disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory

Volume 1 *Rethinking Contemporary Mythologies*

Article 2

4-15-1992

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.01.02

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Recommended Citation

Von Hendy, Andrew (1992) "The Modern Construction of Myth," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*: Vol. 1 , Article 2.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.01.02
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol1/iss1/2

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The Modern Construction of Myth

by Andrew Von Hendy
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When it comes to myth, the student in any given discipline is apt to be in the position of the six blind men in the ancient Hindu fable who define the elephant according to the particular part each has happened to touch. My first goal in this essay is to cope with the whole elephant, to set the contributions of the various disciplines which study myth into significant relation with one another so as to produce an interdisciplinary overview. The six blind men, however, apprehend a single, concrete object, whereas the student of "myth" confronts a concept which has been and still is the site of contending ideological constructions, many of them connected only quite problematically to any objective referent.[1] My second goal is therefore to make clear the extent to which such constructions have shaped thinking about myth, often to the inhibition of interdisciplinary understanding. These two objectives, particularly in combination, require not merely synchronic but also diachronic explanation. As a consequence. much of the essay is cast as an historical "genealogy," in the sense derived from Nietzsche and made current by Michel Foucault. The history of the concept is not rehearsed for its own sake, but examined for its power to shed light upon the ideological constructions which bedevil the study of myth in our own time. This effort may be said to constitute the third goal of the essay, and my fourth and final one grows out of the third. In the last few pages, hoping that the prior genealogy has equipped me with at least one eye, however bleary, I advance another definition of the elephant and suggest how the construction of myth in modern anthropology might serve as a check on the various forms of Romantic ideology which have otherwise dominated the field.

I

By "modern," in my title, I mean the kind of thinking about myth which began, roughly, with the eighteenth century. Premodern thinking about the concept can be represented by Francis Bacon in the previous century. His work offers a dramatic instance of the divide between the old and the new conceptions of myth because he grasped the new without quite knowing that he had. On the one hand, when he speaks of what he considers to be myth, the mythology of classical antiquity, in his essay "On the Wisdom of the Ancients," he conceives of it in the two-millenia-old Neoplatonic tradition as allegorized fable, moral teaching concealed under the bait of fantasy (Bacon, XIII, 67-172). On the other hand, when he distinguishes in his *New Organon*

the four genera of illusions which interfere with clear thinking, the idols of the tribe, the cave, the marketplace and the theater, he describes phenomena which characterize, when taken compositely, what many in our day would mean by myth (Bacon, VIII, 76-78). It does not occur to Bacon to associate the universal illusion-spinning of the race with the fables of the gods; this association, conclusive for the modern construction of myth, becomes current only in the next century.

The word "construction" in my title indicates that the meaning of a concept such as myth, is, like all meaning, culturally constructed, however "natural" it may appear within a given ideological context. We can see "myth" being cut out of whole cloth in the course of the eighteenth century. The French classicist, Marcel Detienne, suggests that the first systematic students of traditional story, in that century, reinvented Plato's concept of myth as part of their own war, analogous to his, against superstition. The historian of ideas, Frank Manuel, documented a generation ago in *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* the extent to which the foremost mythographers of the day consciously or unconsciously projected in their work contemporary concerns about the origin and nature of religion. We can see this tendency at work already in the first important modern essay on "myth," the *philosophe*, Jean Fontenelle's "On the Origin of Fables," published in 1724 (though probably written in the 1690s). As Robert Richardson observes, Fontenelle tries out nearly every theory of myth known to the later century.[2] Two features of his syncretistic essay, however, stamp it as modern in contradistinction to Bacon's. The first of these is his assumption that the invention of fables is a constant of the human mind at a certain cultural level. Fontenelle, interested in the covert undermining of Christian revelation, regards this constant negatively; fables display, not "the wisdom of the ancients," but the perennial folly of human fantasy. "Let us not look for anything in the fables except the history of the errors of the human mind (Fontenelle,18)." In order to demonstrate the universality of this condition he introduces the second modern feature of the essay, its embryonic comparative method. Here, in the same year as Lafitau, who is so often credited in histories of anthropology with pioneering the method, Fontenelle deliberately compares Greek mythology with those reported from the New World, while Christian fable, (just as in Frazer's *Golden Bough*), hovers in the background as the shadowy, unmentionable third. This second feature of the essay is a reminder that the rise of modern mythography is contemporaneous with the appearance of anthropology itself.

