

ALL MYTHS ARE STORIES

ONE SUMMER DAY IN 1960, when my wife and I were living in Coventry, England, I strolled into the tiny public library next to the ruins of the old cathedral and browsed. By chance I came across Mircea Eliade's *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*. I devoured it at one reading. It was one of the most exciting books I had ever read. It roused my interest in prehistory and myth.

In Britain prehistory is very real, a living substratum of contemporary society, like the unconscious in the mind of an individual. Vestiges of the prehistoric are all around. The Rollright Stones in the Cotswold are an hour's drive from Coventry. The hills around the Severn are also near. There one can see neolithic long barrows such as Hetty Pegler's Tump. Stonehenge in Wiltshire is not far away.

In England, as in other Old World countries, prehistory lives in ancient rites and customs which are still performed at certain times during the year even though the participants are frequently unaware of the antiquity of the ceremonies. There are well-dressers in Derby and furry dancers in Cornwall; in some villages young men don antlers and chase young women through the streets. Elsewhere, in the same season, small boys roll cheeses down hills to commemorate the revival of the sun. The ancient Celtic rite of Samhain survives in Halloween which came to us from Celtic lands. All of these rituals survive from pagan Britain, as does folklore about elves, fairies, and pixies. Old stories are still recited in the countryside and there are witches. I have met a few. There is a wealth of living lore in all old world countries, a vital inheritance which still flourishes under the veneer of modern civilization.

Archaic myth lives in the Old World. It is a heritage from the

past shared by all. People of the New World are less fortunate, especially in those countries where native cultures have been displaced or destroyed.

The European conquerors were all too successful in some countries. They annihilated the native cultures. This, however, did not happen in most of Latin America, Africa, Eurasia, nor Oceania, where synthesis occurred instead. These lands are actually Old World even though some of them may be geographically located in the western hemisphere. Mexico is a prime example.

The New World is where traditional cultures have been displaced or marginalized by European colonists to the impoverishment of both conquered and conquerors. Native cultures were aborted, and the migrants lost their roots. White Canadians, Americans, Australians, New Zealanders, and other overseas people of European stock live in cut-flower civilizations.

Myth is part of the traditional heritage of the Old World. It has been aborted or lost in the new. Archaic myths are traditional stories which are usually about gods and heroes. Strictly speaking, myths are folk-tales which are part of an oral heritage. True mythic traditions now survive in only a few isolated parts of the world such as the rain forests of Brazil and the highlands of New Guinea. However, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the definition of myth has been broadened to include sacred history (*Heilgeschichte*), literary epics, and popular genre literature such as westerns, gothics, science fiction, fantasy tales, and romances. What is more, mythic implications are sometimes discerned in modern scientific theories, philosophical systems, theories of history and political ideologies.

While these modern theories and ideologies are not myths, strictly speaking, they have mythic overtones and implications. They stand where myths once stood. The chief differences between archaic myths and modern theories are linguistic, as Ernst Cassirer showed in *Language and Myth*. Traditional myths are metaphors; they are usually presented in mythopoetic language, partly because rhythm and the repetition of images like "wine dark sea" are useful mnemonic devices. At the same time, many myths, such as the creation stories in Genesis, are archaic scientific theories based on the best information available at the time. Indeed, Mircea Eliade argued that all myths are myths of origin. They tell how the cosmos began, why humanity is sexed, and how nations, classes, families, and occupations came to be. In that way they are archaic scientific theories.

