Introduction

In 1973 a manuscript reviewer for a major British publishing firm sat horrified by what she was reading. As she turned the pages she grew increasingly disturbed by the tale of a group of Londoners who are sexually fascinated by car crashes. The wife of a prominent psychiatrist, she was certain the manuscript was the product of a mind that was utterly deranged. What she was reading was not a novel at all; it was evidence of hopeless psychopathology. She returned the manuscript with the recommendation: “This author is beyond psychiatric help. DO NOT PUBLISH.”

The author of the work was a young writer with a devoted cult following
named James Graham Ballard, who had made his name with short stories and novels that straddled the boundary between science fiction and serious literature. When he learned about the reader’s report he was elated, because to him the diagnosis of insanity was proof of a total artistic success. He had intended the book to be profoundly disturbing so that its readers would be forced to confront ominous undercurrents of violence in their own culture. In the event, the publisher, Jonathan Cape, did not suppress the book as the reviewer had recommended. Knowing that a novel by Ballard would sell, and a controversial one even more so, it published the book under the title *Crash*, and its controversial reception quickly transformed Ballard’s moderate fame into something more like infamy. But stirring up controversy had not been Ballard’s goal. Like his other fictions, he conceived of the book as a contemporary myth, which by exposing worrying cultural trends would enable people to cope with them. It was coping rather than controversy that Ballard aimed to achieve with what he called his “myths of the near future.”

Why J.G. Ballard believed that his fiction functioned as myth in this way is the question that drives this paper, which aims to place Ballard’s work in a new context by examining his use of the concept of myth as means of appraising and critiquing modernity. Ballard rose to prominence in the 1960s as writer associated with the British “New Wave” of science fiction writers, a group that included Michael Moorcock and Brian Aldiss. By drawing on the resources of myth, these writers sought to reorient science fiction as a genre, turning it away from clichéd conventions and toward relevant social critique. Because of Ballard’s uneasy relationship to established literary genres, scholars have at times struggled to contextualize his work. Rather than continuing the futile literary debate about whether Ballard qualifies as a major writer because he transcended the science fiction genre or because he worked so well within it, it may be productive instead to approach Ballard from the perspective of cultural and intellectual history and ask why he saw mythic science fiction as *the* authentic literature of the twentieth century and as the only literature capable of addressing contemporary concerns.

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand Ballard as part of a diverse group of twentieth-century writers and intellectuals who believed that myths were indispensable frameworks for interpreting experience, and essential tools for coping with and criticizing modernity. These mythic
thinkers argued for a new way of making meaning that took into account the unique nature of modernity, and they believed that this need could be fulfilled by myth—a concept that was at once conveniently vague and rich with significance. Prominent exemplars of mythic thinking included the modernists and J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, but the trend was diverse and widespread. Throughout the period 1900 to 1980, mythic thinking took the form of works of literature, art, philosophy, and theology designed to show that ancient myths had revelatory power for modern life, and—as in the case of Ballard and the New Wave—designed to show that modernity sometimes required creation of entirely new mythic narratives. The prevalence of such mythic thinking prompted the prominent literary critic Frank Kermode to conclude in 1959 that, “our literary culture is saturated with mythological thinking.”

Ballard and the New Wave writers contributed to this saturation by seeking to produce a form of science fiction that functioned as contemporary myth. Their mythic science fiction was intended to depict and analyze natural science’s epistemic pretensions, the alienating effect of modern urban life, the emotional estrangement produced by modern mass media, and the advance of modern technocratic society. This paper will examine these themes by focusing in particular on Ballard’s thought from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. Ballard’s recent death has refocused interest in his life and work, so the time is perhaps ripe to begin considering his place in twentieth-century British culture.