Fontenelle's negative attitude toward fable reflects his own anti-religious agenda and represents the atheistic strain in Enlightenment thought. But this strain became rapidly locked into dialectical conflict with its contrary, the growing valorization of fable. Just as the century is marked both by mass

defections from Christian belief and by denunciations of the triviality of allegorized classical mythology, it displays a steady rise in respect for the power of the human mind to construct for itself the tables of its own belief. In a recent and brilliant encyclopedia article on French mythography of the eighteenth century, Jean Starobinski sums up his findings with the epigrammatic remark "In the intellectual history of the century, the sacralization of myth is strictly tributary to the humanization of the sacred (363)." If Fontenelle inaugurates and serves as an instance of the negative critique of fable, Vico, whose *New Science* was published only a year later, may be said to introduce and prefigure its positive affirmation. If one looks at Vico without wearing the spectacles designed for the purpose by various nineteenth and twentieth century Romantic interpreters, he appears, like Bacon, as an interestingly ambiguous and ambivalent transitional figure. On the one hand, his view of the *civility* of primeval humankind, the *giganti* of his First Age, is as dark as Hobbes', and he shares with Fontenelle a stadial theory of metahistory according to which the race mercifully evolves toward civilized polish. On the other hand, once he achieved his radical insight that "the world of civil society was certainly made by men and... its principles are to be found within the modifications of our own human mind," he felt compelled to recognize as a corollary that the humans of the First Age must have been "poets who spoke in poetical characters. This discovery, which is the master key of this Science, has cost us the persistent research of almost all our literary life, because with our civilized natures we cannot at all imagine and can understand only by great toil the poetic nature of the first men (21-22, 96)." It follows, as Vico says in his opening section on method, "that the first science to be learned should be mythology or the interpretation of fables" (33). Hence, in his Book Two, "Poetic Wisdom," which occupies half his text and is certainly the heart of it, Vico deduces the categories of this poetry of foundational representations. This deduction includes, under "Poetic Logic," his brilliant analysis, not appreciated fully until the middle of our own century, of the four master-tropes of original language. Thus, as the instances of Fontenelle and Vico suggest, fable, or, as it came increasingly to be called in the next generation, myth, shuttled dialectically between being represented as an outmoded record of error and as the key to human continuity. From either point of view, however, it became the constructed Other of Enlightenment.

By a familiar irony of intellectual history, the Romantic reaction to Enlightenment merely consolidated myth as the Other of Western secularism. The "humanization of the sacred" and its concomitant "sacralization of myth" complete their apotheosis, and create the modern excitement about "myth," only with Romantic representations of the positive value of mythopoeia. It may be useful to distinguish in this Romantic valorizing of

myth three moments, which I will call nostalgia, assertion and consolidation. One can illustrate the first of these by focussing on Schiller's immensely influential articulation of a concept for which T. S. Eliot provided the definitive literary label when he produced his own version of it and called it "dissociation of sensibility."[3] The ancient Greeks were not like us, Schiller asserts in his essay "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry." Whereas we live in a modern, dissociated, "sentimental" condition of irony which undermines our powers of spontaneous belief, they lived in a "naive" condition of unified sensibility which enabled such belief. In his celebrated complementary poem, "The Gods of Greece," Schiller's speaker exclaims in the first stanza, "*wie ganz anders, anders war es da!*", "how wholly other, other was it there" (163).[4] The serendipitous theological associations which have since accrued to this phrase are perfectly appropriate in the context. In the succeeding stanzas the speaker elaborates on this assertion. *There* there was no gap between subject and object; truth and poetry were one. Poetry wrapped only a magical transparence about the thing signified and the signified poured the fulness of life through the verbal construction. *There* what will never more be felt, the unity of consciousness with its intended object, *was* felt; nature was the presence of gods. In contrast to this, the second half of the poem is one long cry that the physical frame of things is now an abandoned *place*, incapable of counterresponse, "*entgöttete*," a word it is tempting to translate anachronistically as "demystified," or, in Weber's key phrase, "disenchanted." Schiller makes in clear in his essay that the unity of Greek imagination is the unity of unselfconscious simplicity. Modern humanity is truly superior to the ancients in the self-conscious quality of its affection for nature, but the price we pay is infinite longing for a state of rapport we cannot reclaim. One may be reminded of Rousseau, a generation earlier, stammering paradoxically in his second *Discourse* about the original condition of man that it is "a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, which probably never will exist, and yet about which it is necessary to have accurate notions" (34). I link Schiller with Rousseau here the better to suggest the relevance of Schiller's powerful and influential fiction to the rise of the modern social sciences. Thanks especially to some excellent recent work in the history of anthropology, it will not seem so farfetched to assert that this first, nostalgic moment of Romantic myth has had a pervasive influence in shaping Western representations of the sacred among non-Western peoples.[5]

This first moment of "nostalgia" assumes a West severed from a unified sensibility by nothing less than historical necessity; Schiller agrees implicitly with both Fontenelle and with Vico that the passage of the race into self-conscious separation from the cosmos was inevitable. But the second moment, the moment of high Romanticism proper, affirms that this fate can be transcended by way of the individual's virtually infinite power to generate

mythopoeia. A great deal of work has been done in the past twenty years to elucidate the seminal roles of German Idealist philosophy after Kant and of the German and English Romantics in establishing the modern "humanistic" notion of a substantial ego which is the originating source of value, prior to society and (all too often) beyond historical conditioning.[6] The moment of "assertion" in Romantic thinking about myth can be seen as a subset of this broader Romantic ideology. Doubly cut off from union with a society of believers and union with the cosmos, the creative individual can, nevertheless, evade the traps of a limiting rationality by both intuiting the permanent truths embodied in past mythologies and perhaps even discovering or inventing the new one around which his or her own culture would at last cohere. (Notice the presupposition, which the Romantics inherited from Herder and popularized, that a mythology *is* a set of beliefs around which a "culture" coheres, while a "culture" (Herder's word) *is* a society organically unified by its mythology).