According to Eliade, myth is the content of religion. He writes:

Speaking for myself, the definition that seems least inadequate because most embracing is this: Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the “beginnings.” In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a “creation”; it relates how something was produced, began to *be*. Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural Beings. They are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the “beginnings.” Hence, myths disclose their creative activity, and reveal their sacredness (or simply the “supernaturalness”) of their works; in short, myths describe the sudden and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the “supernatural”) into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the World and makes it what it is today. Furthermore, it is a result of the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man himself is what he is today, a mortal, sexed, and cultural being.¹

Eliade defines myth as *sacred history*, *hierophany*, the disclosure of the sacred. Anything can be sacred, a rock, a tree, an animal, a man, or a story. From Eliade’s point of view, myths are necessarily sacred. They are metaphorical and symbolic. What Eliade calls *hierophanies* were revealed *in illo tempore*, “in that time” or “one upon a time” but are realized in the present through ritual reenactment. In that way, for example, the death and resurrection of Christ are made real in the present through the sacrifice of the mass. It is a dramatic reenactment of the holy event which is not a historical event set in the past, from the Catholic Christian viewpoint, but a real event in any time or place.

How did myths originate? This question will be addressed in detail in the following chapter. Suffice it to say here that myths originated in what Joseph Campbell calls “mythogenetic zones” which are defined by cultural horizons. The mythogenetic zone is an area in which the people have roughly the same recurrent experiences and share the same cultural values.² Myths, according to Campbell, rise from collective experience. This idea is akin to Jung’s concept of archetypes which arise from recurrent, common experiences such as the rising and setting of the sun, the phases of the moon, man’s experience with woman,

woman's with man, birth, childhood, youth, maturity, old age, and death, the chase, food gathering, and courtship.³ Campbell held that all particular mythogenetic zones gave way to a single global mythogenetic zone beginning with the age of discovery around 1500. The modern zone is the creative imagination of the individual. I do not entirely agree but think that there are still collective mythogenetic zones today though not necessarily in the geographical sense.

There have been a series of mythic transformations throughout historical times which presumably began during the prehistoric era. By this I mean displacements from myth to other aspects of culture. Here I adapt an idea advanced by Northrop Frye, the Canadian literary critic. He suggests that all forms of Western literature are displaced from myth. Myths are stories about gods; epics are stories about heroes; and romances are about heroic figures who are somewhat larger than life; those that Frye calls high mimesis or imitation are somewhat more powerful than we are but not overwhelmingly so. In lower mimesis we encounter characters who are like ourselves, in irony, hapless victims who are beneath us.⁴ In a sense, this idea can be applied to other areas of culture with regard to myth. There are degrees of displacement from myth with modern scientific theory at the opposite extreme from myth yet bearing the mythic watermark.

Writing was first invented in Sumeria in lower Mesopotamia around 3000 B.C.E. Our earliest-known myths are therefore Sumerian. However, these are literary compositions based on myths rather than the actual myths themselves. They were written by scribes who probably modified them in the process of recording them. They are compositions. We have no original Mesopotamian myths. The same is true of Egyptian, Greek, Canaanite, and Hebrew myths. We have literary compositions which are based on myths but no archaic myths in original form.⁵

Myth-making primarily occurs in literature because all myths are stories. However, there are also mythic themes in art and music, scientific theories, and historiography. Myth also flourishes in the popular arts where it is purest. In part, myth legitimates religious and social values. According to Peter Berger in *The Sacred Canopy*:

Both religious acts and religious legitimations, ritual and mythology, *dromena* and *legoumena*, together serve to "recall traditional meanings embodied in culture" and its many institutions.⁶

In archaic or modern native cultures (what we used to call "primitive"), science and myth are inextricably related. In *The Savage Mind*, the

structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss shows that much primitive lore is made up of botanical classifications, meteorological and astronomical observations, the knowledge of animal behavior, medical knowledge and much else which we moderns classify as scientific information.⁷ In this way, myth is science in archaic or “primitive” cultures. However, the methodological techniques of data-gathering are very different. The essence of modern science is the scientific method which involves testing and other verification techniques. Primitive science is usually anecdotal, improvised, and based on tradition. For these reasons alone, folklore and scientific data are very different. This is certainly true where specialized scientific experimentation is concerned in the hard sciences such as physics.

There are many soft areas in modern science, however, and these are comparable to the way that archaic peoples gathered information and interpreted phenomena. Modern science is secular and non-metaphysical. However, certain parallels that can be made between archaic myth and modern scientific theory which show the historical continuity between them and in which the unintended mythic watermark is detectable in the scientific hypothesis.