If Ballard’s use of myth is exposed as a response to modernity, his project can be seen as part of a key cultural struggle that defined twentieth-century Britain: the struggle between advocates and opponents of modernity. In scholarship on post-war Britain, this struggle is typically understood as a contest between opposing camps in the “two cultures” controversy. The most notable critics of modernity in this controversy were F. R. Leavis and his disciples. Allegiance to the humanities was the basis of their opposition to the scientific and technological advancement advocated by C. P. Snow and his allies, who shared a liberal confidence that such advancement translated into social progress. Appreciating the work of Ballard and other mythic thinkers significantly alters our understanding of the cultural struggle over modernity in post-war Britain by allowing us to see that it extended well beyond the parameters of the two cultures controversy. In particular, an examination of
Ballard’s work reveals how, in the search for an alternative critique of modernity, many thinkers and writers turned to the discourse of mythic thinking. This turn to myth was justified with claims that myth gave access to deeper truths than historical or scientific explanation, and that it offered a unique means of coping with the psychological pressures that modernity brought to bear on the individual.

This psychological concern was a central theme of Ballard’s work and one that linked him to other twentieth-century British mythic thinkers: he saw the modern world, dominated by science and technology, as profoundly threatening to the individual psyche. Ballard argued that living in the environment he called “the modern technological landscape” produced deep psychological turmoil and alienation in the individual. By mediating between the outer world of the modern technological landscape and the inner world of the psyche, myth could help individuals cope with modernity. Precisely what Ballard meant by this and how he came to believe it becomes clearer when his work is understood as part of a unique literary movement that took place in Britain in the 1960s.

**Which Way to Inner Space?: The Rise of the New Wave**

A key context for understanding Ballard’s views on the mythic nature of fiction is his association with the group of writers known as the British New Wave. This was a group of writers who saw science fiction as the literary genre best suited to analyzing the contemporary world. Yet at the same time, the New Wave writers sought to redirect the genre by abandoning trite, pulp-science fiction conventions and developing science fiction’s potential as an experimental form of writing. In Britain, the New Wave’s most prominent members were Ballard, Michael Moorcock and Brian Aldiss, all of whom have since built reputations as leading contemporary novelists. These three did not share all of the same literary inclinations, yet each of them believed science fiction was the only form of literature capable of addressing the problems of life in a society increasingly shaped by modern science, technology, and media.

The New Wave in Britain initially coalesced in 1964 when Michael Moorcock took over editorship of the magazine *New Worlds*. In an attempt to cultivate a highbrow, avant garde sensibility, he immediately began a concerted
effort to improve the quality of writing in *New Worlds*, and to this end he solicited ambitious, experimental contributions. The tone of the magazine was set by aggressive editorials and articles, mainly written by Moorcock and Ballard, that took aim at the literary establishment, obsolete traditions and social institutions, and scientific orthodoxy while touting a self-proclaimed *New Worlds*-led popular literary renaissance. As Moorcock proclaimed in the first issue of *New Worlds* that he edited, “A popular literary renaissance is around the corner. Together, we can accelerate that renaissance.” According to Moorcock and Ballard, this renaissance would be produced by grafting experimental literary techniques onto a form of science fiction that had cultural relevance and mass appeal. This amalgam, a new breed of science fiction, was summed up in their frequent use of the terms “speculative fiction” or “speculative fantasy” as substitutes for the term science fiction. The New Wave was characterized by a distinct air of rebellion against American cultural hegemony, because the popular literary renaissance proclaimed in the pages of *New Worlds* could only be achieved by overthrowing the genre conventions that defined traditional science fiction, and these were largely American conventions.

The New Wave was a literary movement that positioned itself as an outsider, populist movement in opposition to a complacent literary establishment that did not engage with contemporary life, an establishment content to reproduce versions of the nineteenth-century “social novel.” Driven by a concern that contemporary British literature was too elitist and was not adequately addressing contemporary concerns, *New Worlds*, and by extension the New Wave, sought to combine literary experimentalism with literary populism. Thus, there was a tension, if not a contradiction, at the heart of the New Wave movement. New Wave writers claimed that a strength of science fiction was its status as popular genre. Yet at the same time there was an element of cultural uplift in their project because they sought to replace certain science fiction conventions with experimental, avant garde literary methods.