One might consider as instances three works published coincidentally in the year 1800. In the "Talk on Mythology" in Friedrich Schlegel's *Dialogue on Poetry*, one of the most important theoretical documents of German Romanticism, the speaker, Ludovico, calls for a "new mythology" which he identifies, in a famous pioneering description, with Romantic poetry itself. In his *System of Transcendental Philosophy* the Idealist philosopher Friedrich Schelling describes the epistemological mechanism by which mere rationality could be evaded, namely what has come to be called in literary history and theory "the Romantic symbol." He also initiates a project which was to occupy him for the rest of his long career, the development of a spiral philosophy of history centered upon the evolution of myth. To the essentially backward-looking metahistorical theories of the eighteenth century, like Vico's or Schiller's, he adds a teleological dimension; just as a second age of "mythology" mediated in the past between an initial age of "poetry" (Vico's "First Age") and our present age of "science," so a new age of "mythology" will mediate the utopian return of the race to a new age of "poetry (374)." And in "Klingsohr's Fairytale" in his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* the visionary poet Novalis invents a famous fable, an "internalized quest-romance of the sort written in England by Blake and Shelley) in which the adventures of his heroine, Fable, represent the power of mythopoeia radically to renovate human consciousness.[7]

The third moment of Romantic thinking about myth constitutes its entrenchment in nineteenth-century literary culture. It is marked especially by the widespread ensconcing of the Romantic symbol and of the assumption that the essence of myth is a permanent truth which transcends any particular historical vesture in which a story may be garbed. The Romantic concept of "symbol" is quite unlike the concept of it prevalent in the social sciences

which derives from positivistic semiology. The Romantic version refers to a sign the sum of whose meaning, so to speak, is greater than any logical analysis of its parts.[8] This sign (for which James Joyce invented the relevantly religious name, "epiphany,") communicates to the person who apprehends it a direct experience of transcendence. Coleridge, whose descriptive definition of it is the best-known in English, says it is "characterized... above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal (151)." Nineteenth century aesthetics builds on this foundation in assuming access to the core of ahistorical truth beneath traditional story. Hence Tennyson, in retelling the Arthurian matter of Britain, or Wagner in dramatising Norse mythology in his *Ring* cycle, assumes that his "symbolic" version enable insights which both transcend the limitations of particular historical settings and exceed whatever specific allegorical interpretations the work may inspire.

II

It would be difficult to overstate the impact of this Romantic ideology of myth upon both popular and scholarly conceptions of it right into our own day. In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, the literary theories I have been tracing thus far seem to mark time while fresh thinking about myth develops in the new modes of the human sciences, in sociology, anthropology and depth psychology. But these young disciplines themselves are affected by the wave of irrationalist thought current at the time, in the philosophies of Nietzsche and Bergson, for example, and the social thought of Pareto and Weber. These disciplines begin to exhibit their own versions of the Romantic ideology of myth, particularly in their focus upon the origins of religion and upon "the primitive." When Tylor helped to launch modern anthropology with the publication of *Primitive Culture*, he intended to support Comte's metahistorical scheme, according to which religion belongs only to the first stage of human development and the kind of religion which generates myth only to the first part of *that*. By devoting so much of his text to myth and religion he obviously meant to strike a blow in the then-current "warfare of science and theology," but within a generation these lines of inquiry produce Frazer's *Golden Bough* and the Cambridge Hellenists, Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl, in all of whom one finds large elements of neo-Romantic irrationalism.[9]

The work on myth in these new disciplines creates, in turn, a feedback loop into the aesthetics of Modernism. The controversial MOMA exhibition of a few years ago, with its juxtapositions of "primitive" tribal art and celebrated Modernist pieces, was a reminder of the impact of the new theorizing upon the visual arts, and one has only to recall T. S. Eliot's recourse to myth in *The Waste Land*, Joyce's in *Ulysses*, D. H. Lawrence's in his later work, Thomas Mann's in *Joseph and His Brothers*, and so forth, to appreciate

the reenergized emergence of Romantic ideology in Modernist literature.[10] Modernist art contributes little of theoretical importance to this ideology, but its brilliant successes, especially in combination with its appropriations of anthropology and depth psychology, stimulate, in *their* turn, a new outburst of theorizing about myth which peaks around the mid-century. In getting a grip on the extent of the survival of Romantic ideology in the twentieth century, it may be of help to consider its appearance under the four following groupings.

