Myths and Mythical Thought

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For the soul is the beginning of all things; it is the soul that lends all things movement.

—PLOTINUS

Interpretations of Myth: from the Greeks to Astral Mythology

For nineteenth-century men, "myth" was anything that was opposed to "reality." Thus, the creation of Adam and the notion of the invisible man were "myths" no less than Polynesian legends or the *Theogony* of Hesiod. Like so many other positivist clichés, this view was of Christian, and ultimately of Greek, origin. The word *mythos* in Greek meant "fable," "tale," "talk," or simply "speech," but it came to be used in contrast with *logos* and *historia*, thus coming to denote "that which cannot really exist." Even the earliest Greek philosophers criticized and rejected the Homeric myths as fictions. Xenophanes (sixth-fifth century B.C.) re-

fused to accept that God moves about from place to place as Homer told. He rejected the immorality of the gods described by Homer and Hesiod, and especially criticized their anthropomorphism: "But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that man can do, horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves." Criticism of mythic traditions took on a special character among the scholars of Alexandria in the Hellenistic age, but the myths of Homer and Hesiod continued to interest the elite throughout their world.

The myths were no longer taken literally, however, and men now sought their "hidden meanings." Theagenes of Rhegium (flourished ca. 525 B.C.) had already suggested that the names of the gods in Homer represented either the human faculties or the natural elements. But the Stoics more than any other group developed the allegorical interpretation of Homer and of all religious traditions. For example, the myth in which Zeus binds Hera was taken to mean that the ether is the limit of the air, and so on.

About the beginning of the third century B.C., Euhemerus published a romance in the form of a philosophical voyage, entitled *Sacred Writings*, which enjoyed an enormous and immediate success. Euhemerus felt that he had discovered the origin of all the gods: they were ancient kings who had been deified. This, of course, was another "rational" way to preserve Homer's gods, who now took on a historical (or, more precisely, prehistorical) brand of "reality." The myths merely represented the confused memory or imaginative transfiguration of the exploits of the great primitive kings. These two forms of interpretation, allegorical and euhemerist, had wide repercussions. Thanks to these methods, the Greek gods and heroes did not sink into oblivion after the long process of "demythicization," or even after the triumph of Christianity.

The scientific study of myth, however, did not begin until Karl Ottfried Müller's *Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaft-*

lichen Mythologie (*Introduction to a Scientific Mythology*) was published in 1825. Later, through the numerous and frequently brilliant works of Friedrich Max Müller in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the study of myth took on a more general popularity. According to Max Müller, myth is the result of what he called "disease of language." The fact that one object can have many names (polyonymy) and conversely that one name can be applied to several objects (homonymy) gave rise to a confusion of names whereby several gods might be combined into one figure, and one might be broken up into many. What was at first merely a name, *nomen*, became a deity, *numen*; thus Max Müller's famous formula, *nomina = numina*. Moreover, in his view, the use of endings denoting grammatical gender led to the personification of abstract ideas as gods and goddesses, with the pantheon being constructed around the sun, the dawn, and the sky. Thus, the myth of Cronus swallowing and later disgorging his children was only the "mythopoeic" expression of a meteorological phenomenon, namely, the sky devouring and later releasing the clouds. So too, the tales of a golden boat sinking in the sea and of an apple falling from a tree tell of the setting sun. In his old age, Max Müller witnessed the collapse of his theory of solar mythology. His main critic was Andrew Lang, who utilized the data collected by the new science of anthropology, especially drawing from E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871). Tylor observed that primitive tribes of his day were still living in the mythmaking stage of the mind. Mythical thought, for him, was specific "to the human intellect in its *early childlike* state," and the study of myth must then begin "at the beginning," among the less civilized peoples who are the nearest representatives of primeval culture. (This, of course, was an attack on Müller's exaggerated emphasis on the archaism of Indian culture.) Tylor argued that the chief cause of the transfiguration of daily experience into myth was the general belief of primitives that nature is *animated* and thus is susceptible to *personification*. Tylor thus held that *animism*, the belief in spiritual beings (but not yet gods), was

the first stage of religion, followed by polytheism and finally by monotheism.

For more than twenty years, Andrew Lang attacked Max Müller's doctrine, mainly inspired by Tylor's anthropological interpretation of mythology and religion. He pointed out that myths reflect actions, ideas, and institutions which actually existed at some time in the past. For instance, in his opinion the myth of Cronus dated from an epoch in which cannibalism was practiced, and in the mythology of Zeus we can decipher a primitive medicine man. But after reading some reports on the High Beings of the Australians and other archaic peoples, Lang rejected Tylor's theory of animism as the first stage of religion. For, according to Tylor, the idea of God emerged from belief in nature spirits and the cult of ancestors, but among the Australians and the Andaman Islanders, Lang found neither ancestor worship nor nature cults, but rather the belief in an exalted and remote deity.

The discovery of the priority of such High Beings marks the beginning of a long controversy over the origins of religion and of "primeval monotheism," in which Lang's evaluation of myth plays an important role. Here, the later Lang saw mythical creativity as a sign of degeneration, for he felt myth to be irrational, and thus associated it to animistic beliefs. In contrast to this, the belief in High Beings, which is the real substance of religion and chronologically prior to animism, is rational. Thus, Lang saw a radical difference between myth and religion, and his theories were largely taken over, corrected, and systematized by Wilhelm Schmidt in his massive twelve-volume work, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (*The Origin of the Idea of God*, 1912–1955).