The New Wave writers had several reasons for seeing science fiction as a promising vehicle for their literary movement. To begin with, it was an undeniably popular genre with a ready-made readership. But beyond that, it was a genre that operated below the radar of the influential literary critics, who, with a few exceptions, deemed it unworthy of their attention. As such, it was a genre that allowed for more freedom of experimentation. As Moorcock put
it, “Sf was attractive because it was overlooked by the critics and it could be written unselfconsciously .... There was no sense of having someone looking over your shoulder.” This conviction went hand in hand with their belief that the nineteenth-century style social novel had become obsolete and detached from everyday life. It simply was not up to the task of analyzing mid-twentieth-century life, whereas science fiction was uniquely equipped to do so. As Ballard said, “[O]nly science fiction is fully equipped to become the literature of tomorrow, and it is the only medium with an adequate vocabulary of ideas and situations.” As these words suggest, the New Wave writers shared a conviction that the most important forces shaping twentieth-century Britain were not politics or economics but science, technology and the media. This was the main reason the New Wave writers turned to science fiction. Their belief that the mainstream novel was not adequately addressing these forces led them to seek an alternative literary vehicle for their concerns, and science fiction was their solution.

But if science fiction was the only genre properly suited to describing and analyzing contemporary life, it also needed to be modified in order to serve this purpose in a relevant way. New Wave writers thought that certain science fiction conventions and tropes made the genre an effective medium of cultural critique, but only if these were appropriately modified to fit contemporary conditions. Science fiction’s traditional interest in the future, for instance, could be adapted and put to good use. Whereas science fiction usually exhibited a fascination with the predicting the achievements of science in the distant future, New Wave writers often projected current trends merely into the near future. This allowed for analysis of contemporary trends through a focus on their latent content. In other words, New Wave writers used the future not as prophecy but as a metaphor for the present; the future was used to interrogate contemporary reality.

Science fiction’s traditional fascination with science and technology could likewise be modified by New Wave writers, who were deeply concerned about the dramatic changes being caused in Britain by these forces. But whereas science fiction writers were typically optimistic and celebratory about scientific and technological advances, the New Wave writers viewed the changes being brought about by science and technology with a critical and ironic eye. This perspective was evident, for example, in their fascination with the concept of
entropy as a metaphor for social and psychic disintegration. Finally, in New Wave writing gone was science fiction’s customary interest in alien planets and outer space, replaced by a interest in the “alien” suburban landscapes of contemporary Britain and in what Ballard termed “inner space,” or the psychological tensions produced by modernity. But Ballard urged that if writers wanted to explore this territory it was not more stories about outer space but rather an “inner space-suit which is needed, and it is up to science fiction to build it!”

The Nature of the Catastrophe: the New Wave in Historical Context

The New Wave interest in so-called “inner” space derived from their conviction that the twentieth century was uniquely traumatic and disruptive. Two words that recurred throughout the writings of Ballard and other New Wave writers used as labels for the times were “catastrophe” and “disaster.” The implication of the words was that modernity, and in particular the twentieth century, is a catastrophe that has already happened and continues to happen, constantly amplified in new ways. Aldiss once remarked that he really had no faith other than “belief in Catastrophe.” And it was no coincidence that Ballard’s first four novels, The Wind from Nowhere (1962), Drowned World (1962), The Burning World (1964), and The Crystal World (1966), were all disaster stories. The modern catastrophe could not be reversed, but it could be confronted, analyzed, and described. Hence the question, “What is the exact nature of the catastrophe?” echoed throughout New Wave writing as an unofficial slogan, and the attempt to answer it was central to the New Wave project. Ballard placed the disruption around 1945, since which time “the specters of mass psychosis stride across the communications landscape (the specters of the atom bomb, of the Nazi death camps, of the misuse of science, and so forth)....” The 1960s in a sense amplified the catastrophe, because it was then that modern media began to emerge and saturate the psyche with images of these “specters.” When asked about the nature of the catastrophe in an interview, Ballard explained with reference to his experimental novel The Atrocity Exhibition:
Well, it is happening. Even the stories in The Atrocity Exhibition are disaster stories of a kind. The book is about the communications explosion of the ’60’s. From my point of view, the ’60’s started in 1963 with the assassination of President Kennedy – his death and Vietnam presided over the whole of the ’60’s. Those two events, transmitted through television and mass communications, overshadowed the whole decade – a sort of institutionalized disaster area.”