Examples of the former include the speculations of certain nineteenth-century scientists who insisted that there was absolute scientific authority for their philosophical opinions. For instance, Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* is an exercise in speculation based on very fragile evidence. It is particularly true of nineteenth-century physicists such as Emil Heinrich DuBois-Reymond who asserted that there was scientific proof for mechanistic-materialism. Today mechanistic-materialism is regarded as a philosophical idea. It also could be called a myth. Biological evolution is not a myth. The supportive data is overwhelming. However, some of Darwin's ideas were highly speculative and gave rise to movements such as Social Darwinism which Darwin himself deplored. Social Darwinism is an ideology and, as such, a modern myth.

Today, there is much debate concerning objectivity. Is it possible? Some scholars of the deconstructionist school hold that we live in a postmodern era in which much that was held with great confidence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is highly dubious. Another way of saying this is to acknowledge that there is a great deal of myth-making among academics and scientists.

The physicist Fritjov Capra argues in *The Tao of Physics* that there are parallels between mysticism and science, both in methodology and theories. He asserts that the mystic as well as the scientist uses rational/empirical methods and that both mystical meditation and scien-

tific experimentation are highly disciplined, rigorous pursuits. He suggests that most scientific theories had their genesis in random ideas which have occurred spontaneously to the scientist and are like what artists, composers, novelists, and myth-makers do. His argument is that the contrast between science and the humanities has been exaggerated.

There are certain grey areas where mythic and scientific thinking coincide. However, mythic thinking is spontaneous, imaginative, and creative; scientific thinking is systematic, rigorous, and logical. What is variously called psychodynamic or depth psychology is a good example of a soft science which has a strong mythic component. Psychodynamic psychology is founded on the concept of the unconscious. This idea emerged from the German romantic tradition and other nineteenth-century intellectual movements. It was originally a mystical notion, the idea that God lurks in the depths of soul.

Both Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung based their respective psychological systems on biology. Freud argued that his therapeutic technique of psychoanalysis was a makeshift one which would have to do until science proved the physiological basis of all mental problems. At that time chemotherapy would replace psychotherapy. Jung did not agree. While his analytic psychology was also based on biology, he insisted that there is an irreducible psychic factor as well.

Today, Freud's prediction has been proven. Psychotherapy has given way to chemotherapy and hormone treatment. Psychoanalysis and its supporting theories now seem to be ideological, and therefore very much like myths although there is no supernatural or metaphysical component. Jung's analytic psychology is frankly mythical. Jung used myths as psychotherapeutic tools. In recent years there have been colloquiums between psychoanalysts and Buddhists such as the Zen master Daisetsu Suzuki. The latter held that psychoanalysis and Zen are very much alike. The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm agreed. Both psychoanalysis and Zen are based on the concept of the unconscious although they use very different terminologies. Both are rigorous forms of meditation.⁸

Jung found many parallels between his analytic psychology and Gnostic Christianity, Hinduism, and native religions such as that of the Elgoni in East Africa among whom he lived for several months during the 1920s. Jung and his followers have an affirmative and appreciative approach to religion and see no conflict between religion and science.

Today many scholars and scientists maintain that science and myth are akin to one another, and that both are valid. They are not mutually exclusive. Those who have this outlook are often called holis-

tic thinkers. Holists prefer synthesis to analysis. They are also generalists rather than specialists.

In recent years, holistic thinkers such as Sam Keene and José Argüelles have argued that we of the West have neglected right hemispheric, synthetic, and spontaneous thinking, that we have over-emphasized the left hemispheric, analytical approach. We need to correct the imbalance. We need to value music and the arts more highly than we do, and also acknowledge the importance of meditation and the cultivation of psychic experiences. Those who think in these terms interpret mythic thinking as psychism and hold that it is entirely consistent with modern thought.

Holistic thinkers argue that modern people are not qualitatively different from archaic people. Our thinking has not been purged of illusion and myth-making by modern science and philosophy. They deny that pure reason is either possible or desirable. They also question the idea of progress.

