

## CHAPTER 1

### *Modernity and the Crisis of Myth*

In July of 1969, a dugout canoe carrying anthropologist Edmund Carpenter and his crew headed for a spot on the bank of the Sepik River where a solitary figure stood awaiting their arrival. The figure was the chief of a Stone Age tribe living in a remote area of New Guinea. The Australian administrators of Papua and New Guinea had hired Carpenter to recommend effective ways of communicating with the native peoples who were under their supervision. As Carpenter stepped ashore, the other villagers were nowhere to be seen, but when gifts were given to the chief, the natives began peeking out from their places of concealment and slowly coming forward. The distribution of balloons and other gifts soon won Carpenter the trust of the villagers and permission to conduct a series of experiments among them.

The experiments involved the use of assorted items of modern technology. Each villager was given a small mirror and a Polaroid portrait of himself or herself. Only when Carpenter and his helpers pointed to features of the images and then to the corresponding features of their faces did the villagers understand the images. Next, the voices of the villagers were recorded and played back to them. As these experiments were conducted, motion pictures were made of the natives' reactions and, once developed, were shown to the villagers.

Upon hearing their voices coming from a metal box, the natives jumped back, began shouting in anger and fright and brandishing their spears. The reactions to the visual experiments were similar to each other and different from the auditory one.

They seemed paralyzed by the sight of their own images. Rooted to the spot, they stared at the mirrors, transfixed, their stomach muscles trembling in tension. Suddenly having become acutely self-conscious, they would slip away from each other and in solitude gaze intently at their portraits. In a very short time,

however, the fear of the gadgets vanished and villagers were playfully making photos of each other and wearing them on their foreheads.

At the conclusion of the experiments, Carpenter left to analyze his data. When he returned to the village in December 1969, just six months after his initial arrival, he was shocked at what he found. He reported:

At first I thought I had made a mistake and come to the wrong place. It had changed completely. Houses had been rebuilt in a new style. The men wore European clothes, carried themselves differently, acted differently. They had left the village after our visit and, for the first time, travelled outside the world they had previously known. . . . Suddenly the cohesive village had become a collection of separate, private individuals. Like the hero of Matthew Arnold's poem, they wandered "between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born."<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently, Carpenter reports, the most sacred ceremony of the tribe, the male initiation rite, was made voluntary and permission to film the disclosure of the sacred mysteries was given to the outsiders. Despite the fact that previously no woman had ever been allowed near the disclosure, a woman was admitted to operate one of the cameras. Religious leaders even halted the ritual temporarily to give her time to insert fresh film. It was announced, moreover, that this would be the last involuntary male initiation and that the sacred water drums, the most important objects in the ritual, were being put up for sale.

What are we to make of this incident? It is not necessary to idealize the New Guineans to appreciate the magnitude of what befell them. Remember, theirs was a Stone Age culture. Not only had they never encountered Europeans before, but they had never even become acquainted with neighboring tribes. When hunters of two villages caught sight of each other in the forest, both fled in terror. Beyond that, not simply a ritual but also the myth intimately associated with it and, indeed, the way of life which sustained the myth and ritual and was, in turn, sustained by them were dealt a life-threatening blow. Perhaps it would not be too strong to speak of the event as a cultural murder. To use the term murder, however, is almost inevitably, at least for those of us who read mystery novels, to raise the standard questions: Who did it? By what means? What was the motive?

Carpenter himself is quick to take the blame and acknowledges that his actions may have been immoral. He says:

. . . I am convinced (and horrified) that this was a direct result of our experiment. Our actions had produced instant alienation. They had destroyed the natives' old, strictly tribal self-concept.

In one brutal movement, these villagers had been hoisted out of a Stone Age existence and transformed from tribesmen into detached individuals, lonely, frustrated, alienated. They were no longer at home in their old environment or, for that matter, anywhere.<sup>2</sup>

He identifies the electronic media as the means of this cultural upheaval and expresses concern for the effect the media may be having on us. As for motive, the outcome was wholly unintended.

