

This chapter could as well serve as an appendix to *The Magic Mirror*. It provides a brief overview of some important theories of myth without offering detailed analyses or criticism. Though the theories outlined here are interesting, they play little part in what follows in this book. This cursory review does show us two things about theories of myth, however. The first point is a critical one: most theories of myth are remarkably lacking in a definition of myth. Much may be said about the role of myth, or the power of myth, or the pervasiveness of myth without making clear what is under consideration. The second point is a more analytical one: by and large, theories of myth specify or exhibit category distinctions that demarcate what is truly human from what is other than this. These two points are taken up in much greater detail in chapters 2–6, and the reader may wish to move on quickly to the sustained arguments presented in those chapters.



What is (a) myth? It seems our inquiry must begin with the most basic question. What are we investigating? This simple question is really quite difficult to answer.

At times it seems as if anthropologists, ethnologists, folklorists, classicists, philosophers of culture, and all others studying myth are working in the manner of botanists or zoologists who have not yet clearly defined the difference between flora and fauna and the differences between varieties of these while investigating a world of constantly and wildly mutating forms of life. The study of myth is an

exemplary instance of a science in the throes of defining itself and its objects at one and the same time. This may seem odd, but it is to be expected in a field whose original boundaries are shrinking alarmingly fast, as truly "virgin" societies have all but vanished from the face of the earth, due, at least in part, to our efforts to explore, examine, and understand them. At the same time as the boundaries of the field are shrinking, they also seem to be becoming more porous. We can observe this in the extension of the concept of myth in the popular media (as in the newspaper article titled, "More Myths about Seatbelts"). But we also see its extension in serious scholarly work explaining aspects of contemporary painting, the history of literature, economic practices, and so on. For example, a recent reviewer of Garry Wills' *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* claims that, "A rich mythology has grown up around this mythic moment in American history" and that, "Wills dispels some of the curiously persistent myths about the occasion."<sup>1</sup>

I would like to suggest that there is an implicit consensus in the way that the concept of myth is used, but this pervasive usage is both more and less what individual theorists and writers ascribe to myth. 'Myth' is a term used to describe what is "other," what does not belong to the existential, intellectual, cultural, or historical position of the person applying the label "mythical." This is a very general initial formulation of a functional property of the term 'myth'. Myth functions or works to identify and classify aspects of human existence that are foreign to the observer. There is nothing radical about this claim. However, we will see as we go along that there are a number of quite interesting ramifications of this feature of myth. 'Myth' is also functional in that it is a strictly relative term—like the shift in the center of the solar system in the Copernican Revolution in astronomy. What is other, what is mythical, depends on what one takes as the point of reference. The difference between the intellectual revolution in astronomy and the way that investigators of myth view their subject is that the mythologist seems to have great difficulty imagining the focal point of analysis as any other than his or her own. The astronomer can picture the movement of the planets from the perspective of the sun. The mythologist appears locked in to her/his own vantage point as the point of arbitration of what belongs to the other, and, therefore, the mythical is always a function or correlate or complement of the observer's position. A simple example of this comes from listening to the ways that people name narratives. To the Okanogan teller, the "Creation of the Animal People" is a story or a tale.<sup>2</sup> To the observer, standing

outside the culture from which the story springs, it is a myth. The same observer would be hard pressed to see the story of the evolution of myriad plant life as a myth, though s/he may be willing to say that life arising out of nonliving, primal soup charged by bolts of lightning is the best story we've developed to explain biodiversity.

The closest myth comes to being acknowledged as part of the world of the analyst of myth is in the conception of myths as underlying, inarticulate assumptions about the world and human existence. These assumptions may be seen as misapprehensions, at best quaint and at worst dangerous, needing only the light of rational thought to expose and wither them. Analysts of myth may also understand schematic narratives that can be reproduced under new auspices, in new settings, as mythical. Northrup Frye uses this notion of the mythical to great advantage in *Anatomy of Criticism* and other works.<sup>3</sup> So, we may be able to identify the Oedipal myth in contemporary films or novels. Of course, the identification of the mythical narrative patterns often forces the myth out of its shadowy recesses in artistic (or psychic) processes. The mythical story's power to sway and persuade loses a great deal of efficacy when it is identified and analyzed; it may lose precisely those characteristics that earned it the title "mythical" in the first place.