Whether or not there are modern myths is an open question. If we insist on precise definitions of myth as set forth in most dictionaries, myth-making ceased with the rise of modern secular culture. Modern people seldom dream of gods, demons, and other supernatural beings. When they do they are usually candidates for the mental hospital. If we do not insist on metaphysics in myth-making, however, there are many ways in which it flourishes today.

Modern people are no less prone to create myths than our archaic ancestors. Perhaps we should speak of *Homo Mythologicus* in the way that we speak of *Homo Religiosus* or *Homo Ludens* meaning "religious man" and "playful man," implying that these traits are natural to us as human beings. It is our nature to weave myths and to think in mythic terms. Mythic thinking is imaginative and also imaginal, which refers to image-making. We tell stories; we cannot avoid it. Much of our storytelling is unintentional; some of it is deliberate and contrived. It is a way of thinking which is at the opposite pole from critical thinking. The analytic thinker takes things apart to see how they are put together. The mythic thinker puts the parts together. He or she is a holistic thinker. Mythic thinking is connected, structured, and linear. Stories always have a beginning, middle, and end.

Mythic thinking narrates, integrates, and makes whole; it does not fracture experience into fragments. It is not expressionistic. In that way, mythic thinking contravenes some of the dominant modes of the late twentieth century. It is at opposite poles from rock music, special effects in films, or the "Sesame Street" effect of rapid-fire impressions,

quick takes, and momentary gestures. Instead, mythic thinking is metaphorical, sequential, and demands sustained attention span. It is by no means the approach everyone prefers. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defined *mythos* as “plot,” what the story or drama is about. Not all contemporary *New Yorker* stories, for example, have plots, but consist of quick impressions in series. Sensationalism is a characteristic of twentieth-century culture which permeates modern music and modern art, and which many people find congenial. Those people are often bored with prolonged, connected narrative, and therefore with myth.

Myth is personal and individual as well as ethnic and national. I have the diaries which I kept when I was a teenager in Hawaii. One of them records my personal experience of the Pearl Harbor raid of December 7, 1941. I was present at an historical event which was also a deeply significant event in my personal history. In retrospect, I have subtly transformed my war story into a myth which I call “Loss of Innocence” or “Expulsion from Paradise,” titles which apply to Hawaii itself. My diary entry is a chronicle without commentary. However, I have molded and remolded my version of Pearl Harbor in the course of retelling the story. Jung stressed the importance of the personal myth in the prologue to his *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. He writes:

My life is a story of the self-realization of the unconscious. Everything in the unconscious seeks outward manifestation, and the personality too desires to evolve out of its unconscious conditions and to experience itself as a whole. I cannot employ the language of science to trace this process of growth in myself, for I cannot experience myself as a scientific problem.

What we are to our inward vision, and what man appears to be *sub specie aeternitatis*, can only be expressed by way of myth. Myth is more individual and expresses life more precisely than does science. Science works with concepts of averages which are far too general to do justice to the subjective variety of an individual life.

Thus it is that I have now undertaken, in my eighty-third year, to tell my personal myth. I can only make direct statements, only “tell stories.” Whether or not the stories are “true” is not the problem. The only question is whether what I tell is *my* fable, *my* truth.⁹

An entire book could be written on the definition of myth—should be written in fact. It is a vast topic, and a thorny one. The basic problem

is that there are so many definitions of myth, a problem with all abstract terms, “religion,” for example, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith shows in *The Meaning and End of Religion*.¹⁰

As with “religion,” the problem is the proliferation of meanings. Every theorist has a private definition of myth, and most theorists work at cross-purposes with one another. There is little consensus. The field is a chaos. Consequently, dictionary definitions and encyclopedia articles express particular interpretations rather than ones generally held. The religion professor Ivan Strenski stresses this point in *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century History*. According to Strenski:

Myth is everything and nothing at the same time. It is *the* true story or a false one, revelation or deception, sacred or vulgar, real or fictional, symbol or tool, archetype or stereotype. It is either strongly structured and logical or emotional and pre-logical, traditional or primitive or part of contemporary ideology. Myth is about the gods, but often also the ancestors and sometimes certain men. . . . It is charter, recurring theme, character type, received idea, half-truth, tale or just plain lie.¹¹

To illustrate, Strenski cites the definition of “Myth” in the *American Heritage Dictionary*:

MYTH is a traditional story originating in a preliterate society, dealing with supernatural beings. . . . Any real or fictional story, recurring theme, or character type that appeals to the consciousness of a people by embodying its cultural ideals or by giving expression to deep, commonly felt emotions . . . one of the fictions or half-truths forming part of the ideology: *the myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority*,” or “any fictitious or imaginary story, explanation, person, or thing: *German artillery superiority on the Western Front was a myth* (Leon Wolff). It is also a “notion based more on tradition or convenience than of fact: a received idea: *Without such uncertainty we are left with a set of dogmas and myths*. (I. L. Horowitz)¹²

According to the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, most of the confusion concerning myth is caused by philosophers and can be traced to the pre-Socratics. As Cassirer says, the sophists regarded myths as scientific and ethical truths expressed in metaphorical language. Plato defined myth as “conceptual language in which alone the world of

becoming can be expressed." It is a way of knowing the world just as mathematics and logic are ways of interpreting reality.¹³ Plato contrasted *múthos* with *lóros*. Both mean "word," he said, but *múthos* is presented with authority whereas *lóros* is open to dialogue.

The New Latin spelling *mythus* is the immediate source of the term "myth" in all modern languages including English. The French adapted their word *mythe* from it and some English-speaking writers appear to have used that spelling as well. For instance, in the *English Oxford Dictionary*, the classics writer T. Keightley wrote in 1846: "From the Greek *múthos* I have made *mythe* in which no one has followed, the form adopted generally being *myth*."

To me the common denominator in all definitions of myth, ancient and modern, is the word "story." A myth is not necessarily a story about gods and supernatural beings, nor necessarily a traditional tale. It is, however, a story. The narrative might be fictional, historical, or cosmological in form. It might be either prose or poetry. Yet not all stories are myths, and this is the chief problem in the definition. Essentially, a myth is an important story which interprets reality. It is also something presented and not a topic for rational analysis and discussion unlike (*logos*).

One feels that a myth should deal with vast events such as the creation of the cosmos or its destruction by flood and fire, or the Russian Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union seventy years later. Family and personal histories are grey areas unless they concern heroes, kings, and royal households. Myths are usually interpretative on a grand scale.

The confusions with the word myth rest, in part, with its modern usages, as in "the American dream," and, with philosophers, as Cassirer says. Twentieth century theorists in various relevant disciplines such as the history of religions, literature, anthropology, archeology, and popular culture have coined private definitions so that definitions have proliferated to the point of chaos. Their problem and ours is the isolation of the disciplines from one another where mythic studies are concerned. There is very little dialogue between workers in these various fields. As a result, we are bedeviled by problems in definition and meaning, some of which are contradictory.

Since archaic myths are only known to us in literary form, literary critics are best equipped to deal with them in my view. Classical scholars such as Robert Graves and G. S. Kirk tell us that we do not have a single Greek myth, by which they mean that all so-called Greek myths are authored works of literature. The same is true of other archaic cul-

tures as well, such as Egypt and Mesopotamia. What we call "myth" is literature unless we refer to the traditional stories of native peoples. Even here, most are known because they have been written and, when written, they have been altered.

All myths are stories. The word "story" is derived from the Latin *historia* which is the root of both "narrative" and our word "history." The Latin lumping of fictional and non-fictional narrative is common to all or most languages. In all languages, the same root words originally meant both "story" in the fictional sense and "history," the narrative of events which actually happened. Distinctions between fiction and non-fiction were made later. The Greeks were the first to make them. Their word *múthos* (*múthos*) originally meant "utterance," something said. Later it was defined as "folk-tale" or "traditional story." In usage, the Greeks also distinguished between divine myths, stories about supernatural beings, and stories about heroes. By definition, a hero was the child of a god, usually the father, and a mortal, usually the mother. This meant that heroes had some supernatural powers but were mortal.