This assessment, however, appears to me to be too simple. First of all, although there existed at that time no anthropology of tourism, a recent subspecialty treating the ways in which tourists affect and are affected by their visits to more traditional societies, surely it has been known since the onset of anthropological field work that the study of oral societies inadvertently triggers significant changes in them, not all of which are beneficial. If that is true for the relatively passive participant observer approach, it might easily have been suspected that the more aggressive approach taken by Carpenter would likely amplify the usual effects. Second, Carpenter need not shoulder all the blame. He was an agent of the Australian administrators of the region, although probably in a better position than they to predict the outcome of his visit to the village. Finally, it is not altogether clear that the electronic equipment was the means of the cultural death. In "The Writing Lesson," a chapter of his *Triste Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose encounter with the Amerindian Nambik-wara destroyed their previously alleged idyllic existence, points the finger at writing. Having seen him take notes in front of them, they very quickly grasped the ways in which this foreign technique could be used to gain an advantage for themselves over other members of the tribe.<sup>3</sup> In the light of Lévi-Strauss's analysis it seems to me more likely that the social changes were effected by neither writing nor the electronic media per se but by both of these technologies as embodiments of some larger cultural force. Indeed, on this reading, all the actions of Carpenter, his assistants, and the government officials—not just the technologies—would manifest the same cultural force and, therefore, contribute to the tribal crisis.

The New Guinea story becomes, then, not simply the tale about what happened to a few hundred natives on a remote island in the Pacific Ocean. It can be read as an allegory about Western civilization. Just as in time-lapse photography the events that take place over an extended period are telescoped into a few minutes or seconds, so what has happened in the West imperceptibly slowly over the centuries was repeated in this New Guinea village in a matter of months, bringing the longer trend into focus.

At least since the nineteenth century the West has been conscious of the death of its myths. In the twentieth century it has become common among intellectuals to speak of the crisis of myth. For some, of course, the death of myth is no crisis at all but a liberation from superstitious beliefs and unnecessary restrictions. For others, however—among them religious persons and poets—there has been a lamentable crisis. Philip Wheelwright described the situation as follows:

This loss of myth-consciousness I believe to be the most devastating loss that humanity can suffer; for as I have argued, myth-consciousness is the bond that unites men both with one another and with the unplumbed Mystery from which mankind is sprung and without reference to which the radical significance of things goes to pot. Now a world bereft of radical significance is not long tolerated; it leaves men radically unstable, so that they will seize at any myth or pseudomyth that is offered.<sup>4</sup>

The death of myth, however, is not a peculiarly modern phenomenon. The appearance in classical Greece of theories about the nature and function of myths already indicates that myths had become problematic in some sense, that naive reliance on them was no longer possible. The purpose of those theories was somehow to heal the existential wound made by being cut off from a simple, direct participation in a mythological world. According to Richard Chase, the theories of myth arising from the classical world were three in number.<sup>5</sup>

The euhemerist theory, named for a Messenian of the fourth century B.C.E., claims that the gods of myths are actually human conquerors, rulers, or philosophers whose oral biographies were embellished and distorted almost beyond recognition at the hands of imaginative storytellers. Euhemerus arrived at this view as a result of visiting an island off the coast of Arabia. There he found a temple, one of whose columns bore an inscription which said

that Zeus was a man who was born and died on Crete and who was later deified by an admiring populace. On this view, myths are vastly inflated human history. Chase notes that this theory became a weapon in the hands of some fathers of the Christian church to discredit pagan myths. It was also used by Boccaccio in the Renaissance, Diderot and Hume in the eighteenth century, and Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century. It continues to have some currency.

The Christian-apologetic theory has, according to Chase, two varieties. One of them, Plagiarism, also used by early church fathers and by some minor figures in the seventeenth century, holds that anything of value to be found in pagan myths was borrowed illicitly from Judaism. Greek gods were taken from the Old Testament and then corrupted. Condescension, on the other hand, admits to some paganlike crudities in Judaism but says that God permitted their inclusion as a necessary, intermediate step toward a higher revelation. The church fathers, of course, not to mention the laity, were unwilling to use the term myth of Christian stories.

In Chase's view, the most important theory emanating from the ancient world regarded myths as allegories. In a few cases myths were said to be about metaphysical concepts; in others they were seen as didactic moral allegories. By and large, however, the Ionians, Stoics, medieval poets, and Renaissance humanists understood myths to be allegories of nature in which each deity represented some aspect of the natural order. The Stoics, for example, understood Hera to be air, Hades to be vapor, Hephaestus to be fire, and Demeter to be earth. The story of Hephaestus' expulsion from heaven is actually a description of primitive people obtaining fire from flashes of lightning.