In any case, it appears that the mythical "object" is unstable, relative, and inconsistent. Anything whatever may be called mythical—as long as "it" lies outside the realm identified as the analyst's own. It is the function of myth that remains the same; myth demarcates what is other, whatever that may be.

#### STRUCTURAL ACCOUNTS OF MYTH

Regardless of what seem to be problems in clearly articulating the object of inquiry in research on myth and mythmaking, most of the authors examined in researching the present work take for granted that there is some sort of consensus as to what constitutes the object of study for mythologists and related theoreticians. The mythologist tends to give many examples of myth without ever defining the term, as if we're all agreed as to what counts as a myth. This is quite clear in some of the classic works. For example, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* is a straightforward paean to the transformation of the condition of human life from an earlier, more brutal form to the much more civilized (and much more like our own) later Greek culture. She writes that, "of course the Greeks too had their roots in the primeval slime. Of course they too once lived a savage life, ugly and

brutal. But what the myths show is how high they had risen above the ancient filth and fierceness."<sup>4</sup> Hamilton makes no attempt to define myth, but catalogues the divinities spoken of in pre-Christian, though non-Judaic, accounts of the Greek, Roman, and Norse pantheons.

Sir James Frazer's work, *The Golden Bough*, is a "contribution to that still youthful science that seeks to trace the growth of human thought and institutions in those dark ages which lie beyond the range of history."<sup>5</sup> Frazer thought of his work as a chronicle of the human imagination as it grappled with the tenuous relation between thought and the vagaries of nature. He concluded that "the movement of the higher thought, as far as we can trace it, has on the whole been from magic through religion to science."<sup>6</sup> In Frazer's scheme, myth appears as the narratives that accompany ritual activity, by way of explaining the activity. Myth may also be stories, primarily in oral traditions, of various deities or of persons of heroic stature who cannot be located in a definite historical period. In either case, for Frazer, myth lies in a dark, prehistoric time, distinct from enlightened, historical, scientific life. Myth is a once necessary, but no longer viable, way of understanding the world.

Much of the data utilized in the study of myth are collections made by nineteenth-century white men in their quest to ferret out the unusual or the quaint and to bring Christianity and fealty to Empire to the heathens. This means that a certain skepticism must be brought to bear, performing a theoretical balancing act in interpreting texts (themselves primarily transcriptions made by the collectors of the data, translating from unusual languages) that may very well be the only accounts of societies now extinct or radically transformed by their acquaintance with the rest of the world. The evidence gathered as the myths of non-European societies included the following: any stories or descriptions of the various members of divine pantheons; accounts of the creation of the cosmos, the earth, society, plants and animals, subsistence-related rituals, and so on; notions of causal efficacy that depend on inserting a "non"-natural element into the causal series (what we call "miracles" in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition); and stories attending ritual activity of any sort. It is on material of this sort that we've based our theories about myth, though there might be some dispute about where certain lines are to be drawn. Those with strong religious beliefs might, for example, exempt the creation accounts of their own tradition from the qualifier "myth." Some theorists, like Ernst Cassirer, distinguish between mythical practices and religious accomplishments,

regardless of geographical or historical origin of the narratives and practices; while other thinkers, like Mircea Eliade, make no distinction at all between religious and mythical beliefs.

As twentieth-century classicists, folklorists, and ethnologists sifted through the accumulation of raw data, the various rituals, transcribed and translated narratives, etymological configurations, and so forth, were sorted into categories. This led to a number of quite succinct definitions of myth, primarily in terms of the structural properties of a story or ritual. These properties are then used to distinguish the truly mythical from the merely entertaining or the morally edifying. G. S. Kirk, a noted classicist, frowns upon defining myth either too broadly (as we'd find in such "universal theories" as those offered by Frazer and Cassirer) or too narrowly (as in defining myth as "sacred tales"). Kirk opts for the definition of myth as a "traditional oral tale," and claims that, "generally speaking a tale is . . . a dramatic construction with a denouement."<sup>7</sup> L. Honko offers a slightly more elaborate definition of myth, one that depends on the fulfillment of four criteria: form, content, function, and context. Simply put, this means that a myth is (1) in form, a narrative account of sacred origins; (2) in content, "contains information about decisive, creative events in the beginning of time"; (3) in function, serves as an exemplar or model in terms of which a "static" ontology is determined; and (4) in context, recited with a ritual pattern, making sacred events repeatable by the human participants.<sup>8</sup>