The New Wave writers thought that a unique feature of the twentieth century was that its traumatic, violent, man-made catastrophes were rapidly absorbed into the “mass communications landscape” where they fed society’s latent desire for images of destruction and brutality. This state of affairs had troubling psychological implications.

Consequently, New Wave anxiety about “the catastrophe” and its representation in the media was linked with an anxiety about the erosion of personal identity by numerous impersonal forces. In this concern with the integrity of personal identity and psychological stability the New Wave writers reflected the increased interest in psychology that characterized the 1960s. New Wave writers admired Freud for his analysis of how the psyche could be destabilized from within by unconscious mental processes and for the way he exposed the limits of human rationality; Freud’s Civilization and its Discontents was a key text for the New Wave writers. They also admired Jung for his warnings about how the modern psyche had become unbalanced through reliance on science and for his emphasis on the psychological importance of literature and mythology; his Modern Man in Search of a Soul was another influential text in the New Wave movement.

They also followed contemporary developments in psychology such as the work of R. D. Laing, who studied the impact of modernity on the psyche and argued that mental illness was a psychological coping mechanism that could ultimately be therapeutic. Both Aldiss and Ballard were friends of Christopher Evans, a psychologist and computer scientist at the National Physical Laboratory whose research on dreaming had an obvious appeal for writers who were interested in the role of the unconscious. Their interest in psychology, combined with their analysis of the social and cultural changes occurring around them, resulted in a conviction that the self was threatened
with erosion as never before. This “consciousness of [personal] mutability” was described in a 1967 *New Worlds* editorial which concluded: “The social sciences, imperfect as they still are, indicate this much at least: that a man’s character (and soon, perhaps, his physical person) is as artificial and arbitrary as any artifact of his culture.” But instead of turning away from this predicament, the New Wave writers decided to confront it and deal with it on its own terms:

[L]iterary art has characteristically lagged behind in dealing with these elements of modern life, even sometimes in recognizing them.... Lawrence’s primitivism and Eliot’s orthodoxy represent two popular alternatives to an acceptance of the present world.... We all stand in need of the ‘new sensibility’ that can enable us to handle experiences and ideas for which nothing in our past lives has prepared us, and this sensibility can be won only by an act of sustained and informed imagination. It is to be hoped that this magazine can provide, in some degree, imaginative works that will fulfill this need.¹⁵

New Wave writers thus framed their speculative fiction as literature of coping that would help readers deal with their experience of modernity. And the key to speculative fiction’s efficacy in this role was its mythic component.

The New Wave writers viewed science fiction as a contemporary form of myth which, when crafted well, mediated between the threatening outer world and the inner world of the psyche. By doing this it helped its readers cope with the “catastrophe” of modernity. The New Wave writer Thomas Disch declared, “As mythmakers, science-fiction writers have a double task, the first aspect of which is to make humanly relevant – literally, to humanize – the formidable landscapes of the atomic era.”¹⁶ In taking this view, the New Wave writers were in part building on an existing British tradition of viewing science fiction as myth that went back at least to the 1930s. This understanding had been articulated first by science fiction novelist, critic, and erstwhile academic Olaf Stapledon, and later by C.S. Lewis, J.B. Priestley, and Raymond Williams.¹⁷ According to the New Wave, the best science fiction possessed what Aldiss called “a myth-making quality” in the service of a serious literary purpose rather than escapist entertainment.¹⁸ It allowed writers to draw on “both ancient and modern myth-ingredients,” thereby creating a powerful form of
contemporary fiction. When they spoke of the writing process and their working methods, they often mentioned their attempts to make “direct use of mythic material” or build a “mythological stratum” into their works, often by drawing on Jung’s theory of archetypes. Disch called this “the second task of sf writers as mythmakers .... the custodial work of keeping the inherited body of myths alive.”

