

Mythic Cycles in Chingiz Aitmatov's "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore"

I. INTRODUCTION

Ten years after writing "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" (*Пегий пес, бегающий краем моря*) Chingiz Aitmatov said that this novella was his favorite.¹ Perhaps this is because it represents the *essence* of Aitmatov's artistic world view. The term "essence" is appropriate here because the setting and the characters of the novella are totally removed from the modern world and from history itself. Unburdened by the need to relate his artistic goals and philosophical interests to any specific socio-political context—a requirement made all the more problematic for an author writing within the Soviet literary system—Aitmatov was free to develop his favorite themes in a kind of "*tabula rasa*" medium. Thus, it was with absolute directness that the author could face questions dominating much of his fiction: the moral soundness of age-old values, the need for continuity in social development, the necessity of humanity's harmonious coexistence with nature, and the positive ethical value of myth.

It is the last question—myth and mythic consciousness—that will be dealt with in this essay. I intend to consider the use of universal mythological paradigms as a means of *moral affirmation* in Aitmatov's tale. The role of myth cannot be underestimated in Aitmatov's work. As J. Mozur points out, starting with *The White Steamship* (*Белый пароход*, 1970), Aitmatov demonstrates "a conscious effort to present human situations and conflicts on both a realistic and a mythical level... with the latter structuring and interpreting the action on the realistic plane"² In a number of works myth allows the author to transcend the specific concerns of the day, to go beyond a given concrete historical situation and aim at something like the platonic "ideas" or universals. As N.N. Shneidman puts it, the use of mythology in Aitmatov's work gives "minor or local events universal spiritual and ethical significance"³ And nowhere is this

¹ R. Porter, *Four Russian Contemporary Writers* (New York: Berg, 1989) 71.

² J.P. Mozur, "Chingiz Aitmatov: Transforming the Esthetics of Socialist Realism," *World Literature Today* 56:3 (1982): 436. See also N.N. Shneidman, *Soviet Literature in the 1980s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989) 200.

³ N.N. Shneidman, *Soviet Literature in the 1970s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979) 36. See also N. Kolesnikoff, "Novellas of Chingiz Aitmatov," *Russian*

more apparent than in "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" where myth appears not just as an element of the story, but as its organizing principle, its artistic basis and its moral foundation.⁴

This is a story about a tiny seal-hunting nationality—the Nivkhs or the Giliaks—that lives at the mouth of the Amur river, as well as on Sakhalin Island, and speaks a paleosiberian language that has no known relatives.⁵ Not only are these people extremely remote geographically and linguistically from the world of modern Russia to begin with, but "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" this remoteness is enhanced by the fact that the action of the story takes place at virtually no specific time. The result is the kind of "never-never land" effect that normally appears as the stuff of myth and legend.⁶ The events of the story are tragic: an eleven-year-old boy is taken out to sea on a seal-hunting trip for the first time—to be initiated into adulthood by his grandfather, father and the father's cousin. Their kayak is caught in a thick fog which does not lift for days, and the adults end up sacrificing their lives for the sake of the boy's survival. The fog engulfs the characters and appears as a powerful symbol of the *timelessness* at the core of the story's mythic and therefore universal essence. To quote R. Porter, "as night follows day and the fog refuses to lift, the question of eternity asserts itself and history as a teleological process recedes".⁷ This ahistorical dimension is essential to understanding the mythic basis of "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore."

II. MYTHIC CONSCIOUSNESS

The difference between mythic consciousness and historical thought is elaborated in M. Eliade's classic *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour*. Within historical thought any given event occurs only once, i.e., it is something unique, and it is part of a linear, unidirectional progression in time. The origins of this approach to reality are Judeo-Christian in that, beginning with the Old Testament and continuing especially in the New Testament's book of Revelation, we find the idea of a divine "plot" with a beginning (Creation), a middle (the Fall, the Incarnation) and an end (the Second Coming and Last Judgement). According to D. Bethea, "with the Judeo-Christian tradition, humanity had 'entered' history (not of course

Literature and Criticism, ed. E. Bristol (Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1982) 107.

⁴ Cf. Shneidman, *1970s* 41.

⁵ D. Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 306.

⁶ Cf. Mozur 437.

⁷ Porter 71.

yet history in the modern, secular sense) and that history had a straightforward movement and teleological coloring. The human being had also, as we learn in Genesis, *fallen* from privileged status in the Garden of Eden (the Judeo-Christian 'Great Time') into profane time and an imperfect world, and there was *no way back*.⁸ In contrast to this, Eliade argues, the mythic or "archaic" view predominating in traditional societies, such as the society in Aitmatov's story, places all important actions into a *cycle* where a transcendental event, e.g., the creation of the world, is acted out eternally: "Dans le détail de son comportement conscient, le «primitif», l'homme archaïque ne connaît pas d'acte qui n'ait été posé et vécu antérieurement par un autre, *un autre qui n'était pas un homme*. Ce qu'il fait a déjà été fait. Sa vie est la répétition ininterrompue de gestes inaugurés par d'autres."⁹

The result of this cyclic thinking is the creation of an *eternal present*, since the past is never really removed in time from on-going experience but is instead constantly acted out and coexists with the present moment. This is how Eliade explains this crucial element of mythic consciousness:

Un sacrifice, par exemple, non seulement reproduit exactement le sacrifice initial révélé par un dieu *ab origine*, au commencement des temps, mais encore il a lieu en ce même moment mythique primordial; en d'autres termes, tout sacrifice répète le sacrifice initial et coïncide avec lui. Tous les sacrifices sont accomplis au même instant mythique du commencement [et donc]... il y a abolition implicite du temps profane, de la durée, de l'«histoire», et celui qui reproduit le geste exemplaire se trouve ainsi transporté dans l'époque mythique où a lieu la révélation de ce geste exemplaire (49-50).