William Bascom, a folklorist, summarizes the state of his discipline's understanding of the formal features of prose narratives (generally gleaned from oral traditions), differentiating between myth, legend, and folktale. Bascom offers a chart consisting of seven categories, from the presence or absence of a conventional opening to the narrative (as in "Once upon a time . . .") to the inclusion of human or nonhuman agents as the principle characters in the narrative. He uses this chart to distinguish the three kinds of prose narratives on formal grounds. Under these headings, myth is classified as the kind of prose narrative in which there is no conventional opening, no restrictions on whether or not it must be told after dark, concerns something that happened in the remote past in an earlier or other world, has nonhuman principle characters, is believed within the particular society as fact rather than fancy, and can be described as sacred rather than secular.<sup>9</sup>

These definitions, along with the catalogues of myth offered by Hamilton, Frazer, and others, are structural or formal descriptions allowing for distinctions to be made within a wide spectrum of

stories. Those who collected the data were predisposed to regard some rather than other narratives and rites as instances of myth, and refining the notion of myth meant collating similarities and differences *within* the mass of data collected. Given these considerations, the conception of myth exhibited in these theories is fundamentally that 'myth' is applicable only to cultural traits or forms not closely related to the traits and forms of modern technologically oriented, western Judeo-Christian societies.

#### FUNCTIONAL ACCOUNTS OF MYTH

While the definitions recounted above depend on particular forms of locution or recital (such as absence of conventional opening or ritualized enactment), functional definitions of myth depend on articulating how myths work, what myths do, or what affects myths have on human lives. Certain important conceptions of myth imply that it cannot be restricted to archaic or primitive societies, even if we were to expand the scope of the conception to include as vestiges of myth the most "primitive" manifestations in modern societies, such as fairytales, superstitions, and folk remedies. Some anthropologists attempt a specification of the notions of rational, prerational, and irrational activity. This classification can then be used, for example, to distinguish healing rituals and practices that are merely incipient, unsophisticated, but logical precursors to modern, scientific medicine from those practices that are based on myth.<sup>10</sup> We can consider this way of understanding myth as functional, rather than structural. In this case, myth is defined by way of functions of cognition rather than by way of the function of the ritual or story within broader cultural practices. Either way, defining myth functionally rather than formally opens up the possibility of applying the concept of myth to any social group, including the group to which the theorist belongs.

Both Joseph Campbell and Bronislaw Malinowski offer functional definitions of myth in terms of the service performed within a larger arena rather than in terms of myth's function in reflecting the developmental stages of cognition or rationality. Campbell claims that myths function "to bring the human order into accord with the celestial. . . . The myths and rites constitute a mesocosm—a mediating, middle cosmos through which the microcosm of the individual is brought into relation to the macrocosm of the all."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he claims, there are "psychological problems inherent in the very biology of our species"—the lengthy period of depen-

dence of the extremely immature human neonate and the later recognition of the limited tenure of one's own existence on earth. These psychological difficulties can only be assuaged, says Campbell, through the medium of myth. He maintains that these two biological facts must be addressed, and that "both the great and the lesser mythologies of mankind have, up to the present, always served simultaneously, both to lead the young from their estate in nature, and to bear the aging back to nature and on through the last dark door."<sup>12</sup>

Where Campbell understands the function of myth as a kind of calibrating system that fits together the exigencies and vicissitudes of the human biological organism with an intuition of an utterly other, universal order, Malinowski describes the function of myth as the "dogmatic backbone of primitive civilization."<sup>13</sup> He denies that myth can be adequately explained or accounted for as primitive methods of understanding natural occurrences. He also disagrees with the notion that myth is a substitution of a concrete exemplar for a more difficult and abstract concept; that is, he denies that mythical symbols must be interpreted in order to discover the "real" referent. In fact, for Malinowski, myth cannot be understood as *any* sort of explanation or "intellectual effort." He writes,

Studied alive, myth . . . is . . . a direct expression of its subject matter; . . . a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements. Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: 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. . . . It is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; . . . a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever stories or narratives fulfill these functions deserve the title of myth or sacred tale. Malinowski is quite happy to extend the field of myth to any contemporary society, including his own. He is, however, cognizant of the difficulties of doing such work within one's own social group.

