

LIFE AT THE EXTREMES OF CULTURE

ARCHITECTURE AND THE CONTINUITY OF MYTH

The Codification of Myth

The transformation of culture, from an oral to a written one, argues Marcel Detienne in *The Creation of Mythology*, results in a major shift in the understanding of myth. No longer a narrative cycle, continually fresh through public performance, myth becomes anthologized, taking on a physical, graphic form. Writing is established as the means for the verification of truth, creating a stabilized work open to comparison and interpretation. Divorced from its role as verbal construction, myth develops as a subject of criticism; the epic and the theogony presenting particular versions of the same possible story. Often rejected entirely by the new learning of the Greek Enlightenment, or cleansed, through the use of allegory, to bring it into line with its more scientific manifestations, myth is gradually transformed into mythology.

Writing proliferated in the new fields of learning; philosophy, history, and in medicine.¹ Through writing, "man found a way to see tradition in perspective as well as the means of organizing the accumulation of data and opposing observation of theses where schemes could be devised based on cogent reasoning. Writing certainly promoted incipient interpretation and comparison of various versions of the same account."² Myth originally existed as a type of speech about a foundation, both a means of communication and message. It was never, however, a fixed statement, nor a frozen history, presenting rather an evolving body of collective knowledge and experience. Resulting from this shift in spirit and intention due to the application of writing, interpretation from outside of the direct experience of myth gradually replaced its exegesis and transformation from within its own range of hearing.

Rapidly losing its claim to credibility, myth became mythology; a collection of stories of ancient events, from which the historian and the philosopher could excavate at will. A newly fixed field, mythology established the material, the limited range of 'facts' ready for selection or, more frequently, rejection. "The historian vouches for 'a fact accepted forever' and legitimizes by virtue of its visual nature, the exclusion of all 'emotional' memory, memory based on hearing, the most impressionable of the senses..."³

Not only the field of the historian, the literary manifestations of myth also became the touchstone of its philosophic interpretations. In the sixth century B.C. Homer was still midway between a popular aurality and the textual apprecia-

tion restricted to an elite which had discovered the delights of hidden meaning. And then "the scandal that evokes the first philosophy engages, without using the word 'myth', the procedure that is to play a determining role in the elaboration of 'mythology': the decision to interpret."⁴ "It is within this logographic activity, intertwining the *mythos* and *logos*, the writing and the telling, that the graphic nature of what in Plato's time is to be called 'mythology' makes its most distinct appearance. Before being thought over, before being discussed, the Greek myth is written down; and 'mythology' that is supposed to be as old as memory is, on the contrary, young and new, so faint in outline and so fragile..."⁵

Myth, pushed into the field of vision by writing, its graphic presence a betrayal of its essential nature, becomes transformed. Part history, part primitive science, myth becomes "the native land where philosophy becomes self aware according as it succeeds in becoming abstract; and this 'abstract' discourse suffices to realize the transition by making it obvious and necessary."⁶ Once necessary, this process - this new knowledge - takes over the propelling spirit originally the property of myth itself, thus leaving its manifestations, the written tales, fixed and static. Of its own momentum, philosophy can only withdraw itself from mythology, separate itself from myth which has always been the opposite side of its coin as well as its context."⁷ "Now we know", writes Lévi-Strauss, "where that upheaval took place: on the border of Greek thought where mythology yields to a philosophy which is preliminary to scientific thought."⁸

It would seem, at this point, that myth could no longer exist. The symbol demanding participation, the freshness of contact with the primordial, has been superseded by a dissection of its remains. The forms of myth, stripped of their self-sufficiency, become empty. If this were simply the case, if myth entirely disappeared through the cannibalism of interpretation, its relevance to subsequent culture would be slight.