The first group, both chronologically and in order of importance, is Freudian psychoanalysis and its modification, Jungian analytic psychology. If it seems odd to classify analytic psychology as merely a "modification" of psychoanalysis, that is because both Freudians and Jungians have found their political interest to lie in stressing differences; with respect to their thinking about myth, however, resemblances and continuities are more significant. Freud's postulation that the mind is largely repressed and censored "primary process" entails as a corollary that it is largely a mechanism for the production of mythopoesis. The persistent recurrence of comparable symbolism in both his patients and in worldwide storytelling led Freud, a belated follower of Lamarckian biology, to produce what he himself once called his "phylogenetic fantasy," that humankind inherits acquired symbolism, including that derived from the origins of religion and the incest taboo in the slaying of the primal father.[11] In this work and in the later expansion of his theory of the instincts into a full-blown cultural critique, Freud constructs a powerful picture of the mind as dominated by mythic patterns of inadvertent symbol. Jung, who was much more frankly under the sway of Romantic poetry and philosophy, transmutes what he called Freud's "semiotic" reading of symbols as indicators of the etiology of individual neurosis into a "hermeneutic" reading of symbols as signifiers of a universal process whose outcome for the individual possesses a teleological direction (Jung, 1972, 291). According to Jung's theory of libidinal development, mental health depends upon hermeneutical rapport with these transpersonal "archetypes" of "the collective unconscious."[12] Mystical as this theory sounds, it is reason itself compared to the debased versions of it peddled by Jungian epigones like Erich Neumann and Joseph Campbell, to say nothing of current gurus like James Hillman and Robert Bly. Thus psychoanalysis and analytic psychology pour into the twentieth century through a new channel the Romantic ideology of myth and symbol.

The second such channel is phenomenology of religion. This school of thought seems to have been jumpstarted by the remarkable success just after the First World War of Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto employs the Robertson Smith-Durkheim distinction between the sacred and the profane in order to characterize the *experience* of "the holy." He thus evades the

previous generations's obsession with origins, but the result is far from a neutral Husserlian account of what seems to be the case; instead, the *method* of phenomenology is employed to dramatize the ontological reality of the object intended by the experience. While the best phenomenologists of religion, such as Pettazoni, van der Leeuw and Eliade, do not indulge in anything so crude, and test their categories in serious comparative studies, the gravamen of their expositions tend, like Otto's, to affirm the truth of Romantic myth and symbol. Mircea Eliade's well-known studies of sacred time and space are obvious cases in point.[13] A student of myth soon discovers that in the United States, at least, departments of religion generate a considerable proportion of current mythography and that much of this work reflects the values and assumptions of this committed branch of phenomenology.

The third channel of Romantic thought is the work primarily of literary scholars inspired to attempt comprehensive synthetic theories, both by the heady successes of the new anthropological and psychological perspectives and by the *éclat* of their adoption by Modernist masters. The two best known and most influential of these are Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and *The Masks of God* and Northrop Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism* and subsequent ancillary works.[14] The psychology involved is mainly Jungian and the anthropology derived principally from the connections between "myth" and ritual popularized by Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the Cambridge Hellenists and the subsequent "myth and ritual" branch of comparative mythology. It has long been a bit of a scandal that Frazer's work, so outmoded as mainstream anthropology, should continue to be revered in literary circles. Recent attention to Frazer by intellectual historians and historians of anthropology has helped to clarify this peculiar genealogy. Frazer appears as the inventor of a powerfully heueristic "comparative method," which, by overriding the socially produced, historically conditioned representations of particular times and places, enables the transcendent subjects who are its practitioners to synthesize the underlying universal meanings of myth.[15] Mythographers like Campbell and Frye do also rely on versions of the Romantic symbol, but they are probably best understood as transmitting Romantic ideology in this broader sense.

Last, but certainly not least, we find theories of myth as symbolic form, stemming from Ernest Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. According to Cassirer, following in part the earlier work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, myth is a distinct modality of human thought, on a par with science, or even language itself. This theory clearly echoes the stadial metahistories of the Romantics and of Hegel and Comte and raises their familiar problems; to what degree, for instance, is "mythic thought," outmoded by the evolution of consciousness? Cassirer suggests ambiguously, as this Hegelian tradition has tended to do

in the twentieth century, that the mode survives in art. This is a notion which encouraged certain New Critical literary theorists during the 40s and 50s to assume a formal analogy between a ritual and a work of art that enables the maker to capture or even invent a myth. Cassirer's theory connects with New Critical thinking in yet another way, via Suzanne Langer who gave Cassirer's "symbolic form" a linguistic turn in *Philosophy in a New Key*. New Critical theory insisted, in a striking development of Kantian aesthetics, that the essence of what distinguishes literature from non-literature must be a quality of language itself, and we find a theorist like Philip Wheelwright, for example, extending this quality of "intension" to the "mythic" as well. For Wheelwright, properly literary language *is* myth.