Claude Lévi-Strauss applies the tenets of Ferdinand de Saussure's work in linguistics to myth studies. De Saussure and his followers developed a system of semiological analysis that charts the construction of meaning through the interplay of language. Very

simply put (for a more complete description, please see chapter 3), semiology shows that there can be no essential or inherent meanings in the words and concepts we use. Rather, the meaning of a word depends on its juxtaposition with, or difference from, other words. In this view, language is not static, is not a passive carrier of meaning, but is active in constructing or constituting meaning. One might guess that a theory of myth derived from semiology would offer the most functional analysis or definition of myth and mythmaking. However, this is not the case. While he certainly gives us a detailed and fascinating account of the permutations wrought on the themes and mythemes of traditional narratives, Lévi-Strauss's method of deciding which narratives will count as the objects of his inquiry is quite pedestrian.

In his introduction (called the "Overture") to *The Raw and the Cooked*, a work subtitled *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, Lévi-Strauss provocatively likens his work to a piece of music. He regards his method of analysis as a method of composition, a layering of themes and images, expressive tensions, varying tempos and rhythms, alternating densities of analyses, contrasting and harmonious patterns of exposition. Lévi-Strauss also contends that this method of composition is particularly apt in an explication of myth, because of the close similarities between myth and music. He writes that both are "instruments for the obliteration of time." Both music and myth induce an experience of a "synchronic totality," resulting in "a kind of immortality."<sup>15</sup> Lévi-Strauss also makes trenchant comparisons between myth and music in regard to the relation between historical temporality and psychophysiological time, aesthetic experience and aesthetic production, and so on. His remarks are often startling and evocative, and his analyses fresh and inviting. But just *what* is it that he is writing about? That is, what counts as myth for Lévi-Strauss?

The closest that Lévi-Strauss comes, in *The Raw and the Cooked*, to defining what it is that he is analyzing as a structuralist, is an aside concerning possible criticism that he chose only those myths that lend support to his thesis. Lévi-Strauss rebuts this anticipated criticism by noting that he delayed publication of the work in order to examine the first volume of *Enciclopedia Bororo*, a compendium of traditions and traditional lore. His suggestion is that, as myths form a kind of web of signification, that the addition of more examples will not substantially alter any theoretical insight or scientific progress we might enjoy using the material already at hand, whether taken from the journals of missionaries or from con-



temporary ethnological and anthropological studies. He likens this to the fact that "experience proves that a linguist can work out the grammar of a given language from a remarkably small number of sentences, compared to all those he might in theory have collected."<sup>16</sup> I would suggest that this is true *only if* the linguist already knows which sounds, which symbols, which facial expressions, and which hand and body movements belong to the system of communication, and which are irrelevant. It would seem that only the meagerest linguistic analysis, one that ought not be quite trusted, can be developed if the linguist has included only those examples most familiar, or only those that fit the linguist's conception of what counts as a sentence, for consideration as relevant exemplars.

Lévi-Strauss analyzes 187 "myths" in the course of *The Raw and the Cooked*, but comes no closer to explaining the principles by which we must consider these stories as myths. In neither *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* nor in *Tristes Tropiques* does he offer a more satisfying definition of myth.<sup>17</sup> The essay, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Structural Anthropology*,<sup>18</sup> gives us a somewhat clearer notion of the meaning of the term 'myth', though still not sufficient for our purpose of deciding precisely what belongs to the investigative category in the first place, before we begin our explanatory calisthenics. In the essay, Lévi-Strauss recounts certain themes from de Saussure's work in linguistics, distinguishing *langue* and *parole* in terms of the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of language. He adds,

we may notice that myth uses a third referent which combines the properties of the first two. On the one hand, a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago. But what gives myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future.<sup>19</sup>

Later in the same essay, Lévi-Strauss recurs to the relationship between *langue* and *parole* and claims that "myth is an intermediary entity between a statistical aggregate of molecules and the molecular structure itself." This analogy to chemical processes does not really help in *defining* myth. Lévi-Strauss is honest, no doubt, in denying that he has chosen particular myths to buttress his structural analysis. However, the pool of data from which he draws has a selection mechanism already built-in and this mechanism is not investigated by Lévi-Strauss in his most important works on myth. I

would suggest that Lévi-Strauss has given us a theory of "myth" based only on stories that anthropologists, ethnologists, and missionaries have found to be unfamiliar, alien, fantastic, and *other*.

