain penetrated by the couple through a narrow split in the rock. The principles of sympathetic magic are again misapplied. Joseph misplaces his sexual energy and wastes his chance to be fertile. In the mountain, Elizabeth is afraid to cross, but Joseph insists that the crossing into the rock is their true marriage, an action described as "entering the passage like sperm and egg that have become a single unit of pregnancy" (63). Once they have crossed, however, nothing feels different for Elizabeth, and she is immediately abandoned there by Joseph. One more time Joseph has replaced his own generative power, which he might have executed through actual intercourse with Elizabeth, with a symbolic and barren ceremony by means of which he literally and uselessly tries to fertilize the land, "entering the passage like sperm" (63).

Joseph's insistence on performing rituals, or adhering to a symbolic experience of life, stresses the banality of myth and ritual in way that is particularly modern, as it replaces actual, magically-bound rituals with empty performances, with symbolic recreations of life that are disconnected from life. Examples are many in the novel. As a divine-king figure, Joseph should be presented with offerings and sacrifices; but instead he is the one performing the ritual, killing and offering calves to an oak tree that he worships. He even offers his own first-born child to the tree, assigning to his heir the meaning of a useless token and later on sending the child away, definitely interrupting a process of divine succession that, explicitly at the beginning of the novel, had originally bound Joseph to the land. Joseph's son should embody the man-god's indispensable fecundity. His birth is announced at the end of winter, symbolically anticipating and—from the perspective of myth-ritualism—bringing forward the coming of spring. But again expectations of fecundity are thwarted. As Elizabeth's pregnancy progresses, she

grows sick; weakened with fear and illness, she decides to visit the holiest place in Joseph's land: the grove among the pine trees that hides a rock and a stream. It is a talisman of fertility for native American women; for Joseph, it is a sacred place to visit in time of need to "be fed" (Steinbeck 1979: 37), for in the groove there is a rock believed to have nurturing as well as generative and healing properties: the novel's Grail, apocalyptically reinterpreted into a talisman of death.³

In a summary of what he calls "the chief romances of the Grail," Loomis identifies four basic forms adopted by this magical object in the medieval sources: a dish, a chalice, a stone, and a salver (Loomis 1992: 2). As it is represented in John Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown*, the Grail takes the form of a stone, hidden in a truly dangerous 'Perilous Chapel' that is described as "something like an altar that had melted and run down over itself" (Steinbeck 1979: 29). Unexpectedly, however, even in the modern degenerate world that remained in the wake of the 'wasteland writers', the source of peril in this chapel is the Grail itself which, from a source of life and sustenance, has been irredeemably transformed into a deadly weapon.

The rock, in the centre of the "holy" glade, is described as "big as a house, mysterious and huge (...) shaped, cunningly and wisely" (35). Elizabeth's mind wrestles with "its suggestive shape" (119) and, even though "there was no shape in the memory to match it" (35), the phallic symbolism is easily traceable when confronted with a second image present in the grove: a great black bull, hornless, but with a "long, black swinging scrotum, which hung nearly to the knees" (36). This description of the bull and its genitalia emphasizes sexual potency as it befits its emplacement on a mythical space where native Americans go in search of vigour and fecundity. The image, like the supposedly nurturing rock, raises expectations of fertility, but these are immediately frustrated: the bull is hornless, that is, powerless in a way that suggests an eschatological mythical representation of a world that has come to its end (Post 1993: 56).⁴

³ One of the Arthurian romances that has been more influential in modern culture, the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach (c. 1170 – c. 1220) that inspired Wagner's *Parsifal* (1880), is remarkable among the Grail sources because of how it reconciles the conception of the Grail as a pagan talisman of plenty and as a sacred container of the Corpus Christi. But even more significantly for a myth-critical interpretation of *To a God Unknown*, Eschenbach represents the holy, nurturing grail as a stone that "receives all that is good on earth of food and drink, of paradisaic excellence" (Eschenbach 1980: 240). Joseph Campbell, who as mentioned read the draft of Steinbeck's novel, connects the representation of the Grail as a stone in Eschenbach with the philosopher's stone of alchemy (1968: 429) and, following Nietzsche, he criticizes its transformation into a "glowing super-chalice of Christ's blood" in Wagner's *Parsifal* as being "a note of Christian sanctimoniousness that is inappropriate" (430).