Thus far I have attempted to summarize the hegemony of Romantic assumptions in modern thinking about myth. But the history of this topic ever since the Enlightenment is a history of dialectical alternations between what Hegel famously analyzed in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* as "Enlightenment and Superstition" (561-589) or what Horkheimer and Adorno revealingly recast in the 1940s as "Enlightenment and Myth." Even in the nineteenth century the Romantic glorification of myth as a means to transcendence, sacred or secular, provoked in opposition three major "hermeneutics of suspicion," those of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.[16] Marx's is the most exemplary, since it includes the articulation of the very concept of ideology. Ideology is, of course, a term at least as popularly abused and as contested these days as myth itself.[17] Since Marx did create its modern notoriety by applying it to what I have been calling "Romantic" and he called "German" ideology, perhaps it can be described provisionally here as the dialectical contrary of the Romantic claim that a mythology is a set of beliefs around which a culture coheres. View that assumption as true, but view it with hostile dread instead of nostalgic satisfaction, and you get ideology.

Unlike Marx, both Nietzsche and Freud also contributed to the Romantic valorizing of "myth." Freud's contribution I have already discussed. Nietzsche's lies in the impact of the early *Birth of Tragedy* upon the Cambridge Hellenists and Modernist writers by virtue of its pioneering, if rather lurid, insights into the prehistoric ritual foundations of Greek culture. But this Romantic strain, disproportionate to its occasion as it was, is far outweighed by Nietzsche's mature hermeneutics of resentment, the way he has taught us to scan the dominant cultural representations of Western humanist thought for signs of its will to power. So, too, Freud's renovation of the Romantic symbol is far outweighed by his hermeneutics of desire, the way he has taught us to penetrate to the conflicts between libido and culture concealed beneath the structures of socialized behavior.

In the past fifty years these three founding "hermeneutics of suspicion" have reappeared, aggrandized, in Frankfurt critical theory and in

poststructuralism. The effect of these critiques upon the concept of "myth" has been to expand it into a virtual synonym for ideology. Hence Roland Barthès conceives of "*mythologies*" as semiotic distortions in popular culture and Jacques Derrida proposes a "*mythologie blanche*" inscribed everywhere in the foundational metaphors of Western philosophy, to which we whites are nevertheless so blind that these tropes might as well be written in invisible ink. As a result of the rise of National Socialism in Germany Ernst Cassirer himself turns on myth, viewing with horror its reemergence in the modern West as atavistic political propaganda (Cassirer, 1946). Even common language usage confirms this negative view of the concept; "myth" is ordinarily employed to signify a widely believed lie. When I remarked near the beginning of this essay that many today would identify myth with a composite of Bacon's four "idols," it was this climate I had in mind.

It would be misleading, however, to leave the impression that the valorizing of myth which is the legacy of Romanticism has been banished from the current field of cultural representation, low or high. We can confirm that the former is not the case by observing in virtually any bookstore these days the array of works by Joseph Cambell, usually located near the checkout counter. And the pressure of poststructuralist critiques of "essentialism" has produced impressively sophisticated counterresponses which take them into dialogue. Such theories are confident of the constitutive power of language, like Hazard Adams' *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic*, or the late work of Paul Ricoeur on a deferred but ultimately attainable symbolism of presence, or the literary theory of Eric Gould which finds the essence of what he finally names "mythicity" in the endless play of language "in the gap between event and meaning" (10).[18] In fact, although suspicion of myth is currently modish in academic circles, this suspicion is still locked, as it has been since the days of Hegel, in dialectical struggle with its adversary. I call the contest dialectical because the antithetical critiques of suspicion, too, accept tacitly as the basis of their negation the humanistic or Romantic assumption that "myth" signifies nothing less broad and fundamental than the power of the human mind to construct meaning in its own representations.

III

Perhaps one can best measure the presence even in twentieth-century thought of Romantic ideas about myth (and their antithetical counterparts) by contrasting them with the findings of modern anthropology. The greatest post-Romantic innovation in the study of myth has been the systematic study in the field of the actual religious beliefs and practices of preliterate peoples. Only after World War I and the great shift in intellectual fashion from focus on origins to focus on structures, did anthropology thus examine myth systematically outside the terms set by Romantic ideology. And the upshot

of this examination has been an increasing consensus that there is surprisingly little there.

This is a hyperbolic way of saying that dominant trends in British and American anthropology have conduced to the dissolution of myth, regarded as a separate entity, into broader sociological considerations. In British anthropology the varieties of what may for convenience be loosely labelled "functionalism" encouraged a Durkheimian identification of religion with social behavior. The consequences for our understanding of myth may be illustrated by Malinowski's historically important Frazer Lecture of 1926, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," the same piece in which he marks his difference from Frazer by famously contrasting his open-air fieldwork with "the closed study of the theorist" (99). According to Malinowski, myth is neither primarily cognitive (as Tylor and even Frazer supposed), nor affective and "artistic" (as Romantic thought would have it), but "a pragmatic charter" with indispensable quotidian functions: "it expresses, enhances and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man (101)." This same view of myth as pragmatic and quotidian pervades such classics of British functionalism as Evans-Pritchard's work on the Azande and Nuer. No one could accuse Evans-Pritchard of neglecting the religion of the peoples he studied, or even the theoretics of "primitive religion," yet he seldom mentions myth and it nowhere appears as a significant topic in its own right.[19] Myth is subsumed, as it is in Durkheim, under ritual behavior, on the one hand, and concepts of belief on the other.