At the beginning of this century, the so-called Astral Mythological or Pan-Babylonian school became popular in Germany. According to the founder and leader of this new school of thought, E. Siecke, myths must be understood literally because their contents always refer to some specific celestial phenomena, namely, the forms and movements of the planets, stars, and moon. Siecke and his collaborators

emphasized the role of the moon so strongly that their doctrines could be called "pan-lunarism." E. Stucken, one of the most prolific of the group, tried to prove the direct or indirect Mesopotamian origin of all the mythologies of the world. Despite their learning and productivity, though, very little of these scholars' work has retained any lasting significance.

Myths and Rituals

W. Robertson Smith, the great Orientalist and theologian, already at the end of the nineteenth century, took myth to be the explanation of ritual, and as such altogether secondary. In his most important work, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1888), Smith elaborated the theory that, since myth is the interpretation of a specific ritual, in many cases it would not have arisen until the original meaning of that rite had been forgotten. Over the course of the next half century, similar ideas were expressed by specialists in a great many fields. One may distinguish three important groups, however: classicists, anthropologists, and Old Testament specialists. The most articulate of the classicists was Jane Ellen Harrison, who argued that *mythos* was, for the ancient Greeks, primarily "just a thing spoken, uttered by the *mouth*." Its corollary is "the thing done, enacted, the *ergon* or work" (*Themis*, 1912, p. 328). A number of outstanding classicists from Cambridge applied her "ritualist" model to other Greek creations. F. M. Cornford traced the ritual origins of Attic comedy and of some philosophical ideas, and Gilbert Murray reconstructed the ritual pattern of Greek tragedy.

The British anthropologists A. M. Hocart and Lord Raglan generalized the ritualist approach and proclaimed the priority of ritual as the most important element in understanding human culture. Hocart claimed that myth is only the verbal explanation and justification of ritual: the actors impersonate the supposed inventors of the rite, and this impersonation must be expressed verbally; it is their speech in this impersonation which we come to know as myth. Thus, for Hocart, *all* myths *must* have a ritual origin. To prove this principle, he derived the myths of flying through the air from some climbing rituals, neglecting the fact that myths of flying are archaic and universally distributed, whereas climbing rites are rare and limited to certain very specific areas.

Many famous Old Testament scholars—H. Gunkel, H. Gressmann, S. Mowinckel, and others—explicated the cultic background of the Psalms, and insisted on the religious role of the king. Following their lead, a group of English Orientalists and Biblical experts launched a movement known as the Myth and Ritual school, or Patternism, in the thirties. A few years later, the Swedish scholars Ivan Engnell and Geo Widengren developed their ideas in greater detail, though at times overstating the main thesis of the British school. The Myth and Ritual position has been strongly criticized by Henri Frankfort in his Frazer Lecture of 1951, *The Problem of Similarity in Ancient Near Eastern Religions*, and the impassioned debate still goes on.

There is something in common for all those authors who take myth to be nothing more than a verbalization or interpretation of ritual. All of them take for granted that the fundamental element of religion and of human culture is the act *done by man*, not the *story of divine activity*. Freud accepted this presupposition and tended to push it even further, identifying the one primordial *act* which established the human condition and opened the way to mythic and religious creation. This act was the primordial parricide, in which he supposed that a band of brothers killed their father, ate him, and appropriated his women for themselves. By devouring him, the sons accomplished their identification with the father, and each of them acquired a portion of his strength. "The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things—of social organization, of

moral restrictions, and of religion'' (Freud, *Totem and Taboo,* 1946, pp. 141f.).

We shall not discuss this interpretation of the origins of religion, culture, and society, since it has been rejected by most anthropologists. Suffice it to add that Freud interpreted myths as substantive gratifications via fantasy, and as such comparable to dreams and other means of wish-fulfillment fantasy. For him, myths were the reveries of the race, the imaginary realization of repressed desire, that is, of the Oedipal impulse. In sum, myth was for Freud a *fantasy repetition* of a *real act,* the original parricide.

Another attempt at a psychological understanding of myth is that of C. G. Jung, whose theory of myth is interdependent on his theory of the collective unconscious. Indeed, it was mainly the striking similarities between myths, dreams, and symbols of widely separated peoples and civilizations which led Jung to postulate the existence of a collective unconscious. He noticed that the images and structures of this collective unconscious manifest themselves in regularly repeating forms, which he called ''archetypes.'' Like Freud, Jung considered myth, dream, and fantasy to be the indifferent products of the unconscious. But in marked contrast to Freud, he did not consider the unconscious mind to be a reservoir of repressed personal libido. Consequently, fantasy images and mythical forms are not for him a sort of ''wish fulfillment'' of the repressed libido, as they never were conscious and thus could never have been repressed. These mythical images are structures of the collective unconscious and are an impersonal possession. They are present in all peoples, though resting in a state of potentiality, and may become activated in myth or dream at any given moment.

''The primitive mentality,'' writes Jung, ''does not *invent* myths, it *experiences* them'' (Jung and Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology,* 1949, p. 101). In other words, myths precede any type of culture, even the most primitive, though, of course, their verbal expressions are molded according to different cultural styles. In contrast to Freud's

insistence on the primary position of the *deed* (the first parricide), myths are for Jung the expressions of *a primordial psychic process that may even precede the advent of the human race*. Together with symbols, myths are the most archaic structures of the psychic life. They did not need rituals, ''things done,'' to emerge from the deep layers of the collective unconscious.

