

The Nature of Myth

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I want to share some thoughts, and feelings, about myth. I have garnered them from my own life-experience and the work of others I have encountered. When others' thoughts illuminate my experience, and when my life illuminates those thoughts, life and work resonate together and there is no need to choose between them. Indeed, they are impossible to separate. Then the challenge becomes to convey them in a way which allows that resonance to be heard by others. My account is thus deeply personal, but that is what permits it to be universal in the only available sense, which is: also potentially true for others.

What is the nature of myth? We will end by considering that subject in another and further sense: the formative rootedness of myth in, and as, nature. But where to begin? Perhaps it will do, as a starting-point, to say that myth is encoded human experience, especially emotional experience, and accumulated cultural wisdom, of and about existential situations – birth and death, love and hate, self and others – that remain as powerful now as they ever were.

It is tempting to then go on to ask, 'What is fundamental about myth?' But that is a rather *logos*-ridden question which doesn't get us very far. Considered subjectively, '[e]very sudden heightening of intensity,' as Roberto Calasso says, means you are in the presence of a god and their 'sphere of influence'; while objectively, 'myth is the precedent behind every action, its invisible, ever-present lining.'¹ That description corresponds precisely with what Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes as an idea which is 'not the contrary of the sensible, [but] is its lining and its depth.'² So we are speaking about something – in this instance, myth – which is neither super-natural (added to the natural world) nor transcendently mystical (above or beyond it) but immanent *in* it.

The upshot is that there are no inherent restrictions on what activity, both inner and outer, can be mythic. What is fundamental to myth, then, is that it is always and everywhere potentially fundamental. (I add 'potentially' to remind us that in practice the reality of myth, like everything else, is a matter of personal experience. So I am trying to protect it, and us, from the curse of monotheism, which Barbara Herrnstein Smith describes as trying 'to identify the presumptively universally compelling Truth and Way and to compel it universally.'³)

This perspective can be developed further. For example, consider the weapons long used against myth, beginning with *logos* and mutating into the reason of both religious monotheism and secular rationalism, then modern science. Are these not non-mythic, or even anti-mythic? The short answer is, no. At the least, the only way for these weapons to gain any

¹ Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, transl. Tim Parks (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988) 95, 383.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort and transl. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) 149.

³ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) 179. Cf. Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, transl. Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

purchase is to themselves become mythic – especially as Apollonian power-knowledge, of course, but also the cool strategems of Athena and the sly mockery of Hermes.

Extremely influentially, Plato, while using *mythos*, sought to position it as an inferior kind of truth to *logos* – a term and value which already contained the seeds not only of the exhaustively complete and authoritative Word (with a capital w), and cognate knowledge, but its modern scientific materialist version whose ideal is ‘the system from which all and everything follows.’⁴ The result, beloved of modernity, is ‘the myth of mythlessness’: the conviction that it is possible, and desirable, to be devoid of mythicity, which is reduced to other people merely having erroneous beliefs.⁵

But as John Moriarty puts it, ‘myth not maths is the mother tongue.’⁶ Not that maths is outside myth, or is rejected by it; but ultimately maths too is mythic, and specifically Apollonian. Thus as Paul Ricoeur points out, ‘the claim of the logos to rule over the mythos is itself a mythical claim’.⁷ And what kind of claim would that be? In another short answer: surely it is male, in an all-too-familiar narcissistic, egotistic, arrogant mode. (It might take a brave mythicist to assert those qualities of Apollo, but only a dishonest one could deny them.) The resulting damage to our mythic-chthonic mother tongue, manifesting in ecological disaster, is by now overwhelmingly obvious. Yet it is the only way we can truly understand, honour and work with, as opposed to dominating and exploiting, the maternal matrix of life.⁸ As Sean Kane says, ‘all the work that various peoples have done – all the work that peoples must do – to live with the Earth on the Earth’s terms is pre-empted by the dream of transcendence.’⁹ (This mighty mythic personage is whom W.H. Auden calls ‘Dame Kind’ and remarks, ‘‘She mayn’t be all She might be but/ She is our Mum.’’¹⁰)

The destructiveness, including self-destructiveness, of modernist anti-mythic is capped by its cunning, inherited from Plato but still at work: the actual lie is that myth lies, when in the words of Doris Lessing, ‘Myth does not mean something untrue, but a concentration of truth’.¹¹ So the only way that mythic truth can be fully and properly appreciated is by abandoning the emaciatedly abstract and politically interested notion of truth espoused by its modernist critics. As Milton Scarborough says,

The ultimate assessment of myth must be of a kind suited to the nature of myth as giving expression to apprehensions of the life-world and as functioning to provide an orientation for living in that world. Within those strictures myth is neither true nor false *in a theoretical sense* but viable or not viable for the tasks (both theoretical and otherwise) which confront us. This viability is not determined in intellectual terms but in the very process of living...¹²

⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1994 [1944]) 7.

⁵ See Laurence Coupe, *Myth*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009) 12. (This book is an excellent introduction to and overview of the subject as a whole.)

⁶ Somewhere in his vast *Dreamtime* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1999).

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdes (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991): 486.