According to Eliade's theory, the ultimate mythic action constantly reenacted in the spiritual life of traditional societies is the Creation, i.e., the origin myth.¹⁰ This reenactment of the creation myth appears to be at the center of Aitmatov's story where the events are presented not as unique occurrences but as the repetition of two origin myths: the creation of the world by the Loover duck and the origin of the Nivkh people from the union of a lame fisherman and a half-human female sea creature.

⁸ D. Bethea, *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 4–5. For the idea of the "divine plot" in narrative cf. F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁹ M. Eliade, *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) 15. Further quotations from Eliade's work will note pagination within the text.

¹⁰ I. Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History* (London: Macmillan Press, 1987) 72–73.

III. COSMOGONY

Before the specific setting and characters are introduced, we are presented with a myth about the way the world first came into being. The myth is conveyed in the characteristic style of oral story-telling, which is very appropriate for this subject-matter. This epic style predominates throughout Aitmatov's story:

Ведь в самом начале - в изначале начал - земли в природе не было, ни пылинки даже. Кругом простиралась вода, только вода... А утка Лувр, да-да, та самая обыкновенная кряква-широконоска, что по сей день пронесится в стаях над нашими головами, летала в ту пору над миром одна-одинешенька, и негде ей было снести яйцо... И тогда утка Лувр села на воду, надергала перьев из своей груди и свила гнездо. Вот с того-то гнезда плавучего и начала земля образовываться (94-95).¹¹

After all, right at the start, at the very beginning of time, there was no earth at all, not even a tiny speck of dust. Water stretched as far as the eye could see, nothing but water... Meanwhile the Loover Duck—yes, indeed, the very same, the common quacking, duck-billed bird who even today flies above our heads in flocks—used to fly all alone above the world in those far off times. And there was nowhere for her lay her egg... Then she settled upon the waves, plucked feathers from her breast and wove a nest. And it was from the floating nest that the earth began to take shape. (229-30)

Although the point of view shifts in this text between the narrator and the characters, there is no sense of any cultural or ideological differences between their respective positions.¹² They all share in the same mythic consciousness, and as far as they are concerned, the Loover duck myth is not just a story. This Creation myth is integrated into the Nivkh seal-hunters' perception of *contemporary* reality: it is always with them, as they find themselves in the middle of the boundless sea. When the boy (Kirisk) and his three companions begin their journey, their position is linked with that of Loover duck flying over the all-encompassing waters. To them the open ocean is

Великая, нехоженная, неведомая Вода вечности, возникающая сама из себя, пребывающая от сотворения мира, еще от тех времен, когда утка Лувр с криком носилась в поисках маленького местечка для гнезда... море вдруг расступилось, заполняя собой все видимое пространство до самого неба, превратившись в безраздельную, неоглядную, единственную сущность мира... и то был весь сущий мир - и ничего больше, ничего иного, кроме этого, кроме самого моря, - ни зимы, ни лета, ни бугра, ни оврага (103-104).

¹¹ All quotations from the original are taken from: Ch. Aitmatov, *Roman. Povesti* (Leningrad, 1982). English translations are from Chingiz Aitmatov, *Mother Earth and Other Stories*. Trans. J. Riordan (London: Faber and Faber, 1989). Pagination from both original and translations are noted in the text.

¹² Cf. Kolesnikoff 107-108.

the Great, the uncharted unknown Water of Eternity, appearing out of nothing, existing since the world's creation. That was way back in time when the Loover Duck had flown squawking in search of a fist-sized patch of land to lay her egg... the sea had suddenly filled all visible space right up to the sky, turning the world into an undivided, unembraceable, single mass... This was the living world, nothing besides, nothing else but sea. No winter or summer, no hills or ravines. (238–239)

This kind of primordial empty space within mythic consciousness, according to Eliade, is connected to an archetype of time before time: "... les régions désertiques habitées par des monstres, les territoires incultes, les mers inconnues où aucun navigateur n'a osé s'aventurer... sont assimilés au Chaos; elles participent encore de la modalité indifférenciée informe, d'avant la Création" (20). The point is that mythic consciousness brings this primordial chaos and the no-man's-land in question together into a single entity: they coexist in time and space. And as the events of Aitmatov's story unfold, as the four characters drift in the fog and cannot find their way to land, we constantly have the feeling that this is not merely an isolated event. Instead, they are acting out their creation myth and are very much aware of this "eternal return." As V. Turbin puts it, "Cosmogony in the tale is all-penetrating: whatever is being narrated, the events will link up with the days when the world was created."¹³ Thus, as the perception of the fog by the protagonists suggests, the four lost hunters and their kayak appear as an analogue of the Loover duck moving over nothingness: *Казалось, что нечто невообразимо чудовищное, какая-то иная сущность, неземная, дышащая промозглой влажностью, поглотила весь белый свет - и Землю, и Небо, и Море... (136)* / "It seemed that some incredible monster, some alien, unearthly being, breathing dank vapours, had swallowed the whole world, lock, stock and barrel—earth, sky and sea" (272). The *entire* world has been swallowed up and projected back into its pre-Creation state: just as it was before the Loover duck had made land. Furthermore, the transcendental link with the mythic state is suggested by the fact that the hunters see the fog as "some alien, unearthly being."

The ultimate reenactment of the creation myth takes place in Kirisk's dream, as he becomes delirious from thirst after many days in the fog. This is the most direct evidence of Eliade's concept of eternal return in the story and clearly indicative of mythic (as opposed to historical) consciousness:

Снилось Кириску, что он шел пешком по морю.... И земли не видно было нигде, ни в какой стороне.... И тут он увидел летающую над ним птицу. То

¹³ V. Turbin, "Za drugi svoia," *Novyi mir* 8 (1977): 250. The translation is mine—V.T.