The victory of writing and its related arts was however, never absolute and did not entirely replace the function of a mythical understanding. "One system does not abolish the other ... In their intellectual creations, in the works of their new branches of knowledge, we recognized the same mental climate as our own: submission to logic and the requirements of verification and experience. But in the mythological tradition of the Greeks there remains the semblance of a desire for participation. In order to triumph, logical thought does not demand the

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disappearance of all pre-logical thought.⁹ The Greek's peculiarity is to live on the boundary, where mythology still maintains a mediatory function. Even philosophy is unable to extricate itself entirely from myth - "the fate of one is coupled with that of the other so that philosophy can only know itself by mastering the consciousness of myth."¹⁰ Myth, while transcended in credibility by the developments of a scientific consciousness, continued to maintain a presence through a shift in its status.

The continuing presence of myth was recognized as the grounding for the arts. Myth presents itself as a primal drama, from which Greek art derives its subject matter, formal definition, and social function.¹¹ The arts do this, according to Aristotle in the 'Poetics', by presenting a convincing action, a narrated drama leading to a cathartic resolution. "A poet's object is not to tell what actually happened but what could, and would happen either probably or inevitably... For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history gives particular facts."¹²

Indeed, for Aristotle, the 'untruthful' aspect of storytelling, the great anathema to the early historians, is not really a problem. "What is convincing though impossible should always be preferred to what is possible and unconvincing. Stories should not be made up of inexplicable details."¹³ "The poet must be a 'maker' not of verses but of stories, since he is a poet by virtue of his 'representation', and what he represents is action"¹⁴ This action, this dynamic content, derives from and parallels that of the content and propelling spirit behind myth itself, the drama of the archetype. And if Plato refuses entry to the dramatists attempting to join his city of philosophers,¹⁵ it is because he realizes that the city itself is a drama, constituted along the same lines, and deriving from the same mythical origins as the presented play, but at a higher level of significance and participation. Architecture, as both a participant and analogy of the city engages directly with this idea of drama, manifesting the archetype of creation and man's attempts to reconcile it through public life.

Through its transformation into mythology, myth loses much of its life and significance. Paradoxically however, this development guarantees its permanent existence, leaving its foundation unaffected. Never transformed out of recognition, myth remains as a bridge to a primary understanding, clouded but not destroyed by the subsequent developments of culture. Its spirit is still accessible, existing in fragments, as intuitions, dreams, or as the 'content' of the arts or philosophy. Indeed,

exiled underground by the stable constructions of mythology, myth does not disappear. For once severed from mainstream culture, dissociated from its history and geography, myth continues to percolate away beneath its surface. Taking refuge in its anonymity, myth, or something very much like it, so close as to go by the same name, finds expression in the extremes of culture: in the personal psyche, the fragments of the poets, and in the dynamics of culture itself.

Myth and the Persistent subconscious

"...Conversely, an expert in mythology and comparative religion is as a rule no psychiatrist and consequently does not know that his mythogems are still fresh and living - for instance, in dreams and visions - in hidden recesses of our most personal life, which we would on no account deliver up to a scientific dissection. The archetypal material is therefore the great unknown."

Carl Jung, *The Psychological Aspects of the Kore*

The persistence of myth, like original myth itself, is understood by the scientists of the mind through the recurrence of archetype. Never finally explained, never disposed of, the existence of the archetype presents itself as a challenge to the psychologist and his discursive powers. "Even the best attempts at explanation are only more or less successful translations into another metaphoric language... The most that we can do is dream the myth onwards and give it a modern dress."¹⁶

Carl Jung, in describing the role of the archetype, makes its existence dependent on the personal subconscious, though shared by all. An existence irreducible to direct historical or philosophic explanation, the archetype does not proceed from physical facts, but describes how the psyche experiences these facts.¹⁷ Indeed, "...no archetype can be reduced to a simple formula ... It has potential existence only, and when it takes shape in matter it is no longer what it once was. It persists through the ages and requires interpreting ever anew. The archetypes are the imperishable elements of the unconscious, but they change their shape continually."¹⁸

Imperishable elements of the unconscious, yet expressed only through the forms of narrative, myths exist as accounts, as pre-logical projections of this unconscious on to the physical world. Proposing an internalization of the drama of creation, an order arising from chaos discovered within the mind, myth then describes the resolution of these forces, of the earthly and divine within man himself.¹⁹ This resolution, relative to immediate experience yet outside time, allows the individual, through analogy, to participate in the primary events of mankind. Each individual event is elevated into type, achieving a place and meaning in the life of the generations; rescued from isolation and restored to wholeness.²⁰

Archetypes, as mental constructions, universally shared and continuously present, can, according to psychology, be best discovered in the individual unconscious. Remnants of a mythical spirit, un-united by a pervasive verbal culture, and buried beneath the collective weight of post-mythical thought, these fragments exist and are brought to visibility in the form of dreams.

