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Source: *The Journal of American Folklore*, Oct. - Dec., 1955, Vol. 68, No. 270, Myth: A Symposium (Oct. - Dec., 1955), pp. 379-392

Published by: American Folklore Society

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MYTH, SYMBOLISM, AND TRUTH

By David Bidney

THE problem of myth is one that has concerned Western philosophers from the time of Plato and the Sophists. In Greek thought the problem was to explain the relation of rational, philosophical truth to traditional, religious beliefs. The Sophists of the Greek Enlightenment attempted a reconciliation by interpreting the traditional myths or theogonic tales as allegories revealing naturalistic and moral truths. This allegorical mode of interpretation was criticized by Plato but found continuous favor among the Neo-Platonic and Stoic philosophers of the Hellenistic period who saw in it a method of preserving the authority of tradition as well as the religious prerogatives of the state. The emperor Julian and the philosopher Sallustius regarded myths as divine truths and mysteries hidden from the foolish crowd and apparent only to the wise. By contrast, the Epicurean philosophers since the time of Democritus and Lucretius, the so-called atheists of the ancient world, sought to explain away and get rid of the traditional tales on the ground that they were fabrications which concealed purely naturalistic and historical events at best but were introduced primarily to bolster the authority of the priests and the rulers. Euhemerus in the third century B.C. gave classic expression to this trend of thought and Euhemerism has since become a symbol for all purely historical explanations of myth. In an age which witnessed the deification of actual rulers such as Alexander the Great, it seemed obvious to some philosophers that the traditional myths of gods and heroes concealed no supernatural mysteries but only the prosaic events of actual history at most.

Both the Neo-Platonists and Stoics, as well as the Epicureans, agreed that the myths were not to be taken literally, but the tender-minded conservatives saw in them eternal, allegorical, religious, and philosophical truths, while the tough-minded reformers explained them away as fictions designed to mislead the credulous, superstitious multitude. In the early Christian era, the Christian theologians were glad to avail themselves of the arguments of the Epicureans against the pagan myths while the Stoic and Neo-Platonic philosophers and rulers contended against the Christian claim to exclusive divine revelation. Christian and Hebrew theologians, such as Philo and Saint Augustine, were prepared to interpret the Old Testament narratives allegorically as well as literally but were not willing to acknowledge the same authority to the pagan myths. It is owing largely to Christian influence and intolerance that the pagan religious scriptures have since been regarded in the West as "myths" in the sense of discredited and incredible narratives.

With the advent of the European Renaissance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there was a revival of interest in Greek letters and art. Christian humanism could tolerate an interest in the classic Greek and Roman myths provided they did not compete with the Christian religion. Hence, to the extent that myths could be interpreted as moral allegories or purely poetic or artistic representations of human emotions and aspirations, they were tolerated by the Catholic Church. This tolerance

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was facilitated by the artistic tradition of the early Church itself which permitted symbolical representation of Christian ideals. The symbol of the Cross and the monogram of Christ, together with such emblems as the Good Shepherd, the Vine, and the Fish, were popularly accepted. During the later Middle Ages Catholic painters were occupied with the representation of subjects of the Old and New Testament history. It was an easy step, therefore, for Renaissance artists to utilize afresh those figures of Greek and Roman mythology which enabled them to express symbolically new secular ideas as, for example, in the work of Titian, Tintoretto, Leonardo, and Michaelangelo. Renaissance art gave symbolic expression to Greek ideals of beauty in the context of Christian culture. Among philosophers, Francis Bacon's attempt in his *The Wisdom of the Ancients* to revive a purely allegorical interpretation of the classic myths as repositories of esoteric philosophical wisdom was not in accord with the culture of the times and received little serious encouragement. The Christian artist could accept Greek ideals of beauty but the Christian philosopher could hardly derive inspiration from their myths.