была утка Лувр. Она с криком носилась над морем в поисках места для гнезда. «Утка Лувр!» обратился к ней Кириск. «Где земля, в какой стороне, мне хочется пить!» «Земли еще нет на свете, нигде нет!» отвечала утка Лувр. «Кругом только волны» (150-151).

Kirisk dreamt that he was walking on water.... And he couldn't see land anywhere, in any direction.... Then, all at once, he saw a bird flying above him. It was the Looover Duck. She was flying over the sea squawking, in search of a nesting place. "Looover Duck," called Kirisk. "Where is land, in which direction, I'm so thirsty?" "There is no land in the world yet, nowhere at all," she replied. "Only waves everywhere" (286-287).

The boy shares and *repeats* the creation experience, and his dream sums up the position of all four hunters in the kayak. His mythic consciousness is so much part of him that he even dreams myth. In this connection it is illuminating to turn to Eliade's idea that "chez les «primitifs»... n'importe quelle action humaine acquiert son efficacité dans la mesure où elle répète exactement une action accomplie au commencement des temps par un dieu, un héros ou un ancêtre" (34-35). The awareness of such repetition makes virtually any action *sacred*, and Eliade points out that especially goal-oriented activities, such as hunting, tend to acquire sacred status in traditional societies with a strong mythic consciousness (41). He cites the example of Melanesian fishermen who, as they set out to sea, feel that they actually "become" the hero Aori and are projected into Aori's mythic time (50). Thus, as is indicated by the mind-set of the four seal hunters in Aitmatov's story, their entire trip appears as a sacred undertaking and part of a never-ending cycle.

IV. ANTHROPOGONY

The other major origin myth consecrating the action "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" is the story of how the Nivkh people originated. This too is a creation myth, for, as J. Puhvel points out, "in deeper historical perspective... creation myth has often been transmuted or transposed to foundation legend, and man's origin to stories of specific ancestral beginnings."¹⁴ Such an ancestral beginning is the myth of the Seal Woman: the Great Mother of all the Nivkhs. We are told that a lonely lame fisherman one day cast his line into the sea and caught a creature that was half-woman, half-seal. When he lifted her into his boat, she drew him toward her and they had a sexual encounter. Then she jumped back into the sea, and he never saw her

¹⁴ J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) 22.

again. Nine months later he found a baby boy on the shore: this was the fruit of their love and the first Nivkh (Aitmatov, 109–111). This myth dominates the thinking of Orgán, Kirisk's grandfather, who has the most prominent mythic consciousness of the four hunters. Orgán keeps dreaming of acting out the lame fisherman's sexual union with the Seal Woman: Всякий раз этот сон оставлял ошеломляющее, долго не проходящее ощущение у Органа. Он верил в него настолько, что никому, ни одной душе на свете не рассказывал о своих сновидениях с Рыбой–женщиной, как не стал бы рассказывать кому бы то ни было о подобных случаях в обычной жизни (111)/ "Each time the dream left Organn stunned, with a lingering sensation of reality. He believed in it so intensely that he would never tell anyone, not a soul, about his encounter with the Seal Woman, just as he would never tell a soul about similar experiences in normal life" (247).¹⁵ Thus, to Orgán this dream is part of reality, which is evident from his motivation for keeping it secret: it is a *private intimate act*. He repeats the anthropogonic myth with as much conviction as Kirisk acts out the cosmogonic myth of the Looover duck.

However, in Orgán's dream each time something prevents the final sexual act from taking place. For example, as Orgán imagines that he has finally brought the Seal Woman on land and can now satisfy his "mythosexual" desire, we learn that Рыба–женщина умоляла его, в слезах заклинала, чтобы он отнес ее обратно в море, на волю. Она задыхалась, она умирала, она не могла любить его вне моря... он не выдерживал. Поворачивал назад, шел через отмель к морю, погружаясь все глубже и глубже в воду, и здесь осторожно выпускал ее из объятий (115)/ "She, the Seal Woman, was all the while entreating him, begging him through her tears to return her to the sea, to freedom. She was choking, dying, she could not love him apart from the great sea... he could bear it no longer. Turning back, he crossed the sandbank to the sea, plunging ever deeper into the water, and then gently let her down" (251). The unrequited longing which appears as a key element of Orgán's mythic

15 V. Ponomareff points out that the female figure is very important in Aitmatov's fiction in general, and in some works the author "metaphorizes the female figure into animal forms, a device which gives his work a further mythical and symbolic dimension" (V. Ponomareff, "A Poetic Vision in Conflict: Chingiz Aitmatov's Fiction," in *Russian Literature and Criticism*, ed. Bristol, 159). Thus, the Seal Woman in this story is analogous to the Horned Deer-Mother from *The White Steamship*: both are progenitors of the tribe, i.e., Goddess figures. Both are presented in the framework of an old man's spiritual life, since the two mythic creatures are constantly on the mind of the young hero's grandfather in "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" and in *The White Steamship*.

dream is also part of the “eternal return” in Aitmatov’s story. This is because the mythical lame fisherman, we are told, spent the rest of his life pining for the Seal Woman and expressed his longing in a song which is sung by the Nivkhs on holidays. And it is this *unattainability* of the Seal Woman that Orgán keeps acting out all his life, never able to consummate his mythic “marriage.”