The Structural Interpretation of Myth

In the last thirty years, the investigation of mythical thought has attracted a number of philosophers. We may cite E. Cassirer, Suzanne Langer, G. Gusdorf, G. Bachelard, Paul Ricoeur, Gilbert Durand, and others. The majority of these authors approached the problem of myth in a larger perspective: that of the study of language or of symbol, or that of the analysis of imagination. On the other hand, a number of anthropologists and folklorists have considered myths as a special form of the folktale, that is, as a traditional dramatic oral narrative. The investigations have followed two main orientations: *historical* (e.g., Franz Boas, W. E. Peuckert, C. W. von Sydow), and *morphological* (Vladimir Propp) or *structural* (Claude Lévi-Strauss).

By far the most important contribution to the structuralist interpretation of myth is that of Lévi-Strauss. In linguistics and ethnology, a structure is taken to be a combinatory game independent of consciousness. Consequently, Lévi-Strauss does not look for the ''meaning'' of myth on the level of consciousness. Myth, being an expression *par excellence* of primitive thought, has as its purpose ''to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction.'' For Lévi-Strauss, ''the kind of logic which is used in mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science, and the difference lies not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied.'' Indeed, ''man has always been thinking equally well'' *(Structural Anthropology,* 1963, p. 179).

In his book *The Savage Mind* (Engl. trans., 1966), Lévi-Strauss asserts that mythical thought and modern scientific thought simply represent "two strategic levels at which nature is accessible to scientific enquiries" (p. 15). The basic characteristic of mythical thought consists in its concreteness: it works with *signs* which have the peculiar character of lying *between* images and concepts. That is, signs resemble images in that they are concrete, as concepts are not; however, their power of reference also likens them to concepts. Mythical thought is a kind of intellectual *bricolage* ("tinkering") in the sense that it works with all sorts of heterogeneous material which happens to be available.

Lévi-Strauss returns to this problem in his four-volume series on South and North American Indian myths, *Mythologiques* (1964–1971). This considerable work is difficult reading owing to the technicalities and intricate analysis of a great number of myths, but at the same time it represents a new and more personal evaluation of mythical thought. Here, Lévi-Strauss goes beyond the linguistic model and recognizes that the structure of myths is closer to music than to language. Lévi-Strauss's method and interpretation have made a notable impact on the cultivated public in Europe and America. Nevertheless, the majority of anthropologists, in spite of their admiration for his brilliance, maintain a more or less polite reserve with regard to his theories.

The Meaning of Myth in the History of Religions

For the historian of religions, the understanding of myth is of considerable importance, and the best opportunity for grasping the structure of mythical thought is the study of cultures where myth is still a "living thing," where it constitutes the very ground of social, religious, and cultural life. My own interpretation of myth is based primarily on the study of such cultures. Briefly stated, it is my opinion

that for members of archaic and traditional societies, myth narrates a sacred history, telling of events that took place in primordial time, the fabulous time of the "beginnings." Myth is thus always an account of a "creation" of one sort or another, as it tells of how something came into being. The actors are supernatural beings, and myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness (or simply the "supernaturalness") of their work. Thus, the history of this activity is considered to be absolutely *true* (because it is concerned with realities) and *sacred* (because it is the work of supernatural beings). The cosmogonic myth is "true" because the existence of the world is there to prove it; the myth of the origin of death is equally true because man's mortality proves it, and so on.

Since myth is always related to a "creation" (the world, man, a specific institution, etc.), it constitutes the paradigm for all significant human acts. By knowing it, one knows the "origin" of things, and hence can control and manipulate them at will. This is a knowledge that one "experiences" ritually, either by ceremonially recounting the myth or by performing the ritual for which it serves as both a model and a justification. In traditional societies, one "lives" the myth in the sense that one is seized by the sacred, exalting power of the events recollected or reenacted.

To cite one well-known example, Australian totemic myths usually consist of a rather monotonous story of the wanderings of mythic ancestors or totem animals. They tell how in the ancient "dreamtime" *(alcheringa)*—that is, in mythical time—these supernatural beings made their appearance on earth, and how they set out on long journeys, stopping now and again to change the landscape or to produce certain animals and plants, and finally vanishing underground when their work was done. Knowledge of these tedious myths in all their details is essential for the life of the Australians, for the myths teach them how to repeat the creative acts of the supernatural beings and thus how to

ensure the continued existence of the various species of animals and plants.

These myths are told to young men during their initiation; or rather, they are performed or reenacted. The "story" told in the myth is thus a sort of "knowledge," an esoteric knowledge that is secret, handed down during initiatory rites, and is accompanied by magico-religious power.

According to the Cuna Indians of Panama, the lucky hunter is he who knows the origin of the game. Further, certain animals can be tamed, but only because the magicians know the secret of their creation. Similarly, one can hold red-hot iron or grasp a poisonous snake if only one knows their origin. This is an extremely widespread belief, unconnected with any particular type of culture. In Timor, for example, when a rice field sprouts, someone who knows the mythical traditions concerning rice goes to the spot. He spends the night there in the plantation hut, reciting the legends that explain how man came to possess rice. The recitation of this origin myth compels the rice to come up as fine and thick and vigorous as it was when it first appeared at the beginning of time. He who recites or performs the origin myth is thereby steeped in the sacred, creative atmosphere in which these miraculous events took place. The mythical time of origins is a "strong" time because it was transfigured by the active, creative presence of the supernatural beings. By reciting the myths, one recreates that fabulous time and becomes contemporary with the events described, coming into the presence of the gods or heroes. By "living" the myths, one emerges from profane, chronologically ordered time and enters a time that is of a different quality—a "sacred" time, at once primordial and infinitely recoverable.