Freud saw dreams as being made of three terms: the manifest meaning of behavior, the latent or real meaning (the substratum of the dream), and the correlation of the first two, the dream itself in its totality.²¹ This corresponds clearly to the constitution of myth described above. The latent meaning, or archetype, expressed through the manifest meaning, the narrative, together constitute the dream itself, the indivisible myth. It is interesting to note that Freud's conception of parapraxis (a mistake in speech or behavior) was conceived as a compromise, an economy effected due to the identification of the form (the actual narrative) with the intentional function (the archetype).²² This corresponds to the destruction of living myth by its consolidation through writing, in the form of the archaeological anthology.

Jung, writing in 'The Psychology of the Child Archetype' is more explicit in his association of the two phenomena. "In the dream," he writes, "as in the products of psychoses, there are numberless interconnections to which one can find parallels only in mythological associations of ideas (or perhaps in certain poetic creations which are often characterized by a borrowing, not always conscious, from myths)... Such conclusions forced us to assume that we must be dealing with 'autochthonous' revivals independent of all tradition, and consequently, that 'myth-forming' structural elements must be present in the unconscious psyche."²³ These forms, discovered in the individual unconscious are for Jung, however, not identical, but analogous with myth proper. "In the individual, the archetypes appear as involuntary manifestations of unconscious processes whose existence can only be inferred, whereas the myth deals with traditional forms of incalculable age."²⁴ Yet myth and dream, though distinct in their cultural presence, are structured in such a similar way as to be manifestations of the same mental necessity: the desire to form a narrative which legitimizes the conditions of a perceived world, formed metaphorically through the use of archetypes. This connection between myth and dream, though discovered within the individual subconscious is not, however, a purely personal possession. The presence of the mythical in the unconscious must, according to Jung, be seen "as an impersonal psyche common to all men, even though it expresses itself through a personal consciousness.... The mythological images belong to the structure of the unconscious and are an impersonal possession; in fact the great majority of men are far more possessed by them than possessing them."²⁵

This collective unconscious, though known only

through its individual manifestations, and in turn accessible only through dreams, presents these forces in its own way. The result is never, however, the construction of a personal drama, idiosyncratically defined. This collective spirit finds expression rather as the propelling force behind the narrative of culture as a whole.

The City at the End of Things Myth as a Cultural Force

"Fear of restrictions often appears in the the form of a fear of cramping an autonomous growth. That is what town planners, when talking about the way towns live and grow, invoke images drawn from nature when they consider town plan: a tree, a leaf, a piece of skin tissue, a hand, and so on, with excursions into pathology when pointing to a crisis. But the town is not really like a natural phenomenon. It is an artifact - an artifact of a curious kind, compounded by willed and random elements, imperfectly controlled. If it is related to physiology at all, it is more like a dream than anything else."

Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town*

Fragmentary, often contradictory, the forces which constitute a living culture, and its manifestation, the physical city, operate, like dream, in an analogous way to myth itself. Indeed, based on a conceptual model never entirely articulated, the city presents itself, as its culture, in a mythical fashion. If culture, like a dream, forms itself along mythical lines; if, according to Plato, the city is seen to manifest a drama parallel yet superior to the productions of the playwrights,²⁶ then they must constitute themselves in a similar fashion; through the narration of an archetypal concern. Yet, like archetype in myth, this ideal city can only be discovered in fragments, within actual narrations, actual constructions, constantly superseded. The pathology of cities, like the parapraxis of the mind, results from the confusion between the 'intentional function' of the city, its archetypal essence, with the formal means of its expression, its particular interpretations, historically situated and determined.