In the United States the influence of Franz Boas and his students produced a similar result by different means. It may seem perverse to impute the elimination of myth to a man who did so much to promote the collection of Native American story and whose ethnographical masterpiece is called *Tsimshian Mythology*. Boas' employment of the word "mythology," introduces, however, a problematic central to my argument. Anyone who has examined his massive tome will know that it contains scarcely two pages of what would pass in Romantic circles as myth; by Romantic standards, it is a compendium of folktales. The tripartite generic distinctions among "myth," "legend" and "tale" given currency by the Grimm Brothers, and popularized by Victorian handbooks like *Bulfinch*, imply the full Romantic ideology; folktales are only *märchen*, fairytales, whereas myths are stories about divinities which constitute significant fragments of the mythology around which a culture coheres.[20] Boas subverts this distinction by adopting a criterion derived from his native informants; myths are stories set in a state of the world before the present one, while tales belong to time as we know it now. By this standard Boas is justified in calling "myth" a large mass of Tsimshian stories which nineteenth-century folklorists would have called "tales." Boas' legacy of this distinction

is a dangerous one, however, because it depends upon local definition. Where his students did not find tribal corroboration they fell back upon whatever seemed to be the particular case. Hence Boas' ultimate impact on this feature of Native American ethnography has been the extension of the term "myth" to all traditional oral narrative.

Claude Lévi-Strauss provides a good, if extreme, case in point. One might think of him casually as the person who has done more than anyone since Boas himself to stimulate the study of Amerindian myth. But a moment's reflection will show that he has carried Boas' positivistic destruction of the Romantic categories of genre to one, at least, of its logical conclusions. Not only does he insist on the identity of myth and tale, but his canonical formula for myth also allows the derivation of the terms of its formal analogies, particularly the inverted fourth term, from any semiological aspect of the culture, including rites, masks and body-painting. Any concept encoded semiologically may serve as a "mytheme," then, once it is abstracted from narrative. It would be difficult to imagine a more severe reduction of humanist or Romantic claims for myth as the special vehicle of transcendence than this dismissal of teller, audience, context and even tale itself on the grounds that myths are networks of mediating concepts that "operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact" (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, 12).

Nor does the relative revival in the last twenty-five years of anthropological investigations of religion seem to offer any reversal of this unwillingness to hypostatize "myth." For Clifford Geertz, as for Ernst Cassirer, myth is a mode of "significant symbol" on a par with language, art and ritual, but Geertz explicitly rejects Cassirer's "taking symbols to be identical with or 'constitutive of' their referents" (a virtual definition of Romantic symbol) and does not mention myth at all in his "interpretive" studies of Javanese and Balinese religion (Geertz, 92). Studies of religion by the symbolist wing of anthropology, which generally views belief and practice as affective and non-logical, might be expected to be soft on myth. But significant studies by Edmund Leach, Mary Douglas and Victor Turner in fact eschew it. Leach and Douglas focus instead upon the structural relations of symbol and Turner entirely upon ritual process.[21] The concept of "symbol" has acquired in the past two centuries an extremely vexed problematic of its own, in many respects parallel to that of myth and in some respects overlapping; in contrast to "the Romantic symbol," however, virtually the entire range of its usage in anthropology, as in the other social sciences, lies firmly within the positivist semantics descended from C. S. Pierce and well outside any truck with transcendence. Even a recent constructivist like Roy Wagner, who goes so far as to see "myth" along with kinship systems and ritual as one of the "basic frames of culture... formed as large-scale tropes," presents a wholly secular theory of the constitutive meaning of

symbols (129). In short, Romantic assumptions seldom appear even in the anthropological thought most sympathetic to myth. The severity of this reduction recalls Lévi-Strauss' persuasive argument that the once potent concept of totemism is largely what Whitehead would call a fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Modern anthropology seems to have gone far toward establishing that the same is true of much that has passed as myth.

This anthropological shrinkage of swollen Romantic pretensions has much to teach everyone still minded to use the term "myth." Concreteness is fallacious only when located at the wrong level. Since we cannot expect either the word or the concept to disappear, "myth" had best be placed as precisely as possible. I believe our best recourse is to accept and build upon the anthropological demolition of the Romantic distinction between myth and tale. In the beginning is the tale. But how then, the reader may object, are we to understand Boas' discovery, so often repeated, as it is by Malinowski in "Myth in Primitive Psychology," that preliterate peoples themselves make this generic distinction? My answer is that either the ethnologists or their informants or both may have fallen into another fallacy of misplaced concreteness. There is a great deal of anthropological evidence that the realms of the sacred and the profane, in terms of narrative, as in terms of all other forms of behavior, are distinguished not so much by modes as by moods. The existence of "sacred narrative," which I consider the best term for what Boas, following his informants, labelled "myth," is a widespread cultural fact.[22] But sacred narrative is merely tale, told in ritual circumstances and religious mood. This simplification may help explain why ethnologists so often discover that the allegedly esoteric myth of a society is the familiar, exoteric possession even of its women and children. The proper generic distinction lies, then, not between a genre called "myth" which channels transcendence and one called "tale" which is merely secular and mundane entertainment, but rather between tale which is employed in a religious context and tale which is not.