⁴ Post sustains this claim in relation to the presence of bulls in Finno-Ugric mythology, which identifies the bull's horns as "the life force itself" (1993: 56).

Ritualist and mythical emblems of fecundity are then portrayed ambivalently. They prove to be unreliable for Elizabeth, who, pregnant and sick, goes to the sacred glade seeking solace and healing. She contemplates the rock, this nurturing Grail-like talisman, and, initially, her irritated nerves settle and she undergoes a mystical experience that seems to corroborate the generative powers attributed to the stone by the old natives and by Joseph. She sees her own child in her womb, curled head-downward, and she sees him move as she feels him stir. But soon enough, immediately after the hope for fecundity is raised, Elizabeth's transcendent contemplation becomes suddenly terrible: "it came upon her that she could have anything she wished, and in the train of this thought there came the fear that she most wished for death" (Steinbeck 1979: 119). In that instant, the world changes around her:

There was a rustling in the forest now, not soft but sharp and malicious. She looked quickly at the rock and saw that its shape was as evil as a crouched animal and as gross as a shaggy goat. A stealthy cold had crept in to the glade. Elizabeth sprang to her feet in panic and her hands rose up and held her breasts. A vibration of horror was sweeping through the glade. The black trees cut off escape. There was the great rock crouching to spring. She backed away, fearing to take her eyes from it. When she had reached the entrance of the broad trail, she thought she saw a shaggy creature stir within the cave. The whole glade was alive with fear. (119-120)

In a traditional mythically-charged narrative, Elizabeth's visit to the rock should have ensured for the family the prosperity brought about by her pregnancy, that is, by the birth of a young successor for the divine king, whose reproductive capacity would be thus assured. But the opposite happens. Elizabeth feels literally attacked by the rock, which in her eyes transforms into a crouching creature, ready to launch at her. Mythologized nature is presented as a threat for the character's life, which sets an ominous precedent for the moment when Joseph's child is born and his birth, far from restoring the land, is followed by the death of Joseph's worshipped oak tree. The bark of the tree grows "as hostile as the rest of the earth" (141) and Elizabeth's sickness aggravates and spreads throughout the ranch.

Elizabeth blames the sacred rock, believing that "something malicious was in the glade, something that wanted to destroy [her]" (148). She vows to return when she feels better, wanting "to insult it because it frightened [her]" (148). She does, accompanied by Joseph, and on their way there they notice how the earth is turning white due to the persistent drought that has followed the death of the oak tree. In the glade however the stream by the rock is still running, and superstitiously Joseph believes that "it's as though the country were not dead while the stream is running"; that the stream is, "like a vein still pumping blood" (153). But terribly, one more time, the hopes for a recurrent, never-ending, persistent

life-force, and for the eventual, ever-recurrent regeneration of the land are soon frustrated. Elizabeth, no longer scared of the rock, decides to “climb up on its back and tame it” (153). Tragedy strikes immediately. As Elizabeth tries to climb, her heels digging “black scars” (154) in the rock, the moss covering the rock strips off and she falls, breaking her neck. Right away it begins to rain but, before the reader—but arguably not before Joseph, who will ultimately kill himself believing wholeheartedly in the generative potency of his ritual sacrifice—might be confused into interpreting Elizabeth’s death as a regenerative rite of sacrifice that will end the drought, the rain stops suddenly, and the clouds withdraw towards the ocean.

Elizabeth’s death only exacerbates the wasting of the land by decreeing Joseph’s sterility. Once again the rite of fertility—this time by means of a sacrificial death—is wrongly performed, as it deprives Joseph of his chance to reproduce. Right after he returns home that same night, Joseph finds Rama waiting for him naked, because she has understood that reproduction is “a need” (161) for Joseph. But even as “her hungry limbs drew irritably the agonizing seed of his body” (161), Joseph’s generative power proves indeed to be agonizing. Following his frenzied encounter with Rama, the plight of his land only aggravates as “the earth grew more grey and lifeless every week” (163). Joseph recognizes that “the duty of keeping life in [the] land is beyond [his] power” (167). He gives his child away and, with no chance of a successor that can inherit Joseph’s divine spirit, there is no longer hope for the crops, the cattle and the men in his land, now, from a myth-ritualist perspective, condemned to perish under a widespread disease (Frazer 313).

