

JOSÉ MANUEL LOSADA, *MITOCRÍTICA CULTURAL: UNA DEFINICIÓN DEL MITO*, MADRID: AKAL, 2022, 824 PAGES.¹

From time to time, academic writers astonish the general and specialized audience with the launch of a volume that addresses a very particular, at first sight well-known topic, changing the perspective scholars had had over it. It has happened in the 20th and 21st centuries with fields such as Horror Fiction, Comparative Literature, Feminist Studies, etc. The publication of *Mitocrítica cultural. Una definición del mito* adheres to this trend, meaning the culmination of a fifteen-years long process. Prof. José Manuel Losada (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain) has offered what many scholars have been searching for decades: a useful, practical, and complete tool to define and analyze myths and their cultural manifestations. As Dr. Losada mentions along the volume, one of the main objectives is setting things clear: what constitutes a myth, and what does not. To do so, a clear, working definition is presented in the “Introduction,” which is developed in the following chapters. In a free translation, that definition argues that a myth is “a functional, symbolic, and thematic narration referred to extraordinary events related to the sacred and/or supernatural. These events may have a historical background and they pledge to an individual or collective (but always absolute) cosmogony and eschatology.” However, we can never lose the perspective that, as Losada has repeated on several occasions, this is a definition of Myth, a very useful, very complete one, but subject to discussion or re-evaluation.

As for practical issues, *Mitocrítica cultural* is divided into two parts, being the first a general introduction to key terms and a contextualization of myth in contemporary times. The second part, the most important one within the book, approaches how different myths, or myth-related notions, have evolved in Western, European history and culture. There, the author also addresses a deconstruction of the different elements that make a myth a myth, analyzing how they work, how they are combined, and how they should be understood by the reader and the myth critic. Finally, all of this is completed with the inclusion of four indexes: on the different myths included in the volume, on key concepts, on works mentioned, and on proper names.

Myths, half-literature, half-religion, have been a constant affecting any given civilization or culture since, at least, the advent of writing systems. They have addressed crucial topics and questions such as “what are we?,” “where do we come from?,” etc. Myths have contributed to explain what was unexplainable, to comprehend what was incomprehensible. In consequence, myths have been created, worked with, modified, substituted, and forgotten as their existence has suited human cosmovision(s). *Mitocrítica*

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cultural successfully explains how this complicated (and convoluted) process has come to an existence.

Focusing on the first of the mentioned parts, one of the most interesting questions addressed by Dr. Losada is that of globalization, or how myths (born in local, particular traditions —although referred to universal notions—) have been affected by the current global processes our world is going through, being this a problematic relationship. Losada assesses that

El mito se opone a la uniformidad global de igual modo que las minorías comunitarias se oponen a la intrusión de instituciones administrativas de nivel superior. En contrapartida al falso “mito” del igualitarismo propuesto por los paraísos artificiales, el mundo mitológico propone la complementariedad: ni los dioses ni Dios han querido a los hombres iguales, amorfos, indiferenciados, sino desemejantes para que se ayuden y sostengan mutuamente [Myths are opposed to worldwide uniformity like minorities oppose administrative institutions’ actions. Before the false “myth” of egalitarianism, proposed by artificial paradises, myths offer complementarity: neither gods nor God have ever desired men to be equal, shapeless, all alike, but dissimilar in order to mutually help and sustain] (2022: 66).

So, the global world is a side-, reverse-effect of myth, and the conflicts that have shaped human history may be understood (or interpreted) through the lens of myth(s).

This argued relation of myths with history is re-visited by Dr. Losada along the second part of *Mitocrítica cultural*. Indeed, “Chapter 8” is devoted to History and how mythification processes work. Going back to the definition of myth, myths “may have a historical background.” Losada adds that

El acontecimiento narrado por el mito ocurre en un tiempo, pero no el tiempo circunscrito en las coordenadas de la historiografía moderna, sino en el de una ficción que apunta a unos referentes absolutos malamente enmarcables en esa historiografía [The narrations included in a myth happen in a specific period of time, but they are not limited by the coordinates established by modern historiography; on the contrary, the address absolute referential points impossible to narrow down to what historiography says] (2022: 475).

Thus, myth and History, despite going hand in hand, have several friction points, for myths transcend history. This is even more strongly addressed in the volume when certain “mythical” historical figures (e.g. Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar...) are recreated into narrations sharing similarities with myths (and are understood as such by the general audience). Losada is crystal clear: “no son mitos” [they are not myths] (2022: 485), adding that they may be considered as pseudo-myths or characters who have suffered a mythification process. As mentioned, this is one of the main strengths of the book: discerning tares from wheat. In a similar way, literary “myths,” such as that

of Don Quixote (addressed in pages 391–402), are re-evaluated through the lens of this approach, separating them from “real” myths.