Hans Blumenberg offers another interesting and complex account of myth and mythmaking, one that defines myth in terms of its function in human life. His approach combines theories of human physiological and biological evolution with phenomenology. According to Blumenberg, in his *Work on Myth*, the best way to make sense of myth is to examine the purposes that myth must have served in the very beginnings of human existence.<sup>20</sup> Mythmaking holds the peculiar status of being, in a sense, *pre-intentional*, in the phenomenological sense of intentionality. Blumenberg's claim is that as the human creature (or perhaps we must consider this a pre-human creature) gained a bipedal, increasingly upright position and at the same time migrated from the sheltered rainforest habitat to the open savanna, there occurred a qualitative change in the human organism. The "sudden" leap to an environment dominated by a vast, inaccessible horizon and an increasing dependence on far-reaching visual acuity engendered an "absolutism of reality." This is a phrase Blumenberg uses to describe that state of being in which the very indefiniteness of the situation, the inability to discover or encounter any boundaries (as the new horizon of the world is, effectively, limitless and unbounded) overwhelms any sense of mastery on the part of the creature over its world. There is nothing to be mastered. Blumenberg writes that this is equivalent to a state of total anxiety; it is "intentionality of consciousness without an object . . . the whole horizon becomes equivalent to the totality of the directions from which [danger] can come at one."<sup>21</sup>

The generalized, constant state of excitement and fear engendered by this new environment cannot be maintained indefinitely. The human organism cannot survive long in such a state of anxiety. However, Blumenberg suggests that this situation, extended for a certain period of time, contributes to the greater sense of anticipation and curiosity in the human animal, prerequisites for later intellectual development. Whatever the positive results of this indefinitely extended excitement and fear, the sense of overwhelming anxiety in the face of an environment that offers no opportunity for piecemeal mastery forces the human creature to transform unspecified anxiety into specific fears. Blumenberg writes, "Something is 'put forward,' so as to make what is not present into an object of averting, conjuring up, mollifying, or power-depleting action."<sup>22</sup> This process most likely begins with the attribution of names to some features of that

which threatens to overwhelm. Here Blumenberg is in agreement with Ernst Cassirer (as we'll see in the next chapter), at least in terms of mythical language development, though the former adds that "by means of names, the identity of such factors is demonstrated and made approachable, and an equivalent of dealings with them is generated." The mere attribution of names, followed by the development of practices meant to placate, direct, subvert or otherwise manipulate these once overpowering experiences (the absolutism of reality) alleviates "*Lebenangst*," the "pathological" condition of human being in its transition from earlier evolutionary forms.

The power of myth lies in its function of making determinate the indeterminate, and, in this, "Myth is a piece of high-carat 'work of logos.'"<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, when the "work" of myth has managed to both demarcate the originally unbounded and constitute features of the world that can be met with the specific affect of fear rather than the unspecified state of anxiety, true intentionality can arise. Blumenberg claims that,

Even when it is still a matter of being on one's guard for the invisible and evading it by observing its rules, affect is the inclusive bracket that unites partial actions that work against the absolutism of reality. Intentionality—the coordination of parts into a whole, of qualities into an object, of things into a world—may be the "cooled-off" aggregate condition of such earlier accomplishments of consciousness, accomplishments that had led the way out of the bracketing together of the stimulus and response and that were at the same time the outcome of this exodus.<sup>24</sup>