The New Wave writers constructed a literary genealogy for themselves that reflected this emphasis on the mythic dimension of science fiction. They claimed that they stood in a long tradition of serious writers who exemplified science fiction at its mythic best. This tradition ran from Mary Shelley and H. G. Wells, through Olaf Stapledon and Aldous Huxley, down to ground-breaking recent practitioners like William S. Burroughs. New Wave writers described both themselves and the writers who stood in this tradition as myth makers and mythographers. Moreover, the leading New Wave writers wrote stories or novels that were titled or subtitled as myths, that retold well-known myths, or that made heavy use of mythic allusions.

Myths of the Near Future: Ballard as Mythographer of Modernity

The New Wave writer who developed the most nuanced and comprehensive view of myth was J.G. Ballard, arguably the most important and influential writer to emerge from that movement. Ballard spoke of his short stories and novels as “myths of the near future” and saw myth as a necessary means of comprehending and coping with the changes that were shaping postwar Britain. Central to his concerns was using his myths of the near future to chronicle what he termed “the death of affect,” or the deadening of normal emotional response that followed in modernity’s wake. Because of its concern with such troubling aspects of modernity, Ballard acknowledged that his work was driven by “a great sense of urgency” and had a strong “cautionary element.” But despite this cautionary tone, as I will explain below, it is a mistake to characterize Ballard’s complex fiction as romantic or reactionary anti-modern protest literature. He accepted the modern world, dominated by science and technology, as a given, but he set himself the task of examining how that world generated unprecedented pressures on the individual psyche.
Instead his work is best seen as an effort to analyze modernity in a way that allowed people to cope with these pressures. Ballard was able to do this with considerable success, if his reputation is any indication. His works gained a large popular following as well as substantial critical acclaim. His often prophetic fictional analyses of twentieth-century life earned him a reputation as “the Sage of Shepperton,” and he is immortalized in the Collins English Dictionary with the entry “Ballardian.”

Ballard’s background gave him an outsider’s perspective on British culture, along with a fund of experience and a conceptual vocabulary that were ideally suited to articulating his concerns in fiction. Born in 1930, he spent his childhood in Shanghai. His father worked for a Manchester-based textile firm and had been posted to Shanghai to serve as managing director of the subsidiary there. In Shanghai Ballard came face-to-face with the apocalyptic nature of the twentieth century. He and his family were interned by the occupying Japanese forces during the Second World War and they spent a total of three years in an internment camp, an experience he fictionalized in his novels *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women*.

Ballard first came to live in the U.K. in 1946. He went to university at Cambridge, where he studied medicine. While at Cambridge his interest in writing grew, and he gave up the study of medicine when he realized such a career would leave him insufficient time to write. He then spent a year studying English literature at King’s College, followed by brief jobs in advertising and encyclopedia sales. By the late 1950s Ballard found himself editing the journal *Chemistry and Industry* while trying his hand at writing science fiction of his own. The stint there immersed him in the world of scientific periodicals, which came to his office by the dozens. Reading these helped him develop the unique pseudo-scientific style and vocabulary for which he became known. He was subsequently able to keep this scientific knowledge current through his friendship with the psychologist and computer scientist Christopher Evans, who weekly sent Ballard the contents of his wastepaper basket, the detritus of the world of ephemeral scientific publications. By the late 1950s he began to envision the possibility of making a living as a writer, and he had clear ideas about what his fiction would look like:

I began writing in the mid-Fifties. Enormous changes were going on in
England at that time, largely brought about by science and technology – the beginnings of television, package holidays, mass merchandising, the first supermarkets. A new landscape was being created. The so-called mainstream novel wasn’t really looking at the present day. The only form of fiction which was trying to make head or tail of what was going on in our world was science fiction.\textsuperscript{28}

Or, as he said elsewhere, “science fiction is a response to science and technology as perceived by the inhabitants of the consumer goods society.”\textsuperscript{29}

Thus, the social effects of new technologies, the increasing cultural authority of science, and the post-war culture of affluence constitute the broad context in which Ballard’s work should be understood. In Ballard’s view, the increasing influence of science and technology was at best an ambiguous development. Explaining the motivations of the New Wave writers in 1969, Ballard pointed out that his speculative fiction was \textit{not} motivated by a confidence that “science and technology can solve all problems.” He elaborated: “I think science fiction is becoming something much more speculative, much less convinced about the magic of science and the moral authority of science.”\textsuperscript{30} By his own admission, Ballard was far from being a Luddite.\textsuperscript{31} In fact, he was fascinated with new technological and scientific developments. But his concern was how the technological and scientific landscape of modernity changed the individual.