The profound symbolism of the Seal Woman’s unattainability is made clear by Orgán’s perception of his imminent death after many days in the fog. When he decides to throw himself overboard in order to leave more water for the others, he feels that now he is about to act out the fertility-based nucleus of the myth. This is what Orgán says to his son Emrain who is trying to talk the old hunter out of the suicide: Нет, не смогу ждать. Разве не видишь? Сил не хватит. Хорошая собака поддыхает в стороне от глаз. Я сам. Я был великим человеком! Это я знаю. Мне всегда снилась Рыба-женщина. Тебе этого не понять... Я хочу туда... (149)/ “No, I can’t wait. Don’t you see? I haven’t the strength. A good dog always trots off to die. Same with me. I used to be a great man. That I know. I always dreamt of the Seal Woman. You wouldn’t understand... That’s where I want to go...” (285). This symbolizes the irreconcilability of humans and the sea. They need the sea for sustenance but cannot progress past its surface: in order to unite with the sea (Seal Woman), they have to drown, and Orgán sees the eventual drowning of Nivkh hunters as inevitable (Aitmatov, 97).¹⁶

The difficult relationship between humans and the sea is a major theme “Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore,” and it acts as a link between the two origin myths discussed so far. We are told that as soon as the Loover duck created land in the middle of the endless ocean, water and land began to battle each other and have been locked in battle ever since. Thus, the cosmogonic act generates the first conflict. The land-water struggle appears as the mythic *proto-conflict* constantly acted out by the two elements and truly epitomizing Eliade’s notion of “eternal return.” It represents the cyclic essence of mythic consciousness among the Nivkhs, and all other conflicts, including the human drama in Aitmatov’s story, seem to be a function of this primal battle: Да только если б знала утка Лувр, как трудно станет на белом свете с появлением тверди среди сплошного царства воды. Ведь с тех пор бьются море против суши, суша против моря. А человеку подчас приходится очень туго между ними - между сушей и морем, между морем и сушей. Не любит его море за то, что к земле он больше привязан (95)/ “If only the Loover Duck had known how difficult life would

¹⁶ Cf. V. Novikov, “Khudozhestvennyi poisk,” *Novy mir* 12 (1978): 261.

become with the appearance of dry land amidst the boundless realm of the sea. The sea could find no peace once land came into the world. It has been beating against dry land ever since; and land has been beating against the sea. Men sometimes find it hard to live between them, between land and sea, between sea and land. Sea does not like man for being bound to earth" (230). What we have here is a metaphysical explanation of the dangers faced by people making their living in an element (the sea) that always threatens to engulf them. Thus, the cosmogonic act of the Loover duck generates the land-water conflict, which leads to the antagonism between humans and water, which in turn accounts for the unattainability of the Seal Woman and the price that has to be paid for union with the aqueous Goddess.¹⁷ An outsider not endowed with mythic consciousness would sum it all up prosaically: fishing and seal-hunting are a dangerous business.

V. MOTHER-BRIDE-GODDESS

The nature of the Seal Woman's relationship with the Nivkh people and Orgán's sexual longing for this creature are *seemingly* paradoxical. The song passed on by the mythic lame fisherman to his descendants combines two incompatible elements in the perception of the Seal Woman: she is a mother-figure and a bride at the same time:

Где ты плаваешь, Великая Рыба-женщина? / Твое жаркое чрево - зачинает жизнь. / Твое жаркое чрево нас породило у моря, / Твое жаркое чрево - лучшее место на свете.... Твои белые груди как нерпичьи головы, / Твои белые груди вскормили нас у моря,... Самый сильный мужчина к тебе поплывет, / Чтобы чрево твое расцвело, / Чтобы род твой на земле умножился... (111).

Where do you swim to, Great Seal Woman? / Your warm belly is the beginning of life, / Your warm belly begat us in the sea, / Your warm belly is the best place on earth... / Your white breasts are like two seal heads, / Your white breasts fed us in the sea,... / Our strongest man will come to you, / To make your belly grow, / And multiply your tribe on land (235).

This intensely sexual perception of the Mother is not just part of Orgán's personal desire to possess the Seal Woman: it is something like the Nivkh national anthem, for this song is sung on important occasions. Therefore, the song sums up the entire people's mythic urge and clearly demonstrates Eliade's principle of "eternal return": the song calls upon the strongest man to *reenact* the primal anthropogonic union. There is no past: only recurring mother-bride

¹⁷ Cf. Mozur 437.

cycles. Therefore, Orgán's death is endowed with profound meaning and can be viewed as a positive event, for as he dies, he is about to heed the call of the song. As Eliade points out, "dans le cadre d'une telle existence, que pouvaient bien signifier la «souffrance et la «douleur»? En aucun cas une expérience dénuée de sens que l'homme ne peut que «supporter»... De quelque nature qu'elle fût et quelle qu'en fût la cause apparente, sa souffrance avait un sens" (114).

It was stated earlier that the relationship between the Nivkh people and the Seal Woman is only *seemingly* paradoxical. Actually, in the framework of mythic consciousness the Seal Woman's bride-mother characteristics do not really amount to a contradiction. In his study of the mythic quest paradigm among a multitude of traditional cultures J. Campbell argues that the bride-mother combination is classic when it comes to the perception of the Queen Goddess of the World:

She is the paragon of all paragons of beauty, the reply to all desire, the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero's earthly and unearthly quest. She is mother, sister, mistress, bride. Whatever in the world has lured, whatever has seemed to promise joy, has been premonitory of her existence--in the deep of sleep, if not in the cities and forests of the world. For she is the incarnation of the promise of perfection; the soul's assurance that, at the conclusion of its exile in a world of organized inadequacies, the bliss that once was known will be known again: the comforting, the nourishing, the "good" mother--young and beautiful--who was known to us, and even tasted, in the remotest past. Time sealed her away, yet she is dwelling still, like one who sleeps in timelessness, at the bottom of the timeless sea.¹⁸

Thus, in Aitmatov's story, the role of the Seal Woman sleeping "at the bottom of the timeless sea" falls into place as part of an ancient mythic paradigm found in many traditional cultures of the world. And this applies to the meaningfulness of Orgán's death as part of the bride-mother cycle. To quote Campbell, the goddess "is also the death of everything that dies. The whole round of existence is accomplished within her sway, from birth, through adolescence, maturity, and senescence, to the grave. She is the womb and the tomb: the sow that eats her farrow" (114). In this context Orgán's death is not a *terminal* act: his drowning is life.¹⁹

¹⁸ J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) 110-111.