Blumenberg's contention is that this mode of accomplishment, as an accomplishment of *logos* as well as of *mythos*, does not end with the rise of science, of philosophy, or of monotheistic religious systems. Rather, the mythmaking mode of consciousness is able to "push back" the indefinite, indeterminate horizon until this threat is safely ensconced as absolutely "Other," effectively clearing the scene for the constitution of a human world. Mythmaking does not end at this juncture, but turns its energy toward a full reversal of the absolutism of reality into the absolutism of the subject. Blumenberg traces this progression through versions of the Faust "myth" as found in Lessing, Goethe, and Valéry, as well as the philosophic analogue to the myth in the work of the German Idealists. The impli-

cation is that the working of myth, in stretching itself toward the possibility of inverting the absolute sway of reality and installing the subject as complete master, would end itself. However, Blumenberg sees the absolutism of the subject as a limit-case that cannot be achieved. Myth cannot end itself. It continues to spin its variations, though eventually only on the single theme of the subject as self and world constituting.<sup>25</sup>

I am in sympathy with Blumenberg's project of discovering a functional definition of myth, a definition that is not confined to describing the peculiar stories of societies different from our own. His description of the mechanics of mythical constitution (especially in terms of demarcating certain boundary conditions holding between the human organism and its environment) is an important contribution to theories of myth. In fact, this conception of the function of myth plays an important role in the theory of myth developed in the present work. But the problem of what counts as a myth is not solved by Blumenberg. He relies on Old Testament stories, Hesiod's catalogue of the doings of the gods, the tragedies and comedies of classical Greek theater, and the historical variations wrought on the themes and characters found in these sources. Though Blumenberg uses a wide variety of sources for the "myths" he investigates, his method of determining precisely what counts as a myth suffers from the same kinds of problems we find in the work of Lévi-Strauss. What counts as a myth, for Blumenberg? He writes, "Myths are stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and by an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation."<sup>26</sup> This may indeed be the case, at least insofar as we're speaking of the means of cultural transmission of myths through history. But Blumenberg seems only to have gathered up a large collection of religious and literary artifacts and described the recurrent "theme[s] and variations." He analyzes these as myths, without making clear precisely why *these* recurrent patterns ought to be considered myths.

There are many other important and interesting theoretical accounts of the mythical and the function of myth, though I believe the sample offered here is representative of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions. However, there are two other contemporary theories of myth that deserve at least passing mention. As noted in the introduction, there has been some fascinating work done on myth in feminist aesthetics and feminist metaphysics. Much of this work is done through radically transforming Jungian and Freudian insights, reviewing these through the lens of female

experience. Estella Lauter offers an explication of the changing mythic themes in contemporary women's poetry and painting, suggesting ways in which our cultural fund (especially as it is being transformed by women in the feminist movement) works in reciprocal relation in changing women's images and identifications.<sup>27</sup>

Paul Ricouer's work on myth ranks in complexity and interest with the work of Cassirer, Barthes, Eliade, and Hillman. However, Ricouer's concept of myth is quite similar to that of Eliade's, though Ricouer's emphasis is on the phenomenological aspects of Christian mythical symbolism, particularly that of the "Fall" of human being into sin. In fact, Ricouer refers to Eliade in the introduction to *The Symbolism of Evil*. He writes,

Man first reads the sacred on the world, on some elements or aspects of the world, on the heavens, on the sun and moon, on the waters and vegetation. Spoken symbolism thus refers back to manifestations of the sacred, to hierophanies, where the sacred is shown in a fragment of the cosmos, which, in turn, loses its concrete limits, gets charged with innumerable meanings, integrates and unifies the greatest possible number of the sectors of anthropocosmic experience.<sup>28</sup>

Ricouer also shows his kinship with Eliade when he describes the relation of myth to history, and the possibilities for salvation in each mode of existence.<sup>29</sup> Given the similarity of perspective between Ricouer and Eliade, at least on what they understand as belonging to the mythical, I think it unnecessary to do a close explication of both in the present work.