5. DEATH BY WATER

In the earliest version of the Grail myth that we have kept, the already mentioned *Conte del Graal* by Chrétien de Troyes, the young knight, Perceval, becomes “Perceval the Wretched” when he fails to ask about the meaning of the Grail that he saw being carried through the Fisher King’s castle. Had he asked about the purpose of that Grail, he “would have brought great succour to the good king who is maimed” because, as a result of the young knight learning about the magical properties of the Grail, the maimed Fisher King “would have totally regained the use of limbs and ruled his lands, and much good would have come of it” (Troyes 2004: 425). In an attempt to explain the core meaning of the myth, Joseph Campbell argued that the true problem that the Grail Knight must face in the varied versions of the Waste Land myth is “to ask the question relieving the Maimed King in such a way as to inherit his role without [inheriting] the wound” (Campbell 1968: 424). Such a claim explains the gist of how a story

about magically healing a divine king is displaced progressively into a narrative of dynastic succession in which the young knight acquires a certain knowledge that empowers him—thus inheriting the king's role—but remains healthy and vigorous.

However, by the time it reaches modernist American literature mostly through the influence of T.S. Eliot, the fragmented and disjointed representation of this mythical tale has suffered a series of transformations that impede the succession pattern explained as the core structure of the story by myth-critics such as Frye, Campbell or Segal. In Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown*, there is no successor to either literally or metaphorically kill the king and take his place, so Joseph must sacrifice himself in a last-resort attempt to restore the Waste Land. But by doing so, by killing himself at the end of the novel, Joseph counteracts the dramatic pattern observed in the initial succession when he became 'king'. He alone climbs onto the rock as Elizabeth did and slits the veins of his wrists. When the stream that crossed the glade finally runs dry, Joseph pours his own blood to irrigate the land.

This is the last act by means of which Joseph mistakes the principles of sympathetic magic. There is no magic beneath the performance of the rite because the performance itself carries out the action pursued by a magic that is thus finally revealed as non-existent. Joseph must feed the land himself with his own blood because he lives in a world without magic, with no hope of mystical regeneration. As presented in the novel, myth is representation with a believed but unreal substratum of mysticism, and thus the universal and naturalized understanding of myth—characteristic of myth-criticism even in the Myth and Ritual School (Manganaro 1998: 159)—is challenged in modernist literary myth-making. What Joseph performs is a barren act of sacrifice that assigns to the sick king the self-imposed role of redeemer, fusing and confusing mythical motifs that eventually disintegrate. The ailing king and “the redeeming hero, the carrier of the shining blade, whose blow, whose touch, whose existence will liberate the land” (Campbell 2008: 11) become one and the same. The constituent elements of the myth are reorganized and so the meaning contained in the myth is inevitable altered. As Lévi-Strauss famously argued, “if there is a meaning to be found in mythology, this cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined” (1955: 431).

And yet, even though Joseph's death explicitly contravenes the pattern of the myth, the rain finally comes after he dies, and, unlike it happened after Elizabeth's death, this time it does not stop. In celebration, the people of the town dance, chant, and pound the earth in a frenzy as the waters keep on rushing. It seems reasonable to think that regeneration has come. In some way, the ritual killing of the king has been performed, and as a result it seems that the drought has passed. But the killing of the king leaves no young successor behind, and so the final

regenerative ending suggests a sort of ambivalence that recalls the resignification of water as a symbol in the paradigm established by the 'wasteland writers'. After all, in Eliot's *The Waste Land* spring rain falls in April and the land is reborn, but the mythical, all-pervading Waste Land of the poem remains cursed. Perhaps, because as Madame Sosostris anticipates when she warns the reader to "fear death by water" (Eliot 2001: 55), we can no longer trust that the water that brings along the rebirth of the earth will also bring about the communal spiritual regeneration celebrated in traditional mythology.