⁸ See ‘The Natural Aesthetics of Enchantment’, by Rebecca Burrill and Patrick Curry (17.2.2024): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TETRF-nBpKc>

⁹ Sean Kane, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, rev. edn (Broadview Press, 1998) 255.

¹⁰ W.H. Auden, *Homage to Clio* (New York: Random House, 1955) 54.

¹¹ Interview on BBC1 TV (27.5.2008).

¹² Milton Scarborough, *Myth and Modernity: Postcritical Reflections* (Albany: SUNY, 1994) 110. Emphasis in original.

To echo Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's timely call, 'we need richer ontologies...it is high time to put epistemological questions to rest.'¹³ And myth is nothing if not ontological: a matter, that is, of *being*.

The partisan and prescriptive image of myth, disguised as objective description, as subjective, superstitious, ignorant and so on has its roots in Platonic enmity on several fronts: to Homer as a purveyor of mere stories (as opposed to truth modeled on Pythagorean mathematics and Parmenidian universalist realism); to Heraclitus as a false teacher of truth as something constantly changing and transforming (which therefore cannot be used to legitimate the authority of a caste of philosophers to know and say what it is); and to *demos*, the masses, for clinging to *doxa*, mere opinion, and thus being vulnerable to persuasion by mere rhetoric that what is true isn't, and what isn't true is (hence the notorious banishment of poets and suppression of unlicensed music from the philosophers' republic). But the influence of this picture has lasted well into the ongoing project of modernity: 'the rational mastery of nature'.¹⁴ Indeed, the attempted sacrifice of myth, as merely beliefs, on the altar of *logos* as 'the Truth and Way', is central to that project.

Fortunately, it can't be done, only pretend to be done. For one thing, myth won't hold still for long enough. For another, as I have said, the very attempt is itself mythic, albeit not of a very edifying kind. By the same token, to demand 'the thing itself and not the myth' is at best absurd. Precisely when it is most itself, the thing is deeply mythical, and when it is most mythical, it is most itself. For the same reason, if we try to stand entirely outside myth, perhaps in order to examine it, we must also stand outside something essential to life, including ourselves. Only a sadodispassionate alienation permits treating myth as something to be intellectually dissected.

Myth is not a proposition, and it doesn't consist of so-called beliefs. It is above all a way of life, of being in the world, which must therefore be inhabited, at least to a degree, before it can be understood. What it therefore demands of us, as the great Indo-mythologist Heinrich Zimmer says, 'is not the monologue of a coroner's report, but the dialogue of a living conversation'.¹⁵ (The sense of a living conversation is missing in many academic studies of myth, whose practitioners fastidiously confine themselves to concepts alone, and then concepts about something merely then and there, never here and now, let alone us. These people are afraid of their own shadows.)

I'm not advocating trying to collapse any distinction between mythic and non-mythic life, with the latter as quotidian, disenchanting, etc. The latter is almost certainly a degenerate version of *logos*, its shining ideal being bureaucracy, rationalism and modernization. This is not to romanticize *mythos*, though, for it too has a degenerate version: perhaps the mindless gory violence of Ares, or the exercise of power which recognizes no limits of Zeus, or the cold cruelty of the brother and sister Apollo and Artemis. Nevertheless, since we are humans, not gods or goddesses, and division is of our essence, we need both *mythos* and *logos* to stay sane, in order to recognise when myth is happening, and, with any luck (another goddess, by the way: Fortuna), to respond intelligently. This is also another reason to retain the qualifier 'potentially' when it comes to describing myth as fundamental.

Another modern misunderstanding of myth is to treat it as purely psychology, 'cutting,' in Sean Kane's words, 'across cultural difference with the mistaken assumption that there is a universal world of myth which is true to all peoples past and present because it is

¹³ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives. The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Cosmologies", *Common Knowledge* 10:3 (2004) 463-84: 484.

¹⁴ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002) *passim*.

¹⁵ Heinrich Zimmer, *The King and the Corpse*, edited Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 3.

true to eternal powers in the human mind.¹⁶ This is to play straight into the hands of that secret couple the religionists and the modernists, specifically neo-Cartesians, who want to divide everything into two: mind (formerly and still sometimes spirit) vs. world, subject vs. object, and spirit vs. matter, leaving the body as battleground.

Such splitting offers, they think, the chance to master ‘their’ half of things and reduce to it the other half. Here is the crypto-mythic dream of mastery again. It is also, Max Weber argues, the fundamental act by which ‘concrete magic’, which is *all* these things including us, and therefore unmasterable, becomes disenchanting and meaningless.¹⁷

Psychologism also overlooks the vital point that myth shouldn’t be identified with self/ mind or spirit/ subject *or* world/ body/ object, because it is the ‘lining and depth’, the very meaning, of *both*. Both psyche *and* world have an ‘inner’ mythic dimension. Thus as Victor Zuckerkandl says, it’s not a question of ‘psychological experiences that we recognize [as]...our “within,” but [a] mode of existence of the world that is of the same nature as [the] “within” [of] my psyche.’¹⁸ This seems to me a very important point.