#### CASUAL USAGES OF 'MYTH'

One more arena of the use of the term 'myth' should be explored, though we can't elevate these uses to the level of theory. 'Myth' is used widely in the public sphere outside of technical or academic treatments. Though in this sphere little attempt is made to define myth precisely, we can glean something of the notions underlying the use of the term. We hear and read of myth in casual conversations, newscasts, movie and book reviews, histories of cooking, newspaper editorials, and so on.<sup>30</sup> 'Myth' is often used as a synonym for mistaken beliefs: "Contrary to childhood myth, nails do not grow after death"; "the image of the scientist as an antisocial loner is a myth [as] the better scientists tend to be quite social." 'Myth' is

used as a term of derision, as a curt dismissal of something as worthless: "new myths about cholesterol"; "the 'student-athlete' myth." 'Myth' may connote a larger-than-life status: "It's a mini-movie in the company of a mythic figure"; "it's really a mythical place, a supercharged symbol of all-American dreams"; "he takes on hugely popular subjects, busily pumps up their mythic status, then sets about deflating the legends." There is also a contemporary version of the euhemeristic notion of myth: "the difficulty of grasping the 'real' Katherine Mansfield was compounded after her death . . . by the mythmaking of her husband, who wanted her image everlastingly to be that of . . . a mystic in search of Truth and Love"; "The Museum of Modern Mythology [in San Francisco] includes the late Clara Peller of 'Where's the beef?' fame and the character of Mrs. Olsen, the Swedish lady who constantly shows everyone how to make coffee."

The use of the term 'myth' is quite pervasive in American culture. For a society that prides itself (or at least sees itself) as being scientific, technological, efficient, fact-oriented, and reality-based, we certainly speak and write often of myth, finding it all around us. But of course, "we" are cognizant of the myths *as* myths, "we" are not taken in, though we may occasionally give a barely audible sigh of nostalgia for something irretrievably lost.

Generally speaking, we can categorize the more casual use of 'myth' into three types. A myth is a falsehood—either a deliberate attempt to sway the unwary or a mistaken belief, quite unfounded, but a belief that has become persuasive through its mere pervasiveness. Myths are the products of stripping away all particularities, a presentation of a highly abstract caricature of a person or event that evokes strong resonance in large part because of its abstractness; this is really myth as stereotype. (Larry McMurtry is said to have "de-mythologized" the cowboy myth, in *Lonesome Dove* and *Anything for Billy*, by showing life on the American frontier as dirty, dangerous, and short, and the cowboy as brutish or naive.) Lastly, a myth can be a story, or more precisely, a narrative scheme, that through constant reiteration has come to seem prototypical of our fantasies—the myths of the self-made man and the peculiar spinster aunt.

#### MYTH AS OTHER

We can gain an important insight into how 'myth' functions, in general terms, by recognizing a feature that pervades all these uses of the

term, from most to least technical, from formal to structural, to merely implicit definitions. Whether myth is valorized or dishonored, castigated or revered, or merely catalogued as interesting artifact, to call something a myth always marks it as the property of the "other." Myth belongs to some other culture, some other time, some other cosmology. Of course, the sense in which myth is other varies from theory to theory, from conception to conception. But there is always a sense in which whatever is mythical does not belong to "us," to "our" experience, to "our" ways of understanding the world, to "our" cultural accomplishments. The statement can be reversed and the sense of it remains: whatever does not belong to "our own" existential, historical, or intellectual position is mythical. It doesn't appear to matter exactly what constitutes the perspective of the analysis, what position "ours" is. In fact, even those who revere myth see it as characteristic of some culture or time other than their own.

Myth is what is other. Myth may be historically distinct or other, what belongs to another time or era—ancient Greek narratives are called myths. Myth may be what is sociologically distinct or other—aboriginal hunting rituals to ensure success at food acquisition are called mythical. Myth may be what is ontologically distinct or other—existence directed toward the sacred is called mythical to distinguish it from our own secular, historicized existence. Myth may be what is politically distinct or other—the products of ideological commitments not our own are called myths. Myth may be what is epistemologically distinct or other—to those who are rational, scientific, and logical, whatever is prerational, prescientific, or prelogical is mythical. Myth may be whatever is psychologically distinct or other—archetypal images or unconscious patterns that transcend individual existence are called myths. Myth may be whatever is developmentally distinct or other—primitives and children have myths, the more sophisticated mythologist does not.