¹⁹ Cf. Shneidman, *1970s* 42.

VI. MONOMYTH

Campbell's discussion of the Goddess appears in the context of a larger analysis of the paradigmatic hero's mythic quest. This is especially fruitful if we consider the experience of Orgán's grandson Kirisk. The action of "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" has to do with a fundamental element in traditional society: the rites of passage. This event in the life of a young person constitutes his/her initiation into the world of adulthood and the severing of his/her link with the world of childhood. This is precisely what happens to Kirisk, and since the action of the story is inseparable from the mythic consciousness of the Nivkh people, Campbell's idea of the *monomyth* can be used to account for the young hero's experience. Campbell argues that the rites of passage constitute the acting out of the initiate's transformation process: s/he is considered dead to the past and reborn in a new guise, i.e., s/he is perceived as a new person after the initiation.²⁰ Campbell's *monomyth* implies that mythic lore and actual rites of passage become one entity, i.e., every initiate reenacts the universal mythic paradigm, while the basic mythology of countless cultures echoes the initiation process:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation—initiation—return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. *A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.*²¹

This three-stage process is observed in the case of Kirisk who leaves the world of everyday life on land in his native village, ventures into the no-man's-land of the treacherous ocean, engages in a life-and-death struggle with the elements, "dies" as a child and is finally reborn as an adult.

As the story begins, we learn that this is Kirisk's first encounter with the open sea, and we are made aware that the four hunters are not setting out on just another hunting trip. This voyage is meant to *transform* the boy, to change his very essence and not merely to demonstrate to him the skills of the trade:

Об этом все знали, все поселение клана Рыбы-женщины у сопки Пегого пса знало, что сегодняшний выход и плавание предпринимался ради него, Кирика, будущего добытчика и кормильца. Так заведено: каждый, кто рождается мужчиной, обязан побрататься с морем с малолетства... [Кирику] предстояло отныне и навсегда познаться с морем, отныне и навсегда и в дни удач и неудач (97-98).

²⁰ Campbell 10.

²¹ Campbell 30.

Everyone knew. The entire settlement of the Seal Woman's clan of Spotted Dog Hill, they knew the three men had put to sea for his sake, for Kirisk the future hunter and provider. Thus it was decreed: all who were born male had to fraternize with the sea from an early age... [Kirisk's] lot was to be a sea hunter now and forever, on good days and bad (232–233).

The repetition of “отныне и навсегда” makes it clear that something is about to change in Kirisk, that he is about to leave a part of himself on land. This would correspond to Campbell's *separation* stage of the monomyth within the rites of passage paradigm where the hero leaves the familiar world. Kirisk's familiar world before the hunting trip is the realm of childhood, play and especially women. It is made clear that before the fateful voyage Kirisk has little contact with the world of men: he spends his time with other children, his mother and his aunt. And so Kirisk's separation is presented as first and foremost the initiation into the world of men. The crossing of the barrier from the female realm to the male realm during the rites of passage is typical in traditional societies, and Campbell provides an example from the culture of Australian aborigines: “... one of the principal features of the ordeal of initiation (by which the boy at puberty is cut away from the mother and inducted into the society and secret lore of the men) is the rite of circumcision.”²² Campbell goes on to describe the way the boys run to their mothers when told that the “Great Father snake smells their foreskin” but are finally forced to submit and are taken away by the men who perform the circumcision, thereby cutting the initiate away from the female world.

Once the *separation* stage has taken place, Kirisk enters the most important part of the monomyth paradigm: the *initiation*. The sea appears as the magical testing ground, the no-man's-land away from the ordinary world that Campbell describes as the nucleus of the hero's triadic quest: “The adventure [in the *initiation* stage—V.T.] is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown.”²³ Even before the appearance of the fog, Kirisk perceives the sea as a dangerous, mysterious place—almost a living force: По мере того как удалялись они от земли, особенно после того, как Пегий пес вдруг скрылся из глаз за взгорбившейся чернотой воды, он стал улавливать некую смутную опасность, исходящую от моря... В том, что море заставляло постоянно думать о себе, таилось нечто неведомое, настойчивое, властное... (104–105)/ “The further away from land they were, especially after Spotted Dog had disappeared behind a towering

²² Campbell 10–11.

²³ Campbell 82.

blackness of water, he began to sense a certain vague menace from the sea... [It disturbed him] that the sea made him constantly think of it, that it harboured something unknown, insidious, powerful" (240). And of course the arrival of the fog transforms the sea into an even more menacing and mysterious testing ground for the hero: [Туман] приближался, как живое существо, как чудовище, имеющее непрременной целью захватить, поглотить их вместе с лодкой, вместе со всем видимым и невидимым миром (128–129)/ "[The fog] was sliding forward like a living being, like a grey giant set on pouncing on and devouring them, along with their boat, along with the entire visible and invisible world" (265). This perception of the fog evokes Campbell's idea of the threshold monster/guardian who normally watches over the entrance to the no-man's-land and threatens the hero of the monomyth.²⁴ And once within the "clutches" of the fog, Kirisk is truly cut away from the old familiar world of everyday reality: Сразу, в мгновение ока, они попали из одного мира в другой. Все исчезло. (129)/ "In the twinkling of an eye they had passed from one world to the next. Everything vanished" (265). This is a variation of the classic mythic descent into the underworld that is so instrumental, as Campbell argues, in the hero's transformation.