In practice, the Greeks also tended to use myths for stories which dealt with grand subjects such as gods and heroes who act in magic landscapes in which natural laws are suspended. Folk-tales were homely stories about ordinary people such as goose girls and shepherds. There was sometimes a supernatural or magical component, encounters with elemental spirits and spirits of the dead, for instance, but the scope of the stories was limited. Myths often deal with tragic themes such as the fall of kings like Oedipus Rex or heroic descents into the infernal regions, as in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. These stories were symbolic and were meant to convey more than they said explicitly and on the surface.

By medieval times, the distinctions among sacred history, secular history, hero tale, and folk story had become quite sharp and clear. Our familiar fairy tales such as *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Hansel and Gretel* are mainly of medieval origin. They were not originally children's stories, but folk-tales told for the entertainment of adults. They are related to myths, however, in that they often have hidden meanings. Anna-Marie Von Franz and other Jungian psychologists hold that both myths and fairy tales disclose archetypes of the collective unconscious. The psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, of the Freudian school, holds that fairy tales have hidden erotic components. The idea that the folk-tale has hidden meaning occurs among native peoples throughout the world. The Hawaiian word *kaona*, for example, refers to the hidden meaning in stories. We have little difficulty identifying an archaic myth as a story

about gods, heroes, and other supernatural beings. Our problems are chiefly with modern myths. As Strenski complains, the meaning of myth has been so broadened during the twentieth century that it means everything and therefore nothing at all. Dictionary definitions usually refer first to archaic myths or traditional stories with a supernatural component. The third or fourth definition listed is broader. Possibly such inclusive definitions should not have been made. In language, however, usage dictates meaning rather than purity of definition.

Strenski's objections are not altogether valid. Even though we cannot be precise in our definitions, most of us sense that a myth is a "big story" just as the Elgoni of East Africa, whom Jung lived among, distinguished between "big" and "little" dreams. By the former they meant dreams in which the dreamer encounters ancestors or gods, or else finds himself or herself in a labyrinth, the heavens, or the depths of the sea, and encounters beings of extraordinary power or awesome mystery. These dreams are very different from the usual day residue dreams about ordinary, everyday events.

The problem with myth in twentieth-century contexts is the usual absence of the supernatural component. Modern people seldom dream of gods, demons, and other metaphysical beings. When they do, the dreamer is usually a person with a medieval or seventeenth-century mind even though he or she lives in a modern metropolis. Such dreams usually have a traditional religious context.

Some dreams and stories are easy to identify as mythic motifs. These are the stories which are directly based on traditional religious beliefs. Religious myths are archaic stories which persist in the modern day in the context of traditional religions. In the West, such stories usually derive from the Bible and, to a lesser extent, Greek, Celtic, and Germanic mythology. They were dominant in our literary and aesthetic traditions until the late seventeenth century, the beginning of the Enlightenment. They are much less so today and are chiefly encountered where modern ideas have not intruded, as in traditional Jewish ghettos, or where they have been rejected, as among the Christian and Moslem fundamentalists.

Non-religious myths are much more difficult to classify and, indeed, whether or not they should be classed as myths at all is an open question. Even so, scholars who have studied the persistence of myth in the modern world usually insist that they are ultimately derived from traditional religious roots. These roots are very apparent in the Far East, India, and the Islamic world. Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism are very apparent in village life which is predominantly tra-

ditional, especially in India. Educated urban minorities, on the other hand, are usually Westernized, and Westernization and modernism are equivocated. In countries, such as Iran, where Westernization has been violently rejected, there has been a return to traditional values and ideas which, to us, at least, seem medieval.