During the second European Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century the typical attitude of the rationalistic philosophers such as Voltaire was to discredit the classic myths either as irrational superstitions or as deliberate fictions foisted upon the multitude by the crafty priests. The point of the attack was to discredit the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures together with the pagan tales as equally untrustworthy. The rationalists were not anti-religious; they sought a religion of reason to replace the religion of faith.

The work of Giovanni Battista Vico stands out as a unique monument of protest against the predominant rationalism of the eighteenth century, which in turn owed so much to the Cartesianism and mathematicism of the seventeenth century. Vico's *New Science* was a seminal work which had substantial influence outside Italy, particularly in Germany, where it was appreciated by men of the stature of Herder and Goethe and influenced the Romantic movement. Vico's method of mythological interpretation may be characterized as "allegorical Euhemerism" since he attempted to reduce the culture heroes of myth to class symbols of society. Vico's method combines an element of allegory together with historic reductionism; myths are taken symbolically as well as literally. He appreciated the ethnological value of myths as containing significant historic records of the cyclical evolution of human thought and social institutions. But the myths were significant not only as ethnological records; they were thought to be originally "true and severe narrations," expressed in poetic language, of actual historical events. In the course of time, Vico held, as later generations failed to understand the true symbolical meaning of these poetic narratives they were altered and finally regarded as incredible.

In the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, poetic myth became a subject of veneration and was regarded as the mainspring of human culture. In the work of Schelling myth received philosophical justification as an essential element in the philosophy of religion. As Cassirer has observed, Schelling's *Philosophy of Mythology* discards the allegorical interpretation of myth and replaces it by a "tautegorical interpretation" of mythical figures as "autonomous configurations of the human spirit." Myth is said to have its mode of necessity and its own mode of reality. The very intensity with which myth is believed by its adherents excludes any rationalistic theory of pure invention. Myth is not some-

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thing freely invented but a necessary mode of feeling and belief which appears in the course of history and seizes upon human consciousness. In accordance with Schelling's philosophy of absolute idealism, the mythological process is fundamentally a "theogonic process," that is, a process in which God or the Absolute reveals Himself historically through human consciousness. Man's consciousness had to pass through the mythological stage of polytheism before the true God could be known as such. Mythology is a necessary stage in the self-revelation of the Absolute.

In the Neo-Kantian philosophy of Ernst Cassirer we have the most significant attempt of modern times to construct a philosophy of myth as an integral part of a philosophy of culture. Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is an attempt to utilize the positive insights of Schelling while transferring them from a philosophy of absolute idealism to that of the Kantian critical philosophy. Myth is thought of as an autonomous form of the human spirit and hence is not reducible to the play of empirical-psychological forces governing the production of representations. Unlike Schelling, however, Cassirer seeks to explain myth through "the unity of a specific structural form of the spirit," rather than as a theogonic phase of the "absolute process." He is concerned to inquire into the essential character of the mythical function and to contrast this function with that of linguistics, aesthetics, and logic. As he puts it, "A critical phenomenology of the mythical consciousness will start neither from the godhead as an original metaphysical fact nor from mankind as an original empirical fact but will seek to apprehend the subject of the cultural process, the human spirit, solely in its pure actuality and diverse configurations whose immanent forms it will strive to ascertain."[1] Myth creates a world of its own in accordance with a spiritual principle, a world which discloses an immanent rule, a characteristic necessity. The objectivity of myth consists in its being a concrete and necessary mode of spiritual formation, "a typical mode of formation in which consciousness disengages itself from and confronts the mere receptivity of the sensory impression."

Cassirer observes that for Schelling all mythology was essentially the theory and history of the gods. Schelling's philosophy of myth, like the ethnological theories of Andrew Lang, Wilhelm Schmidt, and Wilhelm Koppers, presupposes a primary original monotheism followed by a mythological polytheism. Cassirer, however, is inclined to accept the views of Preuss, Vierkandt, and Marett, that primitive religion began with an entirely undifferentiated intuition of a magical, extraordinary power inherent in things. The primitive, mythopoeic mind, he maintains, is to be studied empirically and functionally without any preconceived metaphysical notions.