As Wittgenstein puts it, with characteristic incisiveness, ‘The physiological life is naturally not “life.” And neither is the psychological life. Life is the World.’¹⁹ And in our relationships with the world’s fundamental realities, in Calasso’s words, ‘all we [moderns] have done is invent, for those powers that act upon us, longer, more numerous, more awkward names, which are less effective...’²⁰

But where have we left nature? We haven’t, because we cannot. Sean Kane (whose account informs mine) points out that as one follows myth to its source, through the better part of 100,000 years of mythtelling, what we increasingly find is the mythic dimension of the Earth itself and, inseparably, the Earthy dimension of myth. Proceed past the shiny smooth myths of modernity, through the Neolithic’s anthropomorphic albeit numinous pantheon, dominated by male sky-gods but still with room for the enchantment of more ancient pre-Olympian deities such as Aphrodite and Hermes.²¹ Then go farther back and down into the older, darker female and chthonic world of the Paleolithic, full of exchanges between gods, humans and other animals and startling transformations from one into the other. It soon becomes clear how parochial it is to define myth as ‘stories about gods’. Rather they are about “‘something mysterious,” intelligent, invisible and whole’, which includes but exceeds and qualifies later myths – just as nature includes but exceeds us humans.²² (This is the sense of David Abram’s indispensable term, ‘more-than-human’).²³ We are the pre-eminently cultural animal, but animal nonetheless for that.

In Kane’s words that ‘something’ inheres in ‘the ideas and emotions of the Earth’. He further describes it as ‘Wisdom about nature, that wisdom heard and told in animated pattern, that pattern rendered in such a way as to preserve a place whole and sacred, safe from human meddling: these are the concepts with which to begin an exploration of myth’, and adds that ‘Of these, the notion of the sanctity of place is vital. It anchors the other concepts.... Once the

¹⁶ Kane, *Wisdom*, 14.

¹⁷ H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991) 282. See my *Enchantment: Wonder in the Modern World* (Edinburgh: Floris, 2019), and *Art and Enchantment: How Wonder Works* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), ch. 2.

¹⁸ Victor Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World*, transl. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956) 370.

¹⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Private Notebooks 1914-1916*, transl. Marjorie Perloff (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2022) 191.

²⁰ Calasso, *Marriage*, 94.

²¹ See Curry, *Enchantment*, ch.’s 2 and 3, and *Art and Enchantment*, ch. 2.

²² Kane, *Wisdom*, 45.

²³ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

power of the place is lost to memory, myth is uprooted; knowledge of the Earth's processes becomes a different kind of knowledge, manipulated and applied by man.²⁴ Here a distinction between space and place (accompanied by a parallel distinction between time and moment) becomes crucial.²⁵

But this origin should not be understood as either merely atavistic or merely antiquarian, because it is formative, and thus still very much at work. Mythical nature and natural myth are neither purely past nor entirely elsewhere. As Bruno Latour reminds us, we have never been entirely or consistently modern.²⁶ Moments of enchantment make it possible to apprehend myth as still taking place where you are. For example, an Apache mythteller or 'place-maker', as Keith Basso significantly calls them, 'often speaks as a witness on the scene, describing ancestral events "as they are occurring" and creating in the process a vivid sense that what happened long ago – right here, on this very spot – could be happening now.'²⁷

This awareness is not limited to indigenous people (although when it comes to the Earth, all humans are indigenous). One of the virtues of Calasso's book is that it treats myth, rightly, as still happening here and now. Respecting chthonic myth more specifically, Gaston Bachelard says of wild nature that 'In the vast world of the non-I, the non-I of fields is not the same as the non-I of forests. The forest is [temporally] before-me, before-us, whereas for fields and meadows, my dreams and recollections accompany all the different phases of tilling and harvesting... But forests reign in the past.'²⁸ Hence the perpetually endangered character of enchanted nature, always disappearing as it withdraws from the 'development' of human reason.

But that tragic flaw, as it might be, is inseparable from its great virtue. For this past is not strictly chronological, and the forest one walks in now, although it only reigned in the temporal past, still exists in a mythic present. That is why, entering a forest, we often also enter an enchanted state, which is to say, a mythic condition: the perilous place, both psychic and material, where all that has made us who we are is still happening, and where – right now – you may be renewed, or undone. (This sensibility is very much evident in, and available through, the literary forests of J.R.R. Tolkien, of course.)

Thus, when it comes to myth and nature, we have arrived – as T.S. Eliot says – 'where we started/ And know the place for the first time.'²⁹ Continually, I suspect. After each forgetting.

²⁴ Kane, *Wisdom*, 34, 50.

²⁵ See my 'Enchantment, Place and Space: Implications for Cultural Astronomy', *Culture and Cosmos* 23:2 (Autumn/ Winter 2019) 11-17; accessible at <http://www.patrickcurry.co.uk/papers/Enchantment,%20Place%20&%20Space%20for%20C&C.pdf> (26/3/2024).

²⁶ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

²⁷ Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996) 32.

²⁸ Gaston Bachelard: *The Poetics of Space*, transl. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) 188.

²⁹ T.S. Eliot, from 'Little Gidding', in *Four Quartets* (Eastbourne: Gardner's Books, 2001 [1943]).