Myths and Folktales

In societies where myth is still alive, the people carefully distinguish myths, that is, "true stories," from fables or tales, which they call "false stories." Many North American Indians differentiate between sacred myths such as the cosmogony, creation of the stars, origin of death, exploits of a culture hero, etc., and profane stories, which tell the adventures of the trickster (Coyote) or explain certain anatomical peculiarities of animals. This same distinction is found in Africa and Oceania. Myths cannot be related without regard to circumstances. Among many tribes they are not recited before women and children, both of whom are uninitiated. Usually the old teachers communicate the myths to the neophytes during their isolation in the bush, and this forms a crucial part of their initiation. Whereas "false stories" can be told anywhere or at any time, myths may not be recited except during a sacred period.

Myths narrate not only the origin of the world and all the things in it, but also the primordial events which shaped man into what he is today—mortal, differentiated by sex, organized into a society, forced to work in order to live, and obliged to work in accordance with certain rules. All these are the consequence of events in the primordial times. Man is mortal because something happened in the mythic era, and if that thing had not happened, he would not be mortal but might have gone on existing indefinitely, like rocks, or changing his skin every so often, like snakes, and continuing to live thus renewed. But the myth of the origin of death tells what happened at the beginning of time, and in relating that incident, it establishes why man is mortal.

Similarly, certain tribes live by fishing, because in the mythic times a supernatural being taught their ancestors to catch and cook fish. The myth tells of the first fishery, and in so doing it simultaneously reveals a superhuman act, teaches men how to perform it, and explains why they procure their food in this way. Thus, for archaic man, myth is a matter of primary importance, while tales and fables, however amusing they may be, are not. Myth teaches him the primordial events which have made him what he is; everything thus connected with his existence and his legitimate mode of existence in the cosmos concerns him directly.

What is more, everything that happened *ab origine* can be repeated by the power of rites.

Myths of Creation: Cosmogony As an Exemplary Model

There is a great variety of cosmogonic myths. They can be generally classified as follows: (1) Creation *ex nihilo*, whereby a High Being creates the world by thought, by word, by heating himself in a steam hut, and so forth. Among the most famous examples are the Egyptian god Ptah, the Polynesian Io, Yahweh, and the Earthmaker of the Winnebago Indians. (2) The Earth Diver motif, in which a god sends aquatic birds or amphibious animals, or himself dives to the bottom of the primordial ocean and brings up a particle of earth, from which the whole world grows. This myth is particularly popular in central and northern Asia, North America, pre-Aryan India, and also in the folklore of eastern Europe and Russia. (3) Creation by the division of a primordial unity. Here, one can distinguish three variants: the separation of heaven and earth (often seen as world parents), an archaic and widely diffused myth—from Old Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Greek mythologies to East Asia and Polynesia; separation of an original amorphous mass, chaos, as seen in the Japanese and Orphic cosmogonies; cutting in two of a cosmogonic egg, a motif encountered in Polynesia, Indonesia, India, Iran, Greece, Phoenicia, Finland, Central America, and the west coast of South America. (4) Creation by dismemberment of a primordial being, either a voluntary anthropomorphic victim (Ymir of Norse mythology, the Vedic Indian Purusha, the Chinese Pan-Ku) or an aquatic monster conquered after a terrific battle (the Mesopotamian Tiamat).

Every mythic account of the origin of anything—a tool, a custom, a disease—presupposes and continues the cosmogony. From a structural point of view, origin myths (or etiological myths) can be grouped together with the cosmogonic myth. The creation of the world is the preeminent instance of creation, and the cosmogony is thus the exemplary model for all creative activity. This does not mean that an origin myth of necessity imitates or copies the cosmogonic model, for no concerted or systematic reflection need be involved. But every new appearance—an animal, a plant, an institution—implies the existence of a world. Each origin myth narrates and justifies a new situation—new in the sense that it came into being only as a result of certain actions of long ago. Origin myths thus continue and complete the cosmogonic myth; they tell how the world was changed, enhanced, or impoverished.

This is why some origin myths begin with a cosmogony. Thus, the history of the great families and dynasties of Tibet opens with the birth of the cosmos from an egg. The Polynesian genealogical chants begin in the same way. Such ritual genealogies are composed by bards when a princess becomes pregnant, and they are given to the hula dancers, who learn them by heart. These dancers, men and women alike, dance and recite the chant continuously, until the child is born, as if assisting in the embryological development of the future chief by their recapitulation of the cosmogony, the history of the world, and the history of the tribe. The gestation of a chief is the occasion for a symbolic recreation of the world. The performance is both a remembrance and a ritual reactualization via song and dance of the essential mythical events which have occurred since the creation.