This transformation takes place with the help of Kirisk's three adult companions. They teach him not only the skills of navigation, but what is most important, they show him the path toward *spiritual strength*. And they do this by sacrificing their lives, thereby demonstrating the full potential of the human spirit. However, even before this happens, it is possible to see how Kirisk is changing, breaking away from childish egocentricity and becoming a responsible adult. Soon after the appearance of the fog Orgán refuses to drink his share of the water, wishing to increase his companions' chances of survival. He offers his water to Kirisk, and the little boy makes his first step toward adulthood by taking heed of the old man's example: he refuses to drink. Even when all three adults urge Kirisk to drink, he turns down the life-saving water. The boy finally accepts it only after his grandfather insists yet again and pleads with Kirisk. This trial by water is extremely important in the hero's transformation process, and this is stressed, since the scene is structured architectonically as a *temptation*: 'Пей', сказал ему Мылгун. 'Пей,' сказал ему Эмрайин. 'Пей,' сказал ему Орган. (139)/ "'Drink,' Mylgun said to him. 'Drink,' said his father. 'Drink,' said old Organn." (275)

As their supplies of water shrink, each man, starting with Orgán, eventually jumps into the sea and drowns. Kirisk is devastated, but this is the ultimate

²⁴ Campbell 78, 82.

means of his spiritual transformation. Furthermore, he himself undergoes terrible suffering from thirst and exhaustion: Он пополз на коленях и остановился от усталости. Кириск понимал, что скоро не сможет и двигаться. Он поднес к лицу руку и ужаснулся: рука его утончилась, уменьшилась, как ссохшаяся шкурка бурундучка. (166)/ “He crawled on hands and knees and had to keep pausing from fatigue. Kirisk realized it would not be long before he could not move. As he raised his hand to his face he was appalled to feel how thin it had become and how the skin was all shrivelled up like a chipmunk’s pelt” (303). All this corresponds to Campbell’s and Eliade’s idea that during the *initiation* stage the hero/initiate undergoes a symbolic death, in order to be reborn a new person.²⁵ And indeed, once this experience is over, Kirisk is no longer a child: he has acquired a new identity. His whole world has been destroyed and replaced with a new one. Now the *return* stage of Campbell’s monomyth is about to begin: Kirisk catches sight of land and realizes that he is about to reenter the ordinary realm where he has left his old infantile self behind. The boy’s transformation is marked by the fact that he composes a song—a song symbolizing his new adult identity: Пегий пес, бегущий краем моря, / Я к тебе возвращаюсь один - / Без аткычха Органа, / Без отца Эмрайина, / Без аки-Мылгуна, / Где они, ты спроси у меня, / Но сначала дай мне напиться воды... Кириск понял, что это и есть начальные слова его именной песни, с которой ему жить до конца дней... (171)/ “Spotted Dog running along the seashore, / I am coming home alone - / No Atkich Organn, / No Aki-Mylgun, / No father. / Where are they, you ask? / I shall tell you: let me first take a drink. Kirisk realized that these were the first words of his song that would accompany him to the end of his days” (308–309). No return to childhood is possible at this point, and the monomyth paradigm is complete.

VII. THE “HAPPY” ENDING

The story ends the way it begins: with a reference to the eternal struggle between the land and the sea resulting from the Loover duck’s cosmogonic act. Thus, the mythic circle, the “eternal return” *frames* all the events of the monomyth, turning the structure of “Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore” into a self-referential cycle. As a result, the story’s form and content appear as a harmonious whole resting on the same mythological basis that is simultaneously tragic and hopeful. The tragic nature of Aitmatov’s story can be related to its mythic essence, for, as Campbell argues, the tragic ending is a normal part of mythology: “The happy ending is justly scorned as a

²⁵ Campbell 15; Eliade 98.

misrepresentation; for the world, as we know it, as we have seen it, yields but one ending: death, disintegration, dismemberment, and the crucifixion of our heart with the passing of the forms that we have loved."²⁶ However, myth and myth-related action, by their cyclic nature cannot be tragic in the existentialist sense. There is always the promise of renewal, and this is a strong theme in Aitmatov's story.

The renewal that obliterates the tragedy of the story's ending is the cycle of generations. The three men who sacrifice their lives for Kirisk, especially his father and grandfather, are all genetically related to the boy: he carries a part of them within himself. Thus, this kinship tie is a blood-line of hope whereby the three hunters *continue to live through Kirisk*. In fact, if they did not sacrifice themselves, the drinking water would not last long enough for the fog to lift, i.e., Kirisk would die of thirst along with the others. And so, by not drowning themselves and staying in the boat, the men would actually be killing themselves *genetically*, i.e., they would not allow the cycle to continue. This reasoning constitutes Emrain's epiphany as he contemplates his suicide while Kirisk sleeps next to him:

Мысленно он прощался с сыном, и, чем дольше прощался, тем труднее, тем мучительнее было подняться на последний шаг. Этой ночью он понял, что, оказывается, вся его предыдущая жизнь была предтечей нынешней ночи. Для того он и родился и для того он умирал, чтобы из последних сил продлить себя в сыне. Эмрайин совершал для себя открытие - всю жизнь он был тем, кто он есть, чтобы до последнего вдоха продлить себя в сыне (162).

Mentally he was saying farewell to his son, and the more he dragged it out the harder and more painful it was to take the final step. That night he felt that all his former life had evidently been a precursor to the present night. That was the reason for his birth, that was the reason for his death, so that he could renew himself through his last strength in his son. It was of that he was thinking at the moment he silently bade farewell to his son. Emrayin had made a discovery: all his life he had been himself in order to renew himself, up to his last breath, in his son (299).

