Introduction

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Introduction

Myth is a powerful presence in Western thinking, despite the alleged victory of *logos* over *mythos* in Greek antiquity and despite all attempts of the Enlightenment to denigrate it and explain it away. While science – after Kepler, Newton and Leibniz – has successfully based itself entirely on rational thinking, myth has lost no ground in culture and politics. On the contrary, it seems to enjoy greater popularity than ever in these fields. The causes for myth's prevalence today form a complex pattern that is difficult to analyze because the role of myth is closely linked to the increasing complexity and the fundamentally antithetical needs and structures of Western societies. Still, the core issues related to myth are easily identified and they have essentially remained unchanged. Myth primarily serves basic socio-political purposes – most notably the establishment and maintenance of authority and the formation and reinforcement of collective identity.

Most commonly, myth and its connection to authority are associated with religion – or at least the supernatural. Accordingly, myths are, from the Greeks to the Grimm brothers, "stories about the gods" and accounts of their supreme power. One of the most prominent supporters of this view, Mircea Eliade, considers myth the essence of religion in which sacredness and "supernaturalness" reveal themselves as manifestations of transcendental authority (*Myth and Reality* 5-6). As it turns out, authority appears as a determining factor in the majority of definitions of myth – from anthropology to history and from psychology to cultural criticism. Myth is, Roland Barthes argues brilliantly in *Mythologies*, related to *form*, not to content, it is "a mode of signification" (109). To refer to a given statement as myth is an act, which, once it has been accepted by society, imbues that statement with extraordinary qualities. Most importantly, it becomes authoritative – not only in the sense that it defines itself by its own mode of being as Eliade claims in *Myth, Dreams, Mysteries* (7), but also because it cannot and must not be challenged in terms of truth. Truth or falsehood are not an issue because mythical thinking knows only actual presence – objects are their very incarnations. Mythical *Erkenntnis,* one could argue with Cassirer, collapses the distinction (and the distance) between signifier and signified – as it affixes

meaning directly to perception.[1] What is more, myth is authoritative because it claims to be an expression of first principles. Myth is irreducible, it cannot be lessened, that is, diminished or altered into another, simpler form (*pace* Euhemerus). As a basically nondiscursive form, myth refuses explanation because it is itself an explanation. It is the unquestioned first link in the chain, the beginning, *arche, origo* – and thus, paradoxically enough, the supreme Derridaen *logos*.

Myth has another master characteristic – the potential to totalize. In its simplest and most important manifestation this is the resolution of contradiction. In "The Structural Study of Myth" Claude Lévi-Strauss defines the very purpose of myth as providing "a logical model capable of overcoming contradiction" (821). Of course, the Romantics had earlier adopted an even more encompassing, truly universalist notion of myth. Schelling argues that mythology is by necessity universal, "drawing into itself all elements of the existing culture – science, religion, art itself – and combining not just the material of the present but also that of the past to form a perfect unity" ("Dante" 142). In fact, mythology not only exerts a powerful unificatory influence on a given body of cultural experiences in Schelling's eyes – it also works the reverse way. By designating the whole of shareable representations held in common by the members of a community, myth provides society with collective values and beliefs.[2] In its function of bridging the distance of past and present – actualizing the past and making it available to the present, e.g. for purposes of ethical, communal or legal continuity – myth also achieves temporal totalization. Indeed, the strongly transhistorical perspectives of Freud (such as his treatment of the Oedipus myth as the cornerstone of his theory of psychosexual development) and Jung, with his notions of the collective unconscious and the archetypes, capitalize on temporal totalization. The same holds true for Frazer's proto-anthropological model (and, to an even greater extent, his postulation of a universal psychic impulse). Totalization is also a central issue in the criticism of Northrop Frye, who considers myth the fundamental ("coordinating") principle enabling him to see the phenomena it deals with as "parts of a whole" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 16).

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[1] The images of mythical thought are "not *known* as images. They are not regarded as symbols but as realities" (*Myth of the State* 47).

[2] In his essay on Dante, in "On Modern Dramatic poetry" and in his later writings on mythology, Schelling's use of the word seems to suggest a unifying body of representations shared by an artist, his public, and the idea which objectifies it. (Cf. *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism*, 140-148, *passim* and 133-139, *passim*, as well as footnote 25 [269]).

Myths have always played a particularly important part in American public consciousness – from the days of the New England Puritans who perceived their presence on the newly discovered continent as an "Errand into the Wilderness" down to President Bush's invocation of the Western formula "Dead or Alive" when he explained how he wanted "justice" for Osama Bin Laden.[3] The reason for this pervasiveness is largely historical and is a direct result of the societal conditions of the early settlers and their political needs, particularly with regard to the development of legal institutions. Initially organized in an Old Testamentarian theocracy, the community got its moral, ethical and legal reference points from an intransigent system of Protestant doctrinal prerogatives primarily aimed at the establishment and preservation of sanctioned values and beliefs.[4] As this unity of church and law was dissolved under the influence of a constitutional secularization, a non-transcendental understanding of the Law of Nature in the tradition of Hobbes, Pufendorf and Locke rapidly gained ground.[5] The ensuing swift loss of religion as a "natural," all-encompassing reference point for constitutional "truth" in a society whose first articulate body of expression was religious doctrine created a vacuum.[6] This void was gradually filled by a similarly universal and no less authoritative referential system – myth. The settlers urgently needed its identificatory properties in the critical transitional phase between the separation from their mother country and their reconstitution as an independent state.

Myth is capable of laying down just such structures, as Durkheim explains, because it helps a given community to renew "the sentiment which it has of itself and of its unity" and because it is capable of strengthening individuals in their social natures (*Elementary Forms* 420). At the same time the universal and authoritative reference points it provides are, as Cassirer has recognized, "invulnerable" and "impervious to rational arguments" (*The Myth of the State* 296). In addition, Barthes points out, myth always passes itself off as perfectly "natural" – thus effectively camouflaging not only its

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[3] After a discussion at the Pentagon meeting on Sept. 17, 2001.

[4] I am using the term *theocracy* not to refer to a religious oligarchy but rather to the close mutual interdependence of religious and political value systems – the "confluence of the sacred and the secular" as Bercovitch has it in the *American Jeremiad* (3).

[5] It is a little known fact that John Wise, one of the ancestors of the American revolution, was strongly inspired by Pufendorf's *De Jure Naturae et Gentium* (1672) – particularly by the latter's influential theory of the natural rights and the "Law of Nature". Without being as radical as Hobbes, Pufendorf revered him ("vir summo ingenii acumine" qtd. in Klenner 196) and based essential aspects of his own understanding of the Law of Nature on Hobbes.

[6] Religion, Clifford Geertz explains, does not only *interpret* social and psychological processes in cosmic terms but actually *shapes* these processses (*Interpretation of Cultures* 124).

own constructedness but also the quality of the value systems and ideologies that underlie them. Myth is the perfect means to preserve and inculcate belief – primarily in "essence" and authority.

The papers included in this volume trace a variety of myths related to the culture and the politics of the United States. Well over a dozen analyses, critiques and readings offer new and remarkable insights into different actualizations of myth as they investigate the way in which it functions – all in an effort to shed more light on a phenomenon that seems so quintessentially American.

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