The close connection between the cosmogonic myth, the myth of the origin of sickness and cure, and the ritual of magical healing is clearly seen in the ancient Near East and in Tibet. Often a solemn recitation of the cosmogony is enough to cure an illness. The ideology is not difficult to perceive: as the cosmogony is an exemplary model for all creation, its recitation helps the patient to make a new beginning of his life. The return to origins gives the means for a rebirth. All this is clear in the numerous ritual applications of the Polynesian cosmogonic myth. According to

this myth, only waters and darkness existed in the beginning, and Io (the supreme being) separated the waters by the power of his thought and words, and then created the sky and earth. He said, "Let the waters be separated, let the heavens be formed, let the earth be!" These words of Io's, through which the world came to be, are creative words, charged with sacred power. Whenever there is something in need of creating, men can utter them and appropriate their sacred force. They are repeated during the rite for making a sterile womb fecund, or for curing body and mind, and also on the occasion of death, of war, and when genealogies are recited.

Much the same thing is seen in a custom of the Osage Indians. When a child is born, they summon "a man who has talked with the gods," and when he reaches the mother's house, he recites the creation of the universe and the terrestrial animals to the newborn baby. Not until this has been done is the child given the breast. Later, when it wants to drink water, the same man is called in again. Again he recites the creation, ending this time with the creation of water. When the child is old enough to take solid foods, this "man who has talked with the gods" comes again and recites the creation, this time ending with the origin of grains and other foods. It would be hard to find a more eloquent example of the belief that each new birth represents a symbolic recapitulation of the cosmogony and the tribe's mythic history. The object of this recapitulation is to introduce the newborn child by means of ritual into the sacramental reality of the world, and to validate its new existence by announcing that it conforms with the mythical paradigms.

In many cultures, the cosmogony was annually or periodically reenacted. The implicit idea is that the world is regularly threatened with ruin, and that it must be ritually re-created lest it perish. Mythicoritual scenarios of periodic renovation are found among many Californian tribes (e.g., Hupa, Yurok, the Hill and Plains Maidu, the Eastern Pomo) and in Melanesia. Such scenarios played an important role in the religions of the ancient Near East as well. The Egyptians, the Mesopotamians, the Israelites, and others all felt the need to renew the world periodically. This renewal consisted in a cultic festival, the chief rite of which symbolized or reiterated the cosmogonic myth. In Mesopotamia, the creation of the world was ritually repeated during the New Year festival, as a series of rites reenacted the fight between Marduk and Tiamat (the dragon of the primordial ocean), the victory of Marduk, and his cosmogonic labors. The Hymn of Creation *(Enuma elish)* was recited in the temple, recounting all these events and thus making their power real once again.

Myths of the End of the World

Myths of cosmic cataclysms are extremely widespread among primitives, telling of how the world was destroyed with the exception of a small number of survivors (often a single couple). Myths of the flood are the most numerous and are known practically everywhere, though rather rare in Africa. Other myths tell of man's destruction by earthquake, conflagration, falling mountains, epidemic, and so forth. Clearly, this end of the world was not final but was just the end of one human race or one period in history, followed by the appearance of another. But the total submergence of the earth under the waters, or its complete destruction by fire, symbolizes the return to chaos and is always followed by a new cosmogony with the appearance of a virgin earth.

In many myths, the flood is connected with a ritual fault that aroused the wrath of the supreme being. Sometimes it is just the result of his wish to put an end to humanity. But if we examine the various myths of the flood, we find that among its chief causes are the sins of mankind and the decrepitude of the world. The flood opened the way to both re-creation of the exhausted world and a regeneration of the fallen humanity.

Most American Indian myths of the end imply either a cyclic theory (as among the Aztecs), or the belief that the

catastrophe will be followed by a new creation, or the belief in a universal regeneration without a cataclysm at all, in which only sinners will perish. But the belief that the catastrophe is the inevitable consequence of the "old age" or decrepitude of the world does appear to be common. All in all, these myths express the same archaic idea of the progressive degradation of the cosmos, ultimately necessitating its destruction and re-creation. These myths of a final catastrophe have often been the basis for prophetic and millenarian movements, for the catastrophe is also the sign which announces the imminent re-creation of the world.

In all probability, the doctrine of the destruction of the world (pralaya) was already known in Vedic times (see Atharva Veda 10.8.39–40), and the universal conflagration (Ragnarok or Götterdämmerung) followed by a new creation is an element in Germanic mythology. These facts seem to show that the Indo-Europeans were not unacquainted with the end-of-the-world myth. But beginning with the Brahmanas, and especially in the Puranas, the Indians focused their attention on the doctrine of the four yugas, the four ages of the world. The essence of this theory is the cyclical creation and destruction of the world and the belief in the "perfection of the beginnings." As the Buddhists and Jains hold the same views, the doctrine of the eternal creation and destruction of the universe is evidently a pan-Indian idea. The complete cycle is ended with a dissolution, a pralaya, which is repeated more intensely at the end of the thousandth cycle. According to the *Mahabharata* and the Puranas, the horizon will burst into flame, seven or twelve suns will appear in the heavens, drying up the seas and scorching the earth. The Samvartaka, or cosmic conflagration, will destroy the entire universe. Then rain will fall in floods for twelve years, and the earth will be submerged and mankind destroyed (Vishnu Purana 24, 25). Sitting on the cosmic snake Shesha on the surface of the ocean, Vishnu is sunk in yogic sleep (Vishnu Purana 6.4.1–11), and then all begins again. And so on, *ad infinitum*.