However, with so much of culture controlled through a kind of technological will, the forces active in the mythical construction of society present themselves enigmatically. Here, the "archetype represents not only something that existed in the distant past but also something that exists now, not just a vestige

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but a system functioning in the present whose purpose is to compensate or correct, in a meaningful manner, the inevitable one-sidedness and extravagance of the conscious mind."²⁷ A vision of the past and future, unconscious, continually betrayed, yet present nevertheless, the archetype maintains a restorative role, crucial if un-acknowledged. This medicinal nature of the archetype, while behind the overall dynamics of culture, finds tangible expression in two ways; through the forms of a living social memory; ritual, rumour and gesture, and in the fragments of mythopoeic expression and understanding; works of art and architecture.

An image of mythology distinct from specific myths, of simple conversation about things passed along, social memory constitutes the living structure of a society. "This social memory must be interpreted as the non-specific mnemonic activity which insures the continuity of human behavior, finding in technical exploits and in the words the means of transmitting all knowledge."²⁸ Myth speaks to the city through the process of its transformation, through its continual construction and sedimentation into the edifice of a culture. Fragments, ideas, rumours; it is the city, the icon for culture in general, which constructs the narrative around these pieces, gradually collecting them together, like the motifs in the dream, into a consolidated whole.

This edifice is, however, a communal construction, continually developing. "A dynamic equilibrium functions between changes and survivals in which sorting out new and old pieces of information, which, if actually performed by the memory of each person, is conditioned by social life; how with each generation collective memory, which is a system of cognitive thought, re-organizes and reinterprets essential elements in social relations."²⁹ Myth, as a propelling force behind culture, proposes a dynamics of society, a destiny not based on an idea of progress, but on the constructive rhythms of memory and its newest expressions. Never fixed, its ideals point towards a recurrence of origins, seen however in a cyclical process. Societies change and overlap, and the visions of the origin are presented in new ways.

It is the products of the poet, Aristotle's poet, which bring these visions to their clearest expression. Greek tragedy, presenting a sense of a mythical understanding within the city, posits its continued life within the fragmentary, temporary lives of its performances. Pointing towards myth, these productions, these dramas, engage with the city itself and embody its enduring spirit. If an architectural analogy with myth exists, mediating between a social memory and its archetype - foundations - it must also present a drama, a drama of a foundation, from which all myth fundamentally derives. For it is the new interpretation of an essential concern which allows us to perceive an operative mythology. Poised between memory and forgetting, this possible vision, achieved through the individual narration of an archetypal presence, presents an ideal of a possible future, while maintaining an integral connection to an essential and collective past. This possibility can best be investigated within the individual work; the fresh but enduring vision, which is naturally the most traditional of all ■



NOTES

1. Marcel Detienne, *The Creation of Mythology*, Translated by Margaret Cook, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, p.32
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.* p.62
4. *Ibid.* p.68
5. *Ibid.* p.81
6. *Ibid.* p.117
7. *Ibid.* p.108
8. *Ibid.* p.116
9. *Ibid.* p.112
10. *Ibid.* p.108
11. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, Translated by W. Hamilton Fyfe, William Heinemann Ltd., London, 1927
12. *Ibid.* p.135
13. *Ibid.* p. 99
14. *Ibid.* p.37
15. Plato, *The Laws*, 817b
16. Carl Jung, *The Science of Mythology*, Ark Paperbacks, London, 1949, p. 79
17. *Ibid.* p.73
18. *Ibid.* p.98
19. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, translated by Emerson Buchanan, Beacon Press, Boston, 1967, p.280
20. *Op Cit.* p.162
21. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and translated by Arnette Lavers, Jonathan Cape, London, 1972
22. *Ibid.*
23. Jung p.71
24. *Ibid.* p.72]
25. *Ibid.* p.161
26. Plato, *The Laws*, 817b
27. Jung p.81
28. Detienne p. 37

Barry Bell discute ici de la différence entre "mythe" et mythologie entraînée par le passage d'une tradition orale à une tradition écrite. Il souligne ensuite l'importance du mythe et, sa qualité inhérente, la continuité.