The threat of a non-regenerative death by water—corroborated as true when, after Madame Sosostris's counterfeit Tarot cards actually predict with success the characters and events to follow in the poem, the reader has no choice but to trust her words (Brooks 2001: 207)—is a common trait in the 'wasteland' literature of the nineteen twenties. The "spring rain" (Eliot 2001: 4) makes April "the cruellest month" (1) as it forces new life into the Waste Land, where "the dead tree gives no shelter" (23) and the living have become a ghostly crowd "flowing" like water over London bridge, "undone" by death and undistinguishable from those who languish for all of eternity in Dante's Limbo (Eliot 62-64). In John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), the protagonist Ellen Thatcher accepts her final dehumanization "like someone drowning" (2000: 336) in a moment that "inexorably" (336) closes the character's life-denying evolution. Ellen's crystallization into a "porcelain figure" (272) began when she first married. During her wedding night, the feeling of the rain that "lashed in her face spitefully stinging her flesh" (113) triggered a crisis of anxiety that, as it happened to Joseph's wife Elizabeth when she first looked at the Grail-like rock, made her "want to die" (Dos Passos 2000: 113). She only recovered from this feeling by focusing on a song about an apocalyptic flood that leaves only one survivor: "long-legged Jack of the Isthmus" (113). At the end of *Manhattan Transfer* only one man survives the metaphorical flood: Jimmy Herf, who leaves the Waste Land of the modern city in a truck carrying living flowers away, and stands alone upon the isthmus that connects the continent with the concrete island of Manhattan. With only one man as sole survivor of the flood, in *Manhattan Transfer* as in *To a God Unknown*, there is no chance of succession, no chance of new life after the deluge.

In Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Jay Gatsby is getting ready to swim in the pool when Wilson shoots him and kills him at the end of the novel. He dies falling into the water. As he had told Nick right before, he had not used the pool all summer, and wanted to swim before the gardener drained it now that the dead leaves of autumn had started to fall and were clustering in the stagnant water. The confluence of death and water is evident in Nick's description of the body and blood of Gatsby in the pool: "A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated

the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of transit, a thin red circle in the water” (1991: 133).

As briefly observed in these examples, the transformation of water—traditionally a symbol of “spiritual fertility and the spiritual life” (Becker 2000: 322)—into a symbol of death is a constant in the symbolism of American modernism. Bearing this in mind when reassessing the ending of *To a God Unknown*, it follows that identifying the flood at the end of the novel as a threat of death by water for Joseph’s land is consistent with a myth-ritualistic reading of the text that examines the literality of Joseph’s misguided ritual performances, and it also serves to fully integrate the novel into its literary context. As Post also notes, “[Joseph] will become a part of the earth-cemetery on which the living will continue to scamper and scramble” (1993: 72). From the beginning of the novel, rites of regeneration have been consistently proven to be futile, and restorative sacrifices have been shown to be ineffectual. The magic energy theorized by myth-ritualism is lost in representation. Drought or flood, death is inescapable. Even before Elizabeth’s death, before the rotting of the oak tree, and before the wasting of Wayne Ranch, death and decay always pervaded even in the scenes of apparent plenitude.

As he marched through his land for the first time, Joseph observed that “all over the valley the flimsy little clouds were forming and ascending like the spirits of the dead rising out of a sleeping city” (Steinbeck 1979: 7). Later, he recognized that, “since I have come, since the first day, I have known that this land is full of ghosts” (21). Despite his intimate connection with the green land, Joseph always recognized that death inhabited his ranch, a recognition paralleled with the sickness of another character, Willie, who has the recurrent nightmare that he lives in “a bright place that is dry and dead, and people come out of holes and pull off his arms and legs” (15). These haunting images intercalate from the start with those moments in which Joseph lustfully attempts to fertilize the land, or recognizes, mystically, the spirit of his father in the big oak tree. From the beginning the text juxtaposes scenes of profuse fecundity and their counterpoint, the lingering threat of the “dry years” (13) that came before—preventing the land from ever being homestead before Joseph arrived—and most certainly will come again. Meyer argues that “the contiguity of penetration and possession imagery with the ‘refrain’ of the inescapable presence of the dead, the repeated motifs of blood and sacrifice, function as a counterlandscape to the mimetic topography in *To a God Unknown*” (2004: 84). In this view, then, Steinbeck’s text not only juxtaposes diverging mythical images, but also two opposing landscapes: the mimetic topography of the Nuestra Señora Valley, in central California, and a superimposed mythical blighted land, a Waste Land in which the sexual imagery of