This claim must meet a second empirical objection, that sacred narratives are often much more than simple folktales; they are profound expressions of the matrix of assumptions basic to a particular culture. My reply is that sacred narrative begins in folktale but *builds* upon it; the religious mood in which such a tale is told guarantees that over time the tale will attract to itself a rich panoply of the culture's ideology.[23] This ethnologically-based distinction between myth and ideology helps explain both why poststructuralists and critical theorists have been tempted to identify the two, and why it is a mistake to do so. Tribal consciousness of the ideological freight of sacred story may also be an ancillary reason for the prevalence of indigenous distinctions between myth and tale. In any case, many anthropologists will undoubtedly continue to employ the now customary word "myth" to

designate such sacred narrative. This is a practice harmless enough within circles where, as we have seen, myth and tale have come to be generally identified, but it is a practice which sows confusion outside the discipline, where victims of the Romantic ideology continue to read into the word more lurid implications.

Finally, the check to Romantic pretensions inherent in modern anthropological fieldwork needs to be brought to bear upon the kind of literary studies of myth which have been popular since Frazer and the success of Modernism in the arts. Studies like "Mythic Patterns in Smeddle's *Descent Into Hell*" purport to discover or examine the quality of "mythicity" in the literary productions of Western culture. I believe that the same account of myth which applies to preliterate cultures applies to ours; myth is tale elaborated ideologically. From this point of view the behavior of the modern scholar who produces such a study is the equivalent of one of Boas' Tsimshian writing a learned commentary which expatiates upon the ideology of his neighbor's recent retelling of a sacred narrative. This comparison indicates two respects in which the general rule requires qualification when applied to that curious entity called "Western culture;" first, that by virtue of its long prehistoric development such tale is already heavily elaborated when it enters historical culture and, second, that "literature" is an increasingly secularized analogue of sacred narrative. The German cultural historian Hans Blumenberg has in mind the first of these two qualifications when he distinguishes between the work *of* myth, in preliterate cultures, and work *on* myth in literate ones. Blumenberg's extensive demonstrations of how such "work on myth" accumulates establish, in my opinion, that such "work" is really a branch of literary allusion. In order to account for the mysterious perennial appeal of certain myths, the stories of Oedipus or Prometheus for example, Blumenberg borrows from *gestalt* psychology the concept of *Prägnanz*, "pregnance" or "imprintedness." But the peculiar attraction of such stories may be accounted for more simply, in keeping with the principle of Occam's razor, by what I have called ideological elaboration; the more intensively a tale has been worked into the fabric of a culture, the more likely it is to be worked further—and the more mysterious will seem the sources of its appeal. I do not mean to suggest that such internal elaboration of a culture's own myths is undesireable; it appears inevitable and may even be useful, as as would surely have been the case if a learned Tsimshian could have produced a commentary on the tales Boas collected. As I think the genealogy of the modern construction of myth demonstrates, however, what *would* be desireable is that the literary promoter of myth approach it recognizing that its special appeal is built upon its ideological entrenchment, rather than hoping to find there the Other of Western secularism, the route to religious transcendence, or the ground of the substantive self as synthesizer of truth.

Notes

[1] In order to avoid setting off "myth" in quotation marks each time it appears, I ask that the reader take for granted their implied presence in all uses of the term.

[2] Feldman and Richardson, p. 10. Like everyone who has worked in the past twenty years on eighteenth century and Romantic mythography I owe much to the translations, notes and introductions in this distinguished anthology.

[3] The best scholarly account of this *topos* of "dissociation" remains Kermode, pp. 139-161.

[4] Schiller published two versions of the poem, the first in 1788, seven years before "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry" (1795) and the stronger, revised version which I use here in 1800, five years after the essay; thus the two versions of the poem neatly bracket the prose exposition.

[5] I have in mind particularly Fabian, Stocking and Kuper.

[6] I have been most directly affected, perhaps, by McGann, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy and Bernstein.

[7] For "internalized quest romance" see Bloom, pp. 3-24.

[8] Two excellent recent accounts of the Romantic symbol," both of which have served as partial models for my history of myth, are Todorov and Adams.

[9] This assertion may seem odd in the case of Frazer, who presents himself as a Tylorian rationalist and appears to maintain a "cognitive" position about the nature of magic and religion, but recent work on *The Golden Bough* as text unveils many of its neo-Romantic assumptions and helps account for its continued appeal in literary circles. See especially, in Manganaro, the editor's introduction, pp. 21-23 and the essays in the anthology's first section, "Frazer: Textual Reevaluations," pp. 51-130.

[10] The ethnographic significance of the MOMA exhibition of pp. 84-85, "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," is the subject of two recent lively studies; Clifford, pp. 189-214, and Torgovnik, pp. 119-137.