The Indian doctrine of the world ages is to some extent similar to the primitive concepts of the annual renewal of the world, but there are important differences. In India, man plays no part at all in the periodic re-creation. Moreover, basically man does not want this re-creation and yearns only to escape from the cosmic cycle. Here there is no final end, only periods of varying lengths between the annihilation of one universe and the appearance of the next. The "end" has no meaning in a cosmic sense but applies only to the human condition, for man cannot halt the process of transmigration in which he is blindly carried along.

In Greece there are two different but connected traditions: the theory of the ages of the world and the cyclic doctrine. Hesiod is the first to describe the progressive degeneration of humanity during the five ages (*Works and Days* 109–201). The first, the Age of Gold under the reign of Cronus, was a sort of paradise: men lived for a long time without aging, and their life was like that of the gods, but this happy state did not continue, and gradually man's life became ever harder. The cyclic theory makes its appearance with Heraclitus, who greatly influenced the Stoic doctrine of the eternal return, in which everything that has happened will happen again. The two mythical themes—the ages of the world and the continuous cycle of creation and destruction—are already associated in Empedocles. There is no need to discuss the different forms that these theories took in Greece, often as the result of Oriental influence. Suffice it to say that the Stoics took over from Heraclitus the idea of the end of the world by fire (*ekpyrosis*) and that Plato knew of the end by flood (*Timaeus* 22, C). These two cataclysms determined the rhythm of the Great Year, and according to a lost work of Aristotle (*Protrepticus*), the two catastrophes occurred at the solstices—fire in summer and flood in winter.

Some of these apocalyptic images of the end of the world recur in Judeo-Christian eschatology. But here there is an innovation of the greatest import: the end will come only once, just as creation occurred only once. The cosmos which will appear after the cataclysm is the same cosmos God

created at the beginning, but purified, regenerated, restored to its original glory. This earthly paradise will not be destroyed again, and it will have no end. Time here is not the circular time of the eternal return; it has become a linear and irreversible time. Nor is this all: the eschatology shows the triumph of a sacred valuation of history, for the end of the world will reveal the religious value of human acts and men will be judged by these. This is not the cosmic regeneration of a collective group or the whole human race, but rather a judgment, a selection, a separation of righteous from unrighteous. The chosen will be saved by their loyalty to a sacred history; faced by the powers and temptations of this world, they will have remained true to the kingdom of heaven.

Another point which distinguishes Judeo-Christian eschatology from that of the cosmic religions is that the end of the world is seen as part of the messianic mystery. For the Jews, the coming of the Messiah will announce the end of the world and the restoration of paradise. For Christians, the end will proceed from the second coming of Christ and the Last Judgment. But for both, the triumph of sacred history—manifested by the end of the world—in some measure implies the restoration of paradise. The prophets proclaim that the cosmos will be renewed: there will be a new heaven and a new earth. There will be an abundance of all things, as in the Garden of Eden (Amos 9:13 ff., Isaiah 30:33 ff., etc.). For the Christians, too, the total renewal of the cosmos and the restoration of paradise are essential characteristics of the end-time. In Revelation (21:1–5) we read: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . and I heard a great voice from the throne saying . . . 'and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more. . . . Behold, I make all things new.' "

But this new creation will rise on the ruins of the first. The syndrome of the final catastrophe resembles Indian descriptions of the destruction of the universe. There will be drought and famine, and the days will grow short. The period immediately preceding the end will be dominated by the Antichrist, but Christ will come and purify the world by fire. As Saint Ephraem Syrus expressed it: "The sea shall roar and be dried up . . . the heaven and earth shall be dissolved, and darkness and smoke shall prevail. Against the earth shall the Lord send fire, which lasting forty days shall cleanse it from wickedness and the stains of sins."

The reign of the Antichrist is in some sense equivalent to a return into chaos. On the one hand, the Antichrist is presented in the form of a dragon or demon, and this is reminiscent of the old myth of the fight between God and the dragon; the fight took place in the beginning, before the creation of the world, and it will take place again at the end. On the other hand, when the Antichrist comes to be regarded as the false Messiah, his reign will represent the total overthrow of social, moral, and religious values—that is, the return to chaos.

Myths of High Gods; the Sun and the Moon

The types of myth discussed thus far are all directly or indirectly dependent on the cosmogonic myth. Thus, myths of origins complete and prolong the creation story, and the myths of the end with their intimation of the periodic regeneration of the universe are all structurally related to the cosmogony. These types of myth have been stressed because of the important role they play in the religious life of primitive and traditional societies. But there are other types of myth, which might be classified as follows: (1) myths of the gods and of other divine beings; (2) myths of the creation of man; (3) myths which tell of subsequent modifications of the world and the human condition; (4) myths associated with celestial bodies and the life of nature; (5) myths of heroes.

Common to all these is the fact that they relate events

occurring after the creation of the world. Some may be considered myths of origins, as, for instance, the anthropogenic myth telling of the creation of man, or the myths of the origin of death. Moreover, many of those myths which tell of radical modifications in the nature of the world are also myths of origins, as those myths which tell of the earth's transformation by a demiurge, a culture hero, or a trickster.

All the events related in myths belong to the fabulous past. But it is possible to distinguish between a primordial epoch corresponding to the very beginnings and the subsequent changes of that initial situation. Thus there are (1) myths narrating the creation of the world and of man, and describing that primeval epoch which lasted until the first change in the structure of the cosmos or in man's essential mode of being; (2) myths relating the countless dramatic modifications of the world and of man which took place from that moment until the end of the mythical time. A third group of myths is concerned with the adventures of gods, supernatural beings, and heroes; it is not necessarily related directly to this time structure.