fecundity and fertility rituals coalesces with the occupation of the land by hordes of ghosts and corpses coming out of the holes in the ground, where the dead and the roots of the green valley coexist until they become undistinguishable, for the dead infect the roots, and death permeates all life. The image inevitably recalls *The Waste Land*, when in the closing lines of "The Burial of the dead," the first canto of the poem, the poetic voice asks fellow soldier Stetson if the corpse he planted last year has begun to sprout (Eliot 2001: 71-72), revealing that the lilacs that grow in the first lines of the poem (1-2) feed off the life of the dead bodies buried underground. In Eliot's *Waste Land*, new life is born swollen with death. The corpses looking up at the awakening earth are undistinguishable from the ghosts of the survivors, to the point that Levenson argued that these corpses in fact possessed "a little life" and thus could rise from their graves and wander the earth (1984: 172), "neither / living nor dead" (Eliot 2001: 39-40). Such is the state of the crowd of ghosts that, like in Steinbeck's land "full of ghosts" (1979: 21), flows over London in Eliot's poem. The California valley in *To a God Unknown* is swarmed by "the spirits of the dead rising out of a sleeping city" (7). The sleeping city might be Eliot's "unreal" London (2001: 60) or Dos Passos and Fitzgerald's dehumanized New York but, whatever the case may be, now the ghosts have reached the Eden of the West.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Giving account of the Zeitgeist of the depression years, *To a God Unknown* is the story of the western frontier laid waste. It depicts the ending of an ineluctable journey in American culture towards degeneration. For the first European settlers, America was a quasi-mythical western Eden "in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (Adams 1954: 374). New England became Europe's western Eden, that nostalgically recalled "fresh green breast of the new world" (Fitzgerald 1991: 148), an image of plenty mourned in *The Great Gatsby*, replaced, as Tanner noted (2000: 196), by Myrtle Wilson's "left breast [...] swinging loose like a flap" (196) after she is carelessly run over and killed by Daisy Buchanan. But even before modern degeneration, when the United States became an independent nation and the need arose to occupy the territory, the notion of a western Eden was transferred to the territories west of the Mississippi River, where the land was fertile and the climate temperate. The transformation of the American West from Eden to Waste Land in Steinbeck's work, then, concludes the spread of modern dehumanization and degeneration until it occupies "the entire twentieth-century American landscape" (Post 1993: 8).

To a God Unknown then represents, mythically, “the desolation in America’s social climate that was spreading throughout the land during the period in which Steinbeck wrote the novel” (Post 1993: 8). As other modernist classics that intersect with Steinbeck’s novel, it does so through a story that not only uses myth structurally or thematically, but that represents a futile attempt of bringing on communal regeneration through “a flood of remythologization” (8). Because, as explored in this essay, ‘remythologization’ necessarily entails a process of reshaping, transforming and thus remaking myth. Reminiscing Eliot’s ‘mythical method’, the alternative to a convulsive social climate is seemingly found in the order and meaning of traditional myth, in the belief that only myth “harmoniz[es] the universe to such an extent that it does not admit of the slightest degree of chaos and disorder” (Meletinsky 1998: 156). But the new contemporary reality demands that myth should take a new shape, and therefore a new meaning. In modernist literature, myth is adaptive, malleable. In *To a God Unknown*, as in *The Waste Land* and in other contemporary texts, mythical patterns and motifs are disassembled and rearranged; they give form and meaning to a modern world of chaos and degeneration.

In the case of Steinbeck’s novel, it is the new shape of an old myth that discards the possibility of a regenerative Grail or a successful kingly succession. It is the new shape of an old story that, emptying out the magic of myth-ritualism, establishes that Joseph’s sacrifice might be ineffectual. Throughout this article, the exploration of recurrently frustrated ritual patterns of sacrifice and fecundity, and of flouted mythical patterns, has attempted to demonstrate that, in the style of literary modernism, *To a God Unknown* represents through myth-making the generalized state of spiritual destitution and life stagnation that permeates most corners of the American literary landscape of the time. The novel presents then the spiritual barrenness of an American Waste Land that modern, emptied-out, misguided life rituals cannot regenerate into a Land of Plenty that no longer exists. To represent the modernist world, the old foundational myth has been definitely *remade*.

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