[11] See Freud. Freud employed the phrase "phylogenetic fantasy" in a letter to Ferenczi in 1915, first printed in Jones (III, p. 312).

[12] By far the best text of Jung's for grasping his theory of libidinal development, and probably the most intellectually significant of his prolific career is his first, *Transformations and Symbols of Libido* (1912), particularly as revised in 1952 and renamed *Symbols of Transformation* after he had articulated fully his concepts of "the collective unconscious" and "archetype." See Jung 1956.

[13] I have in mind Eliade 1961 and 1963 rather than the later *History of Religious Ideas*.

[14] On the level of generalization attempted here it makes sense to link Campbell and Frye, but the association should not be taken to imply that their work is of equal value; Frye's bears seriously upon literary theory, as Campbell's does not. It should also be noted, with respect to my next sentence, that Frye explicitly dismisses Jung's "collective unconscious" as "an unnecessary hypothesis in literary criticism' (p. 112).

The case for his being nevertheless deeply influenced by Jung can be made only at length.

[15] I wish to thank Marc Manganaro for permitting me to read a clarifying portion of his manuscript, forthcoming from Yale University Press, on the genealogy of this "comparative method."

[16] The label "hermeneutics of suspicion" for these modes of criticizing the dominant Western culture was invented by Paul Ricoeur. See Ricoeur 1970, pp. 32-35. These "hermeneutics" were provoked, of course, by a congeries of overdetermined causes, not *merely* by the Romantic glorification of myth, however broadly understood.

[17] It is employed in more than one sense in this very essay. There are numerous important studies of the concept from various angles, but for useful general guides see Larrain, Geuss and Eagleton.

[18] For Ricoeur's explicit acknowledgment that his later work on metaphor, interpretation theory and narrative depends upon a theological guarantee of meaning, see especially Ricoeur 1970, pp. 494-551 and Ricoeur 1978, pp. 223-238.

[19] For Evans-Pritchard on "primitive religion," see 1965. In Evans-Pritchard 1956, for example, "myth" is not even indexed.

[20] The most useful survey of this tripartite Romantic distinction of genres is Bascom, although, as a folklorist, he is interested in refining and preserving the distinctions.

[21] Brian Morris' excellent study provides a useful overview of recent work on religion by these and other significant anthropological thinkers (Morris pp. 182-328).

[22] I borrow the term "sacred narrative' from the title of the folklorist, Alan Dundes' recent anthology of the theory of myth, though he himself employs the phrase to characterize myth *as distinguished from* tale (Dundes).

[23] Many constructivist theories of language and symbol as constitutive of meaning, Adams' in literary theory and Wagner's in symbolic anthropology, for example, seem to converge to suggest this conception of how tale accumulates ideology. I have found particularly instructive, and promising for future studies of the process, Liszke's semiological study.

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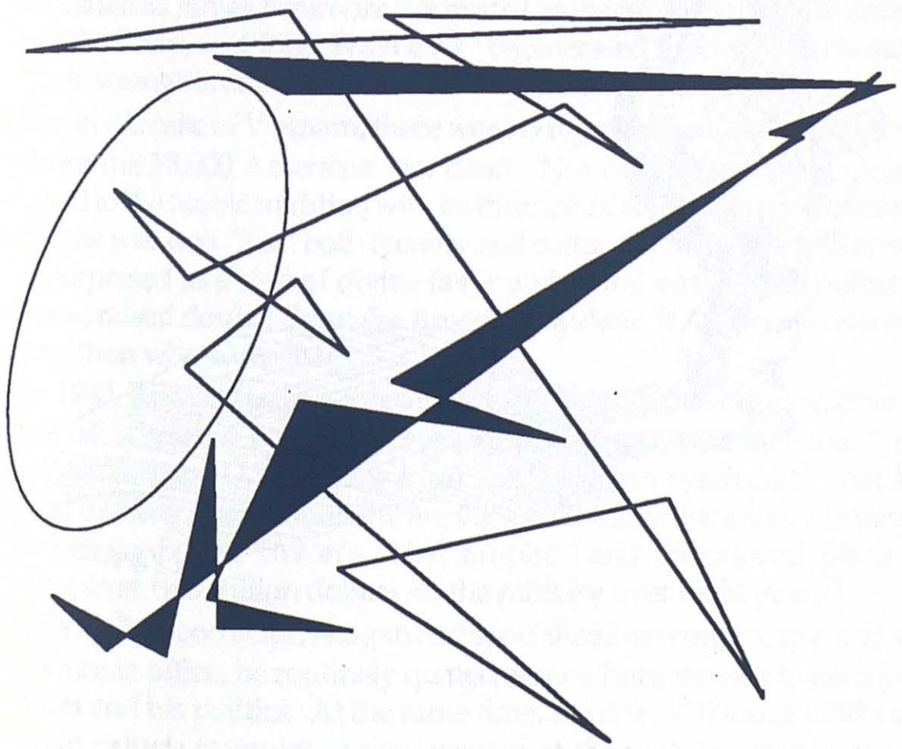
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