Kirisk also realizes this, as he sees his father for the last time: ... теперь он приходил к пониманию, что отец - это он сам, это его начало, а он продолжение отца. (161)/ "Now it dawned on him that his father was actually himself; he was his beginning, and he, Kirisk was the continuation of his father" (298). And once the *initiation* stage is over, i.e., once Kirisk is transformed into an adult, he *consecrates* the genetic cycle in a ritualistic fashion. The boy gives Emrain's name to the star that guides him toward shore, Orgán's name to the

²⁶ Campbell 26-26.

wind that pushes his kayak out of the dangerous no-man's-land into the familiar world and Mylgun's name to the waves that carry the new hunter to safety. Thus, the immortality of the three men is symbolically enacted: they become as immortal as the elements.²⁷ And this is integrated into all the other cycles of the story in the conclusion: Шумел над морем ветер Орган, катились по морю волны акимылгуни, и сияла на краю светлеющего небосклона лучистая звезда Эмрайина.... Еще один день наступал... (171)/ "Organn's breeze roared across the sea. Aki-Mylgun's waves rolled over the ocean. Emrayin's radiant Star shone at the lip of the brightening horizon. Another day was dawning" (309). V. Levchenko places this event into his discussion of the universality of the moral values in this tale. He argues that this universality is stressed by the transformation of the three men into the elements: the most universal of all entities.

Eliade points out that mythic consciousness allows humanity to avoid irreversibility: "Tout recommence à son début à chaque instant. Le passé n'est que la préfiguration du futur. Aucun événement n'est irréversible et aucune transformation n'est définitive" (108). Thus, death is abolished as a terminal act in "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore," which means that the term *tragic* cannot really apply to the mythic plane of Aitmatov's story in the usual sense. The modern usage of the word *tragic* is indicative of historical consciousness, i.e., a linear (non-cyclic) view of events, because tragedy implies irreversibility. This is impossible by definition in the framework of mythic consciousness.

VIII. CONCLUSION

D. A. Leeming sums up the implications of Campbell's monomyth theory in the following manner: "To understand the monomyth—to relate to it meaningfully—is to create a mythic consciousness and by so doing to rejoin the real forces from which our modern age of reason and technocracy has done so much to remove us."²⁸ The implications of Aitmatov's story appear to be the same. In this novella, as well as a number of other works (e.g., *White Steamship, Farewell Gulsary* (Прощай, Гульсары!, 1966) Aitmatov keeps coming back to the idea that the technological and technocratic age is undermining a whole system of age-old values by losing touch with nature and

27 V. Levchenko points out that such transformations are found among various traditional cultures, e.g. the Australian Aborigines and North American Indians. V. Levchenko, "Chetvero v okeane vechnosti," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 12 April 1978: 4.

28 D.A. Leeming, *Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1973) 6.

by ignoring myth which is turned into mere fairy tales for children.²⁹ But these stories are not mere entertainment because their main purpose is the affirmation of basic values. Mythic consciousness is first and foremost *moral* consciousness, and this morality appears to be what "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" is all about. It is a natural kind of morality based on tradition, and it is epitomized by the sacrifice of the three men in the kayak in the Okhotsk Sea. As V. Turbin points out, "... a heroic feat is not even a feat for them; what mesmerizes us is how natural and spontaneous their feat is...."³⁰ The fact that Turbin feels "mesmerized" by this absence of heroic self-consciousness is a good indicator of the distance that separates our modern age from the traditionalist spiritual world in Aitmatov's tale. The modern hero *chooses* to be a hero, and his or her *noðeuz* (heroic feat) is perceived as an instance of extraordinary moral strength. Aitmatov's characters are heroic only from our distanced point of view because their moral strength is not extraordinary in their own ideological context. To quote J. Mozur, "in the final analysis the three men's choice is not a choice at all, for it is their only way to live as men in their understanding of the world."³¹

However, how does this praise of traditionalist morality, this positive look at humanity's spiritualistic past fit in with the Soviet "dialectical," future-oriented and materialist agenda? After all, Aitmatov was part of the Soviet literary establishment, and this tale was viewed by some as being consistent with socialist realism. Certain critics in the Soviet Union and abroad saw no contradiction between Aitmatov's tale and Soviet ideology. For example, V. Novikov argued that the mythological dimensions "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" indicate the new possibilities of socialist art.³² Similarly, in an editorial published in *Znamia* a year after the appearance of this tale, Aitmatov's work as a whole was presented as unambiguously socialist realist.³³ V. Voronov, writing in the same year, also saw clearly socialist affirmation in all of Aitmatov's writing.³⁴ There are several ways of reconciling this tale with Soviet ideology. To begin with, the *ethic of self-sacrifice* is fundamental to the Soviet system. Viewed in this light, the actions of the three men in the Okhotsk Sea can be perceived as exemplary. It is in this classical socialist realist context that R. Porter placed "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" which he

²⁹ Cf. Schneidman, *1970s* 42.

³⁰ Turbin 252. The translation is mine—V.T.

³¹ Mozur 437.

³² Novikov 261.

³³ "Sluzhenie narodu," *Znamia* 12 (1978): 230.