However, what is more relevant in *Mitocrítica cultural* is how the author analyzes both the elements that constitute a myth, and how myths relate to them and to the structural narrations in which they are usually included. Regarding the first of these aspects, probably the most relevant chapter is “Chapter 9,” in which Losada deconstructs the structure of myth. To do so, *Mitocrítica cultural* differentiates between the concepts of “myth,” “theme,” and “mytheme,” explained the latter as

la unidad temática y mitológica mínima cuya indispensable dimensión trascendente o sobrenatural lo capacita para interactuar con otros mitemas en la formación de un mito. Si los temas tienen razón mítica, es decir, atravesada de trascendencia, son mitemas; de lo contrario, son únicamente temas narrativos [the thematic and mythic entities whose transcendent dimension allows to interact with other mythemes to form a myth. If themes have a mythical foundation (linked to transcendence) are mythemes; being this not the case, they are just narrative themes] (2022: 536).

Once again, clarifying concepts, as seen for historical characters. Concerning the second of the aforementioned aspects, we can read “Chapter 3” and “Chapter 6” together, as explained below.

As we have mentioned, a myth is narration halfway between literature and religion and, in consequence, shares characteristics that belong to both cultural manifestations. Losada has successfully addressed this hybrid nature of mythical narrations, explaining both how they connect with literary pieces and how they cipher religious notions such as cosmogony and eschatology. So, the author includes a discussion on concepts such as genre or chronotope that are usually associated with mere literary narrations. For instance, when discussing time and myth, Losada discerns between immanence and transcendence, marking these the frontier between narrative and mythical conceptions of time. To have a myth, we need the former, as stated in the definition *Mitocrítica cultural* offers. When addressing characters, Losada also discerns between literary *personae* and mythical incarnations, what he terms as “prosopomito.” Regarding the religious dimension of myths, Losada has placed together chapters 10 and 11 to address two of the fundamental questions religions have traditionally observed: origin(s) and conclusion(s). Myths have usually tried to answer the questions “why does everything exist?” and “where do I come from?” Thus, human cultures have constructed a series of mythical cosmogonies around these narratives, explaining the beginning of everything and everyone:

El mito indaga el significado originario del mundo; quiere saber [...] El mito presta atención y busca interpretar simbólicamente los acontecimientos extraordinarios en el extremo de los tiempos, donde el tiempo roza con el no tiempo [Myths search the original meaning of the world; they want to know

[...] Myths pay attention to, and aim to symbolically explain, extraordinary events at the edge of time, where time and no-time collide] (2022: 573).

Mitocrítica cultural addresses this theme with a fruitful evaluation of polytheistic and Judeo-Christian approaches. As for eschatology, we are in front of a similar problem, for it “se pregunta, sobre todo, por el futuro, pero no por los futuribles inmediatos, sino por el futuro final, definitivo y absoluto de una persona, de un pueblo o el universo” [asks, above all, about the future, not the immediate future, but the final, definitive, and absolute future of a person, a community, or the Universe] (2022: 615). Thus, since the future remains convoluted in shadows, myths have traditionally played (and still play) a crucial role to approach it. In this section (“Chapter 11”), the author also addresses one of those cultural notions that is usually mistake with myths: the eternal return, or the cyclical conception of history, subverting the Western conception of time. This analysis is interesting for *Mitocrítica cultural* confronts the vision that is probably more familiar to us (Judeo-Christian, medieval-based, projection of history) with extra-European notions, closer to a circular vision of evolution.

In conclusion, as seen in the previous paragraphs, *Mitocrítica cultural. Una definición del mito* offers guarantee for the researcher when dealing with myths or myth-related narrations, giving us the opportunity of clearly working with them. On the other hand, José Manuel Losada also gives us the chance of stating what is a myth from what is not, proposing tools and hermeneutic devices to do so. In consequence, our task as cultural researchers has become easier thanks to the enormous amount of work already developed by Dr. Losada. His volume has become one of those giants’ shoulders from which we can contemplate the academic horizon. Myths were shaped when knowledge could not explain everything, they were created to enlighten our ancestors’ minds offering plausible and acceptable explanation to the most transcendental questions. Today, like in mythical times, *Mitocrítica cultural* has also become a lantern to illuminate our scholarly path and to solve our transcendental doubts.

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