The closest that myth comes to being intrinsically associated with our "own" sphere of accomplishment (whatever that might be) is in the conception of myth as underlying, inarticulate assumptions about the world and human existence, assumptions even "we" may have. These hidden beliefs are conceived as misapprehensions that should be rooted out, and that will be eradicated once exposed as the faulty premises they are. Even a conception of the mythical as schematic narratives that can be reproduced under fresh auspices, in new settings, in contemporary art or literature, is an instance of this feeling of the "otherness" of myth. In identifying such narrative pat-

terns, we generally deny any continuing power of the pattern to sway us. Once the patterns are identified as mythical, they seem old, dated, holding at most a kind of nostalgic interest.

#### SUMMARY

Obviously, there are many ways of answering the question: what is (a) myth? But there is a common thread we've identified that runs through the more theoretical definitions and descriptions and the more casual uses of the term. We call myth those human, cultural accomplishments that identify what is other, and obversely, what is the same. The next question is: other than what? My contention is that myths function to demarcate what belongs to the truly human sphere and what does not. (This is certainly not a complete description of myth—we'll examine other conditions in chapter 6 and in the conclusion.)

Myths are the means by which we indicate to ourselves the range and scope of human being proper. Myths are human creations that, in effect, create the boundaries of human nature. The outline of human being is not set, is not static. One group of humans may create stories and rituals and artifacts that exemplify human continuity with the timber wolf, but not with the black bear. They describe themselves, they *create* themselves, in such a way that the range of the truly human extends so far, but no farther. Another group tells the tale and performs the rites that crystalize and create the belief that being human is consciousness reflecting on its own existence, that all else lies outside, all else is other than truly human. Stories of the origin of human being construct a boundary between the non- or pre-human world and the home of human being. Extreme Unction, a ritual attending death, draws the line between the corporeal body and the immortal soul, claiming the latter only for true human existence.

It is not only that we usually identify as mythical those cultural achievements that serve to delineate human being proper, though this function of myth is certainly implied in all the theories and manners of use under consideration, including those of Cassirer, Barthes, Eliade, and Hillman. Theories of myth themselves perform the function of indicating what belongs to human being properly understood and what does not. For example, we'll see that Roland Barthes defines myth as a particular kind of speech, one that obscures the distinction between what is natural and inevitable and what is historical and contingent. And it is the latter that belongs to human being in its least alienated, most real form, in Barthes' view.



We will see that the notions of myth at work in our theoretical accounts of myth themselves give us further clues to the nature of myth and its role in human life and cultural activity. Perhaps an analogy would be helpful. The building of houses, a pictorial history of human-made habitation, and various architectural theories can be brought together to understand more fully the place and role of shelter in human existence. And this is especially the case when we consider the theories themselves as cultural artifacts with deeply embedded assumptions, quite unable to give us the unvarnished "truth" about shelter, only another version of shelter's role. For example, we read Walter Gropius' essay, "The New Architecture and the Bauhaus,"<sup>31</sup> and find its greatest interest not in what it tells us of architecture per se but in expectation that the theoretical articulation of the building practices will tell us much the same thing, though in a different way, that the buildings themselves do. So, the repetition of mythic narratives, the compilation of narratives in anthropological studies, and various theories of the role of myth in cultural life can be brought together to understand more fully the ways that myth and mythmaking, as subject of inquiry and as activity, shape our existence.

It is not only that we tell ourselves stories and perform particular rituals, and through these delineate what we come to claim as the range and scope of human being. Our explanations of the stories—our stories about our stories—perform the same creative work. In either case, myths or theories about myth, our cultural activity is directed toward discovering and creating the boundary of human being.

The next four chapters examine four theories of myth in some detail. In chapter 6, we will see precisely how each theory, according to its own description of myth, serves the same function as does myth, though without admission of the fact. Furthermore, we'll see that these four quite disparate accounts of myth tell us the same, peculiarly modern, story of what human being *really* is. Our new myth, promulgated through intellectual endeavors, is twofold. The first is of our mythless condition, that "we" do not have myths. This is so even for Mircea Eliade, who valorizes myth as the path to full freedom for human being. Second, our modern myth portrays truly human existence as the unbounded or limitless creative freedom to constitute the boundary between the human and the non-human, the sphere of the subject and the sphere of the world. I will argue that this is a myth that bankrupts itself. It is also particularly unsuited for our human future.