³⁴ V. Voronov, "Gorizonty Chingiza Aitmatova," *Moskva* 12 (1978): 210.

classified as Aitmatov's "successful attempt to combine a Socialist Realist message with flesh-and-blood characters and fantasy. If anything, the story veers back towards his earlier, more orthodox works in its portrayal of human courage and 'correct' moral choices."³⁵

Some Soviet critics attempted to "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" fit into the Soviet ideological mould by stressing what the tale *does not do*. E. Sidorov, for example, sought to distance Aitmatov's message from something that the Soviet system rejected and associated with Western thought: existentialism. He argued that even though the characters are isolated in remote areas, "the author does not deal with solitude in the existentialist sense; on the contrary, he stresses a steadfast sense of life and human solidarity that wins no matter what."³⁶ The same approach was used by V. Novikov who went even further in his anti-existentialist assessment of Aitmatov's tale. He contended that the characters' active fight for survival distinguishes them from existentialist thinking which views humans as powerless toys of the cosmos. Novikov added that the way Aitmatov's characters care for each other makes them very different from existentialist characters.³⁷ However, this anti-existentialist reading of "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" indicates the difficulty of reconciling the tale with Soviet ideology. Novikov's and Sidorov's affirmation by negation is an awkward rhetorical strategy that simply directs attention away from the question of the tale's place in the Soviet literary system.

Other Soviet critics did not integrate "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" into the socialist realist ethic. V. Turbin, interpreted the main message of the tale in a way that appeared to contradict the progressivist nucleus of Soviet ideology. He saw in "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" the idea that being entirely future-oriented does not necessarily answer all the questions, i.e., the past also offers some answers. V. Levchenko, concentrated on the universality of Aitmatov's message and made no attempt at all to relate "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" to a specifically Soviet ideological context.³⁸ Responding to Levchenko's universalist interpretation, M. Auezov refused to reconcile the tale with Soviet orthodoxy. In his review of Aitmatov's tale Auezov rejected mythology as a repository of answers to eternal questions: "Myth, with its claim to provide an all-embracing explanation of all levels of being, contradicts the dialectic cognitive path which in art is accessible only to

³⁵ Porter 71.

³⁶ E. Sidorov, "On Chingiz Aitmatov and his Characters," *Soviet Literature* 11 (1988): 128.

³⁷ Novikov 262.

³⁸ Levchenko 4.

realism...."³⁹ A more direct condemnation of myth and allegory in "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" came from the pen of A. Kondratovich. In a review ironically entitled "The Muse in a Fog" he castigated Aitmatov for the latter's concentration on irrelevant spirituality and said that the only readable parts of the tale are the adventures of the characters. He contended that this tale constitutes a refusal to face contemporary reality and relies on the wrong means for addressing eternal questions of humanity.⁴⁰ But given the ritualistic and mythologizing nature of the Soviet system, it is ironic, although quite understandable, that Auezov and Kondratovich object to the mythological basis of Aitmatov's tale. All this hopefully indicates that "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" does not harmonize smoothly with its sociopolitical context. Arguments can be made in either direction, but no clear-cut classification of the tale emerges.

This ambivalence is consistent with Aitmatov's general position in the Soviet literary system. Officially, he was viewed as a pillar of socialist realism and appeared to espouse its main tenets. This explains the desire of some Soviet critics to make all his work fit into the "correct" ideological mould. At the same time Aitmatov often went beyond the ideological limits of socialist realism, dealing with unorthodox and controversial issues. The question of faith, spirituality and religion is probably the most problematic of all when it comes to "pegging" Aitmatov. As J. Riordan argues, "Aitmatov shows in his stories that only people who have faith in something (not necessarily communism), who truly love someone or something, who can see beyond themselves, are capable of distinguishing real from false values, good from evil."⁴¹ I would suggest that the author's ideological instability has to do with the nature of Soviet ideology which was itself very unstable. Neither socialist realism, nor Soviet political dogma was based on clear and constant definitions. The Soviet

³⁹ M. Auezov, "Ostaetsia podlinnaia zhizn'," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 4 July 1978: 4. The translation is mine—V.T.

⁴⁰ A. Kondratovich, "Muza v tumane," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 12 April 1978: 4. Compare the denigration of mythology and its relevance by these typical representatives of Soviet ideology with the views of a western scholar, I. Strenski: "Myths no longer satisfy human biological needs: they fulfill human existential needs for 'cosmic' orientation. A myth speaks for the 'whole man.' It allows us to discover our ontological place in the universe and to see ourselves and our existence within some *all-embracing vision of reality*. Myth offers us our bearings in more than just the geographical sense: it reveals to us a message of cosmic significance which touches us at the roots of our deepest sense of contingency" (Strenski 74; my italics—V.T.).

⁴¹ J. Riordan, "Introduction," in *Chigiz Aitmatov: Mother Earth and Other Stories* 11.

edifice was built largely of empty words. However, behind these words some authors managed to hold on to certain age-old moral values. And it is these values that do seem constant in Aitmatov's writing. Even if "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore" was created in the Soviet literary context, the tale undoubtedly reaches out beyond this context as a testament to its creator's talent.⁴²

RESUME

Cet article analyse une nouvelle de Tchinguiz Aïtmatov du point de vue de deux théories mythologiques. A partir de la théorie de l'éternel retour de M. Eliade, l'auteur considère les deux mythes qui constituent le fondement idéologique et moral de la nouvelle: la cosmogonie et l'anthropogonie du peuple dit traditionnel qui est présenté par Aïtmatov. Ensuite l'expérience du héros de la nouvelle est liée à la théorie du monomythe de J. Campbell. L'article se termine par une discussion de la réception de la nouvelle par la presse soviétique. L'auteur essaie d'expliquer comment un écrivain tel que Aïtmatov a pu produire une telle nouvelle par rapport au réalisme socialiste et les exigences du système littéraire soviétique.

⁴² It should be mentioned, however, that in recent analyses of Aitmatov's prose in the post-Soviet era, Russian critics have taken into account mythological sources of his writing and abandoned the line of reasoning typical of Soviet stereotypes. It will be increasingly difficult for Western scholars to ignore these studies in the future without falling into the danger of repeating some of their findings.