The crisis which generated these theories of myth involved particular, pagan myths. The impact of these theories on the viability of myth itself was limited. Christendom was interested in history understood as the drama of God's redemption of His creation; it was not interested in nature. Hence it used euhemerism and plagiarism to counter pagan polytheism, morals, anthropology, and history while, at the same time, never acknowledging its own stories as myths. As for the allegories of nature, few thinkers prior to the modern era seriously questioned their validity. Allegory, after all, implies the self-conscious encoding in a one-to-one correspondence elements of one universe of discourse in that of another. Thus, descriptions of features or events of nature were

believed to be encoded in personifications characterized as divinities. This meant that such clever, sophisticated stories, when properly decoded, could be seen to square with observations made by scientist and nonscientist alike. Properly understood, then, even pagan nature myths could be regarded as true.

The dying of myths, however, antedates even classical Greece and is by no means limited to the West. Very probably it has been a persistent feature of all human history and prehistory. In endless succession Anu gave way to Marduk, Dyaus was banished by Indra, and the Maori god Rangi was replaced by Tangaroa. Whether by conquest, social upheaval, or intercultural contact, myths rise, have their day, then perish. From this perspective the New Guinea tale is but another chapter in the eternal human drama, and if it is an allegory, it is an allegory about that perennial drama.

If Carpenter's story is read in this last way, however, its true significance will go undetected. It was Sherlock Holmes who taught us that the scene of the crime often conceals clues that can unravel a case. The principal clue at the New Guinea village is that the traditional myth, unlike the perennial drama described above, has not been replaced by a new one. No new initiation rite has been constructed. No new mysteries have been discovered or hidden inside the sacred enclosure or revealed to those young males who are duly prepared. Nor has the old complex of myths and rituals disappeared entirely. There is only an attenuated clinging to the devitalized traditional myth and ritual. Myth is not so much dead as it is broken, enervated, numbed.

This numbing and the absence of the renewal of myth are the calling card of modernity. As late as the mid-sixteenth century, near the dawn of the modern age, when the Spanish missionaries, soldiers, and civilians came to "New Spain" to missionize and exploit the native American peoples, the effect was different from New Guinea. Under the tolerant Jesuits the religion of the Pima and Papago of Arizona incorporated elements of Catholic Christianity and remained vital. Even when the rigid Franciscans confiscated the paraphernalia and forbade the ceremonials of the Pueblo peoples, the religion simply went underground and remained strong.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, there is something in the touch of modernity which destroys not simply some particular myth but also myth itself. Modernity seems to result in the termination of the possibility of having any vital myth whatsoever. Indeed, modernity is that

era in our history in which the elimination of myth itself became for some a self-conscious goal. Modernity, then, not Western civilization generally or some universal and perennial process, will be our prime suspect in the crime at the New Guinea village.

A change in suspect, of course, prompts a reconsideration of both motive and means. The question of means will be the focus of considerable attention in the course of this work and will be the occasion for examining the nature of myth and modernity. In the chapter that immediately follows this one, however, we will seek to discover what there is about modernity, the probable culprit in a cultural murder, that is so inimical to myth. We shall discover that the theories of myth put forward by modernity reflect an epistemological and/or ontological commitment to dualism, with the result that myth is understood in either a reductionistic or fragmented way. Chapter 3 examines some of the few theories which acknowledge that myth exists within modernity. We learn, however, that they either redefine myth so as to make it unrecognizable and trivial or reserve some part of modernity which is held to be myth-free. Chapter 4 will demonstrate that no part of modernity escapes an ongoing grounding in myth. In particular, it investigates the ways in which the *Timaeus* and *Genesis* tacitly inform some of our most sophisticated scientific, philosophical, and logical theories. Chapter 5 points out some of the ways in which twentieth-century physics undermines the scientific basis for the rise of modernity. It also sets forth a new definition of myth which is heavily indebted to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential-phenomenological understanding of the the life-world and the body-subject. Chapter 6 treats the question of the truth of myth, including the myths which inform this volume. In addition, it portrays modernity as committed, on the level of imagination, to a visualist model of knowing. Finally, the story of Abraham's departure from Ur of the Chaldees for the Promised Land is read as an epistemological allegory of special relevance for our movement into a post-modern world.