Indeed, Ballard’s fiction can be seen as an ongoing attempt to catalogue and analyze the intense pressures that the contemporary world brings to bear on the individual psyche. Using the genre of science fiction, Ballard set himself the task of revealing the unobserved ways in which the contemporary world threatened the psychological stability of individuals and the relationships they formed. As one critic has written of Ballard’s technique, “The ordinary, normally unexamined world of the everyday is defamiliarised and shown to be the source of threats to personal and social existence.”\textsuperscript{32} One of Ballard’s shorthand phrases for this threatening world was “the modern technological landscape,” by which he meant the dominance of a scientific outlook, the modern urban environment, the mass media, and the constant, ever-accelerating proliferation of new technologies.

Ballard summed up the breakdown of the modern psyche under the
heading “the death of affect.” By this he meant a pronounced deadening of natural emotional responses and sympathy for others. This resulted from a modern environment that undermined human relationships and from the media’s monotonous, insistent repetition of images of violence. Because of the way it distorted human relationships and liberated suppressed violent impulses he saw the death of affect as “the most terrifying casualty of the century.”

He was convinced that the modern technological and scientific landscape multiplied the psychological pressures that produced the death of affect, and he therefore thought that contemporary fiction should be concerned with examining “inner space, that psychological domain ... where the inner world of the mind and the outer world of reality meet and fuse.” It was this inner space, rather than outer space, that Ballard urged his fellow writers to explore. This is why the New Wave writers used the psychiatrist as a stock character. They represented the psychiatrist as the natural explorer of inner space, the analogue of traditional science fiction’s astronaut.

Throughout his career as a writer Ballard viewed his fiction as a form of contemporary myth. Myth is the concept that holds together his key ideas like “inner space” and “speculative fiction,” as well as his varied obsessions about and analyses of the twentieth century. His theory of myth was unique and drew from eclectic influences including, as already noted, both Freud and Jung.

Freud impressed upon Ballard how myths manifested psychological tensions and conflicts. Furthermore, Ballard’s conception of how his myths functioned bears more than a passing resemblance to Freud’s talking cure. Both enable psychological coping by bringing the hidden or suppressed to light so that it can be confronted. Though Ballard was more drawn to Freudian than to Jungian analysis, he was influenced by Jung’s account of how myth can reveal otherwise inaccessible dimensions of the psyche. But Ballard’s understanding of myth drew on more than his reading in psychoanalysis. One of the books that deeply impressed Ballard early in his career was Robert Graves’s idiosyncratic theory of myth-making, *The White Goddess.* From Graves Ballard seems to have gained an appreciation of the persistence of a myth-making impulse in European culture.

Despite the distinctiveness of Ballard’s understanding of myth, he shared with other twentieth-century British mythic thinkers several assumptions about the cultural importance of myth. These included the assumption that all
cultures produce myths regardless of how advanced they were or are, a belief that ideally myth had a beneficial cultural role, a sense that a turn to myth was the natural antidote to the dominance of scientific discourse, and a conviction that a reliance on myth was more vital than ever before.

The problem Ballard faced was how to construct a form of contemporary myth that was relevant and effective. Neither the past, nor political programs, nor the mainstream novel were really up to the task of helping people cope with the twentieth century; the pace of change had made these irrelevant. But change was precisely what science fiction was adept at handling, therefore it was the leading candidate to serve as a modern mythology in Ballard’s view: “S-f has been one of the few forms of modern fiction explicitly concerned with change – social, technological, and environmental – and certainly the only fiction to invent society’s myths ....”37 Science fiction’s concern with change was therefore important in two ways. On the one hand, by confronting change head on, science fiction engaged subject matter that was by definition highly significant and relevant. On the other hand, science fiction dealt with this change by mythologizing it, by using it as the basis for new myths that made sense of the change for those who were threatened by it. Science fiction produced myths that mediated between the inner world of the psyche and a rapidly changing external reality.