Among the most primitive societies (i.e., those of hunters and food-gatherers), myths of the high gods are simple. The supreme being is believed to have created the world and man, but he soon abandoned his creations and withdrew into the sky. Sometimes he did not even complete his work of creation, and another divine being took over the task. In some cases, his withdrawal was responsible for a breach in communications between heaven and earth, or for a great increase in the distance between them. In some myths, the original proximity of the sky and the presence of God on earth constitute a paradisal state. The place of this more or less forgotten *deus otiosus* was taken by various divinities, all of whom are closer to man and help or persecute him in a more direct and active way than the remote sky.

The celestial supreme being and creator recovers his religious activity only in certain pastoral cultures such as the Turko-Mongols, in Yahwism, in the reform of Zoroaster, and in Islam. In other cases, even when his name is remembered—as with An (Anu) of the Mesopotamians, El of the Canaanites, Dyaus of the Vedic Indians, Uranus of the Greeks—the supreme celestial being no longer plays any important role in religious life and is almost ignored in mythology. The "passivity" of Uranus as *deus otiosus* is plastically expressed by his castration: he has become impotent, unable to take part in the affairs of the world, drained of creative power. In Vedic India Varuna supplanted Dyaus, and he in turn gave way to the warrior god Indra, who then yielded to Vishnu and Shiva. El yielded primary to Baal, as An did to Marduk.

With the exception of Marduk, these supreme gods are no longer "creative" in the active sense. They did not create the world, but only organized it and assumed responsibility for its maintenance. They are primarily fecundators like Zeus or Baal, who by their union with earth goddesses ensure the fertility of the fields and the abundance of harvest. Marduk himself is only the creator of *this* world, that is, the universe as it exists *today*. Another "world"—almost unthinkable for us, because it existed only as fluid, the restless infinite ocean—existed before this one: it was ruled by Tiamat and her spouse, in which three generations of gods lived.

The polytheistic religions are generally characterized by rich, variegated, and dramatic mythologies. In addition to sky gods and storm gods, important roles are played by deities of vegetation and chthonic fertility. Special mention must be made of the tragic myths of the young gods who die (often by murder) and sometimes come back to life, such as Osiris, Tammuz, Attis, and Adonis, or the goddess who descends to the underworld (Ishtar, Inanna) or is forced to dwell there (Persephone). These "deaths" are all creative in the sense that they bear a consistent relation to vegetation, the period of "death" or the stay in the nether regions being related to the winter season. Around these myths of violent death or descent to hell, many of the mystery religions later developed.

Rich and varied mythologies have also grown up around

the two great luminaries, sun and moon. In many cultures these celestial bodies are considered as the eyes of a supreme being. Even more frequent is the process of "solarization" of the supreme being, that is, his transformation into a sun god. Myths of man's descent from the sun are known among some North American tribes (Blackfoot, Arapaho) and are especially prevalent in Indonesia and Melanesia. The sun is also conceived as a hero and is symbolized by an eagle or a falcon. Dynasties and military aristocracies have often traced their origins to solar heroes (Egypt, Melanesia, etc.), and the well-known motif of two antagonistic brothers may well be related to the mythic conflict of sun and moon. Many myths of this type have survived in folklore, and together with myths of the animal world (Master of Animals, theriomorphic guardian spirits, etc.) they have provided most of the world's folklore themes. Certain solar myths, for example, have survived in secularized form as folktales or sagas long after being emptied of their religious content.

Lunar mythologies are often even more dramatic. For while the sun always remains the same, the moon waxes and wanes—disappearing, only to come to life again after three moonless nights. In the religion of many primitive peoples, the moon is considered to be the first man who died. But for the religious man, death is not an extinction but only a change, a new kind of life. A number of myths are related to the phases of the moon, its death and resurrection, including myths of the land of the dead, of the adventures of the first ancestor, of the mysteries of fertility and birth, of initiation, magic, etc. Most of these myths have survived, though degraded and transformed, preserved in the world's folklore.

Myths of the Creation of Man and the Origin of Death

The myths of the creation of man represent in some respects a continuation of the cosmogony. In a great number of myths, man is created from some material substance. Thus, for example, the Yoruba of Nigeria believe the primordial couple to have been fashioned from mud by the god Obatala; Indonesian and Melanesian myths tell how the first man was created from a stone. In Oceania, a god created man from earth or from a figure drawn upon the ground which he then sprinkled with his blood. In some mythologies (e.g., Southeast Asia, Iran) man is believed to have been created from an animal or plant. Other myths tell of an original androgynous state of the first human. Here, either the creator separates the two sexes from the androgyne, or he draws the woman forth from the body of the man. In some cases, the god creates the first man *ex nihilo* by power of his thought. Thus the Californian Wiyot say that Gudatrigakwitl, the high god, used neither sand nor earth to fashion man; he simply thought, and man came into being.

Far and away the most complex and dramatic category of myths, however, is those which tell of radical transformations in the structure of the world and of man's mode of being. One group of such myths tells of cosmic changes which occurred in the primordial past: when heaven became remote, mountains flattened, or the tree or liana connecting earth and heaven suddenly was cut. As a result of changes like this rupture between heaven and earth, the paradisiacal age ended, and men and gods no longer mingled easily. Man then became mortal, sexed, and obliged to work for his living.