Eliade, Reinhold Niebuhr, and other scholars in the field of religion identified Marxism, for example, as a secular version of the Judeo-Christian Messianic myth. This does not mean that Marx consciously derived his economic, political, and social theories from Christianity. We know that he was an atheist and that dialectical materialism was adapted from Hegel. However, it is argued that certain Biblical ideas such as the messianic hope, the chosen people, and the coming day of judgment are so deeply ingrained in the culture that they permeate all aspects of it. They have a way of surfacing in disguise but do so unconsciously. Marxists certainly do not consciously derive their ideas from the Bible. It is rather that the Bible has had such impact on Western thought that *all* philosophical, political, social, literary, and social ideas are affected even when the supernatural element is vigorously rejected. The Marxists have adapted and transformed Biblical ideas unwittingly.

Exactly the same arguments apply to other political and economic theories. Many American intellectual historians, such as Vernon Parrington, derive American democracy from the Puritan wilderness Zion. Scratch the surface of the American dream and you find the Biblical Messianic ideal once more. The same is true of National Socialism, which scholars such as Georg Mosse derive from the Volkishness of German romanticism with its roots in Teutonic paganism.

The argument is that myths are masks of God, to use the title of Campbell's multi-volume master work. Certain mythic themes which occur in the Bible, the Greek classics, and, to a lesser degree, Celtic and Germanic lore, recur as themes into the present. They are usually undercurrents, however, and are only detected by critics. They include motifs such as creation, the heroic quest, the earth mother, death and rebirth, *descensus ad inferos*, *ascensus ad paradiso*, the sacred marriage, and others. They constantly recur in our literature and art, where we might expect them to. However, they also crop up in unexpected places such as in our political theories, in interpretations of history, and even in some of our scientific theories. We see them in the movies, read them in the funny papers, and encounter them when we go to Disneyland. They are particularly apparent in the popular culture, more so than in the so-called high culture in which one chiefly encounters the mind of the artist, composer, or author.

Thus, even today, we continue to be myth-making animals even though most of our myths do not have an explicit supernatural dimension. This is because of the skepticism which has prevailed among the educated classes since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

There are other forms of myth-making as well, perennial forms which fit neither the idea of the traditional tale nor the modern story based on the traditional tale. These are the theories that we compose partly out of empirical evidence and partly out of our imaginations. Many archeological theories, for example, are the subjective interpretations of highly prestigious scholars such as Marcus Childe or Abbé Breuil; the theories persist long after anomalies occur in them which finally result in their disintegration. The megalithic religion theory of Childe became an academic myth. It did not originate in the Bible or any other archaic work but in Childe's mind, and it was perpetuated until the mid-1960s because of his great prestige. The same is true of Breuil's theory of hunting magic where palaeolithic cave art is concerned, and, today, with Marija Gimbutas' theories of goddesses in Old Europe or James Mellaart's of neolithic Anatolian goddess cults. Today such theories are under attack and will probably collapse, but they were accepted as received standard opinion for a number of years. Theories such as these are very similar to the myths of archaic peoples and play very similar roles. The Ptolemaic model of the cosmos is an example. It persisted into the seventeenth century even though many anomalies had occurred long before. However, the theory had such prestige and authority that challengers were threatened with torture and death if they did not adhere to it.

There are two kinds of myth in antiquity and today's world. One is the traditional religious myth which flourishes in the context of the traditional religions. This is myth as we always have understood it. It is *hierophany* or the "sacred history." As such it is the content of all religion. To the unbeliever myths are fictions, illusions, or lies. To the believer myths are true. The religious myth may be either a divine myth about gods or a saga about heroes.

The other kind of myth could be called *the secular myth*. It is derived from religious myth, but the supernatural aspect is either missing altogether or has none of the qualities Rudolf Otto identifies as the numinous, or *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Most literary myths fall into this category from Sumerian tales of the third millennium B.C.E. to modern novels such as Melville's *Moby Dick* or Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Mythic themes are also detectable in theories of history

such as the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner. Most nations have national myths: the Portuguese as expressed in Camoens' *Os Lusíadas*; for instance, the American as revealed in Jefferson's preamble to the American Declaration of Independence or Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Such myths express the teleological aspirations of whole peoples and are based on archaic religious traditions. Those of the West emerge from the Bible and classics.