In fact, Ballard thought that the pace of change driven by science and technology had altered the cultural function of myth. Myth no longer looked backward out of a concern to explain where a culture had come from, as with the classical Greek myths. Instead it looked forward out of a concern to discover where the culture was going. Ballard argued that the first writer to demonstrate how science fiction could be fashioned into a forward-looking twentieth-century mythology was William S. Burroughs. He acclaimed Burroughs as the “first mythographer of the twentieth century,” because, by adapting certain science fiction conventions, he had been able to create “the first authentic mythology” of the present era of catastrophe.38

Building on his understanding of psychoanalysis, Ballard argued that myth-making was a fundamental human activity and a central purpose of effective and relevant contemporary literature. He held that individuals naturally construct their own mythologies as coping mechanisms that allow the inner self to deal with a threatening external world: “Each of us builds
the mythology of our own lives out of the materials that surround us in our everyday streets.” This view also characterized his own work, which he spoke of as an attempt to mythologize his experience through writing. Furthermore, he often described his characters as “mythologizing” their experience in order to cope with and make sense of it. This emphasis on psychological coping in response to external threats is why he described his fiction as a series of “stories of psychic fulfillment.” He believed the imaginative writer’s role was to perform the normal process of private mythologizing more extensively, analytically and publicly, in an effort to help others make sense of the landscape of modernity. Thus, the best contemporary writers functioned as mythographers. Consequently, Ballard also described his stories and novels as “myths of the near future” and as “predictive mythologies” that used the near future to interpret the present. Doing so revealed the threats to the individual psyche that were latent or unobserved in the contemporary world and equipped readers to cope with them:

The title *Myths of the Near Future* exactly sums up what I think a lot of present writers, musicians ... filmmakers, painters ... are concerned with: the mythologies of the future. Not myths which will one day replace the classical legends of ancient Greece, but *predictive mythologies*; those which in a sense provide an operating formula by which we can deal with our passage through consciousness – our movements through time and space. These are mythologies that you can actually live by: how to cope with the modern urban landscape .... I’m interested in what I think of as a radically new set of mythologies that aren’t concerned with the past ....

He elaborated on how his mythologies were intended to function: “... I construct my emergency kit – the latest short story or the novel I’m working on at the present – an emergency assemblage with which I try to cope with the situation in which I find myself. I offer it to anybody else I feel is in the same boat.” Thus, Ballard’s description of his writings as “stories of psychic fulfillment” was true in two senses: not only did his characters seek psychic fulfillment, but, if the stories did their work as myths of the near future, his readers would find it as well.
Conclusion

One index of the New Wave’s cultural influence is the popularity and stature of its core writers, Aldiss, Moorcock, and Ballard, all of whom built successful careers. All are acknowledged as major literary figures in Britain and beyond, but Ballard — a literary heavyweight by any measure — was arguably the most significant writer to emerge from the New Wave. By the early 1970s he was widely read, published, and translated, and highly sought after as a reviewer, columnist, and interview subject. Though he consistently spoke of his work as science fiction, he gained a reputation that extended well beyond the boundaries of that publishing category. The strong populist dimension to the New Wave project was further evidenced in Ballard’s concerted attempts to present his work and views in venues that would reach the widest possible readership. His primary means of doing this was through interviews, which he agreed to with astonishing frequency. Where these interviews appeared gives us some indication of who was reading Ballard and of the sort of audience he wanted to reach. Alongside interviews in highbrow publications like *Paris Review* or *Books and Bookmen* are interviews in obscure fanzines (*Cypher, Vector*), journals of science fiction criticism (*Foundation, Thrust*), underground publications (*Friends, Search and Destroy*), London weeklies (*Time Out, New Musical Express*), and large format glossy magazines (*Vogue, Rolling Stone*). The number of magazine and newspaper interviews from the 1960s through the 1980s totals more than eighty, and this does not include his numerous radio, television, and book interviews. This outreach to a popular readership underscores the cultural influence of Ballard’s fiction and views.