Other myths of a similar sort tell of the origin of death. The most common African motif is what has been called "the message that failed," in which, for instance, God sent the chameleon to the mythic ancestors with the message that they would be immortal, and he sent the lizard with the message that they would die. When the lizard arrived first, man's fate was sealed. Another African motif is that of "death in a bundle": God allowed the first men to choose between two bundles, one of which contained life, the other,

death. According to a third motif, mortality is the result of man's transgressing a divine commandment.

Among the myths recounting changes in man's condition, perhaps the most pathetic are those of the *dema* type. *Dema* is the name given to the primordial beings by the Marind-Anim of New Guinea, and their central myth tells of the slaying of a *dema* deity by the *dema* men. Its general outlines are as follows. A lovely maiden named Hainuwele grew miraculously from a coconut palm and was blessed with the power to produce rich gifts from her body. During a great festival, Hainuwele stood in the middle of the dance ground distributing gifts to the dancers. But near the end of the festival, the men killed Hainuwele and buried her. The next morning, one of the men dug up the body, however, and cut it into pieces, which he buried in various places, except for the arms. These pieces gave birth to plants previously unknown, especially tubers, which since then have been the chief food of men. He then took her arms to another *dema* deity, Satene. From Hainuwele's arms she made a door, and then summoned the men who had killed her. "Since you have killed," she said, "I will no longer live here. I shall leave this very day. Now you will have to come to me through this door." Those who were able to pass through the door remained human beings, while those who were not became animals and spirits. Satene announced that from that time forth, men would meet her only after death, and then she vanished from the earth.

A. E. Jensen has shown the great importance of this myth for an understanding of the religion and world image of the ancient planters. The murder of a *dema* divinity by the *dema* ancestors ended an epoch and opened that in which we live today. The *dema* became men, that is, sexually differentiated and mortal beings. As for the murdered *dema* divinity, she survives in her creations (food, plants, animals, etc.) and in the house of the dead. In another sense, she can be said to survive in the "mode of being of death," which she established through her own death. The violent demise of the *dema* divinity is not only a creative death; it is also a

way of being continually present in the life of men, and even in their death. For by feeding on the plants and animals that sprang from her body, men feed on the very substance of the *dema* divinity.

Another class of widespread myths concerns those of the king's son who is abandoned after birth because of a prophecy threatening danger to the king. Consigned to the waters, the child is saved by animals or shepherds, and is suckled by a female animal or a humble woman. When fully grown, he embarks on extraordinary adventures (monster slaying, etc.). Later he finds his parents and takes revenge, finally being recognized and winning rank and honor. In most of these myths, the dangers and trials of the hero (encounters with monsters and demons, descents into hell, being swallowed by an aquatic monster, etc.) have an initiatory meaning. By overcoming all these ordeals, the young man proves that he has surpassed the human condition and henceforth he belongs to a class of semidivine beings. Many epic legends and folktales utilize and readapt the highly dramatic scenarios of a hero's initiation (e.g., Siegfried, Arthur, Robin Hood, etc.).

The folklore of all nations contains a large number of myths and mythical motifs emptied of their religious values and functions, but preserved for their epic or fantastic qualities. Moreover, the heroic poetry of the world's oral tradition, as well as the beginnings of drama and comedy, is directly dependent upon the mythical traditions of the world. Some forms of "mythical behavior" still survive in our own day; one can speak of "myths of the modern world," as, for instance, the eschatological and millenarian structures of Marxist communism, the mythic structures of the images and behavior imposed on collectivities by the power of the mass media, and so forth. The characters in comic strips present the modern version of mythological folklore heroes. Superman has become extremely popular, owing particularly to his dual identity: though he comes from a planet destroyed by a catastrophe, and though he possesses prodigious powers, Superman lives in the modest guise of a

timid, unassertive journalist, bullied and dominated by his colleagues. This humiliating camouflage of the hero follows the well-known mythic theme of the abandoned hero we have discussed above.

The mythicization of public figures through the mass media, the transformation of a personality into an exemplary image, is also a frequent phenomenon in today's most developed societies. Mythological behavior can be recognized likewise in the obsession with "success" that expresses an obscure wish to transcend the limits of the human condition; in the exodus to suburbia, in which we can detect the nostalgia for "primordial perfection"; in the paraphernalia and emotional intensity that characterize what has been called the "cult of the sacred automobile," and so on. The mythic imagination can hardly be said to have disappeared; it is still very much with us, having only adapted its workings to the material now at hand.

Myths from West to East

JOSEPH CAMPBELL

The retelling of age-old tales for the sheer delight of their "once-upon-a-time" is an art little practiced in our day, at least in the Western world; and yet, when such a colorful sampling of the art as that of the present collection is brought to us, the enchantment works and we are carried in imagination to a Never-Never-Land that we, somehow, have long known. The reading is a little like a visit to a bazaar, say in Istanbul or Old Delhi. We stroll about, at first casually, just looking, but then enter one or another of the shops and become caught there in the fascination of gems in unforeseen settings, curious images of unheard-of-gods, bolts of incredible gold brocade, and all in a setting of incense. The shopkeeper begins telling us of the lands from which his wares have been brought, and something of the ways of life in those regions begins appearing to us through the settings of the gems, the figures woven in the gold brocades, and the attitudes of the gods. Their fascination is of ways of life fundamentally different from our own, which yet speak, somehow, to some part of us to which, perhaps, we have not been paying attention: the part of fantasy and dream,