Finally, myth manifests itself in its purest forms in modern popular culture, no matter how bowdlerized, commercial, or tasteless. Indeed, as Jung insisted, it is much more apt to be found here than elsewhere. In the high culture one encounters the soul of the artist, writer, or composer, as mentioned, but in the popular culture, one encounters the anonymous and collective dreams of whole peoples. Children's literature, as a species of popular culture, is a particularly interesting source of continuing myth in the modern age. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, the Dr. Seuss books, the Ninja Turtles, and, of course, Lewis Carroll's Alice stories are obvious examples.

A collective definition of myth composed of many theories might be framed by the following paraphrases:

Myths are stories, usually, about gods and other supernatural beings (Frye). They are often stories of origins, how the world and everything in it came to be *in illo tempore* (Eliade). They are usually strongly structured and their meaning is only discerned by linguistic analysis (Lévi-Strauss). Sometimes they are public dreams which, like private dreams, emerge from the unconscious mind (Freud). Indeed, they often reveal the archetypes of the collective unconscious (Jung). They are symbolic and metaphorical (Cassirer). They orient people to the metaphysical dimension, explain the origins and nature of the cosmos, validate social values, and, on the psychological plane, address themselves to the innermost depths of the psyche (Campbell). Some of them are explanatory, being prescientific attempts to interpret the natural world (Frazer). As such, they are usually functional and are the science of primitive peoples (Malinowski). Often, they are enacted in rituals (Hooke). Religious myths are sacred histories (Eliade), and distinguished from the profane (Durkheim). But, being semiotic expressions (Saussure), they are a "disease of language" (Müller). They are both individual and social in scope, but they are first and foremost stories (Kirk).

As C. G. Jung showed in his *Memories Dreams Reflections*, each of us has a personal myth, our story about ourselves, that which we tell ourselves about our life history and our place in time and space. This story is subjective and, in part, stems from subconscious and unconscious depths of psyche. It is not necessarily accurate. It is not at all objective. Instead, it is as we perceive and interpret it.

By definition then, a myth is a story, a narration. But what is a story? According to E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*:

Daily life is . . . full of time sense. We think one event occurs after another, the thought is often in our minds, and much of our talk and action proceeds on the assumption. Much of our talk and action, but not all; there seems to be something else in life besides time, something which may conveniently be called "value," something which is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles, and when we look at the future it seems, sometimes a wall, sometimes a cloud, sometimes a sun but never a chronological chart.¹⁴

Story mirrors life and interprets it, but the mirror-image being is distorted, as in a fun house, and the interpretations are always subject to error and misunderstanding. We are like baby chimpanzees before a looking glass, seeing another chimpanzee before us but bewildered when we see only the image and find nothing behind the glass. Neither science nor philosophy are able to solve our perennial epistemological problems and give us the certainty that we seek, and so we tell stories. Each is an attempt to perceive and interpret objective reality.

Forster illustrates the concept of story as follows:

"The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again, "The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king." This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow.¹⁵

However, not every kind of story is a traditional myth, but only those which deal with significant themes, and especially those which

are about gods, demons, and other supernatural beings. These are sacred histories. Consequently, traditional myths are comparatively easy to identify and define. Although the etymology of the Greek word *mythos* is simply “utterance” or “story,” we have used the term in a special sense since the Greek Enlightenment of the sixth century B.C.E. and after. Until the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, myth necessarily had a metaphysical component.

The rise of skepticism concerning the deity and revelation during the Age of Reason led to a new definition of myth. Now it meant a fiction or deception. That was not an altogether new definition because Plato had used it in that sense and so had the early Christians. However, this definition became deeply ingrained during the eighteenth century and after, and, to most of us, “myth” is still a synonym for a fantasy or fiction.