Ballard’s fiction, and New Wave fiction more generally, should be seen as a literature of skeptical criticism and analysis of modernity rather than a literature of protest against it. Indeed, it may be best to describe Ballard’s fiction as a literature of coping, given his consistent emphasis on the psychological effects of modernity and his repeated insistence that his fiction was intended to help readers deal with these effects. He did not advocate a return to a simpler past, nor did he believe that this was possible. Though critical of many consequences of twentieth-century science and technology, Ballard’s fiction was not anti-science and technology. Instead, its underlying concern was the psychological impact of modernity, especially the “death of affect.”
Thus the ultimate point of Ballard’s of fiction was not to protest against the catastrophe of modernity, but rather to analyze it with a view toward developing coping strategies. That is why, as Colin Greenland has noted, the role of Ballard’s protagonists “is to accept the disaster and acclimatize to the new environment.” Ballard knew he and his readers could not undo the catastrophe, but they could come to terms with it.

Adding the story of the New Wave’s mythic science fiction to the narrative of twentieth-century British cultural history brings some key issues into focus in a new way. In particular, appreciating the motives and aspirations of the New Wave project can refine our understanding of a cultural struggle that defined twentieth-century Britain: the struggle between advocates and opponents of modernity. In scholarship on the postwar period this struggle is usually seen through the lens of the “two cultures” controversy. On this view, critics of modernity are seen as defined by their allegiance to the humanities. But the science versus humanities model does not help us situate and make sense of the New Wave project. In part because they worked outside the context of academia – where the two cultures model had the most resonance – New Wave writers never identified themselves as advocates of the humanities and made no attempt to argue that the humanities had a central cultural function. Instead, they argued that mythic science fiction had a cultural importance that was necessitated by the nature of modernity.

The work of Ballard and the New Wave thus reveals how, in the search for an potent critique of modernity, important thinkers and writers turned to the discourse of mythic thinking instead of the humanities. This turn to myth was justified with claims that myth did cultural work that history, politics and science could not do, and that it offered a unique means of coping with the psychological pressures that modernity brought to bear on the individual. The New Wave writers recognized that they were not the only British writers to produce mythic fiction, but deemed their own form of mythic science fiction the best means of coping with the catastrophe of the late twentieth century.

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Ibid.

Brian Aldiss, “Magic and Bare Boards,” in *idem* and Harry Harrison, eds., *Hell’s Cartographers: Some Personal Histories of Science Fiction Writers* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), 208.

The question appeared on the cover of *New Worlds* no. 182 (July 1961) and it was particularly common in Moorcock’s fiction of the 1960s and 1970s.


20 The phrases are from Moorcock, “Aspects of Fantasy,” 10; and Ballard, interview by Burns, 26.


23 New Wave writers Thomas M. Disch and Charles Naylor edited a collection entitled *New Constellations: An Anthology of Tomorrow’s Mythologies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), with an introduction by Disch on “Mythology and Science Fiction.” Some notable examples of reworked myths include Moorcock’s *Behold the Man*, a retelling of the story of Jesus; and Aldiss’s *Prometheus Unbound*, a retelling of the Frankenstein story.

24 The title Ballard gave to one of his short story collections was *Myths of the Near Future* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982).

25 Ballard, interview by Alan Burns, 20; 21.

26 The entry reads: “BALLARDIAN: (adj) 1. of James Graham Ballard (J. G. Ballard; born 1930), the British novelist, or his works (2) resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in JG Ballard’s novels and stories, esp. dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments.”


34 Ibid., 97. Italics in original.


39 Ballard, interview by Rodney Smith, 209.

See for example Ballard, *Concrete Island* (London: Cape, 1973), 22; and idem, “The Terminal Beach,” 62.

Ballard, interview by Pringle and Goddard, 40.

Ballard, interview by Revell, 42.

Ibid., 45.

See the partial bibliography of these interviews prepared by Ballard scholar David Pringle at http://www.solaris-books.co.uk/Ballard/Pages/Miscpages/interviewsbib.htm.