According to Cassirer, mythical thinking is a unitary form of consciousness with its specific and characteristic features. There is no unity of object in myth but only a unity of function expressed in a unique mode of experience. Hence he is opposed to all forms of "nature mythology" which would explain the origin of myth by reference to some particular class of natural objects, such as astral mythology. Unity of explanation is to be sought only in unity of function, in unity of cultural sphere and structured form.

Ultimately the unity of myth is to be sought not in a genetic and causal explanation but in a teleological sense as a direction followed by consciousness in constructing spiritual reality. It is Cassirer's self-imposed task to inquire into the nature of that formal unity through which the infinitely multiform world of myth constitutes a

[1] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II (New Haven, 1955), 13.

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characteristic spiritual whole. Myth is an autonomous cultural form and must not be "explained" by reduction to some other symbolic form, such as language. Max Müller's attempt to explain the origin of myth in linguistic ambivalence as a kind of "disease of language" is a case in point. Not unity of origin, whether in language or natural object, but unity of structure and function, as revealed in the end or final product, is the true objective. Myth is not a reflection of an objective reality independent of it, but is rather the product of true creative, spiritual actions, an independent image world of the spirit as well as an active force of expression. Myth is the first expression of a spiritual process of liberation which is effected in the progress from the magical-mythical world view to the truly religious view. Myth is the first step in "the dialectic of bondage and liberation which the human spirit experiences with its own self-made image worlds."

In the beginning of human culture myth is not yet sharply differentiated from other cultural forms. Thus language, like myth, preserves a complete equivalence of world and thing and only gradually acquires its own spiritual form and significatory function. Similarly in art there is at first no sharp differentiation between the real and the ideal. Art also is embedded at first in magical representations, and the image has no purely aesthetic significance. Thus, although myth, language, and art interpenetrated one another originally in primitive culture, there is a progressive development to the point where the human spirit becomes conscious of the diversity and relative autonomy of its self-created symbols. Science is distinguished from other forms of cultural life in that through science the human mind knows its symbols as symbols distinct from sense impressions. But this spiritual freedom of self-consciousness is the result of a long process of critical endeavor.

According to Cassirer's Neo-Kantian approach, we must understand the mythical symbol, not as a representation concealing some mystery or hidden truth, but as a self-contained form of interpretation of reality. In myth there is no distinction between the real and the ideal; the image is the thing and hence mythical thinking lacks the category of the ideal. This is true in all stages of mythical thinking and is expressed most clearly in mythical action. In all mythical action the subject of the rite is transformed into a god or demon whom he represents. Hence Cassirer is prepared to admit with Robertson-Smith that rites precede myth and that the narrative of myth is a mediate interpretation of the immediately given rite. This explains why rites are taken so seriously in primitive religion and why it is constantly believed that the continuance of human life and the very survival of the world depend on the correct performance of rites. Nature is thought to yield nothing without ceremonies. Thus in the dance as well as in fertility rites the human actor does not regard himself as engaging in mere imitative representation but as becoming identified momentarily with the person of the mythical drama and exercising his powers. Similarly, word and name do not merely designate and signify objects; they are the essence of the thing and contain its magical powers. In like manner, the image of a thing is endowed with its active force and what happens to the image happens also to the object—a basic assumption of much of primitive magic. Thus in primitive language, art, and magic, mythical thinking uses symbolic representations but without differentiating the symbols from their objects.

This would seem to imply that the Neo-Kantian theory of the constitutive character of symbolism is in accord with the practice of primitive culture and would be

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valid for us *if* we adhered to primitive rites and mythical beliefs. Cassirer himself arrived at the "astonishing conclusion" that David Hume, in attempting to analyze the causal judgment of science, rather revealed a source of all mythical explanation of the world. One feels tempted to say that Cassirer, in attempting to analyze the constructive functions of cultural symbols in constituting objective reality, succeeded only in revealing an implicit assumption of all mythological thought but *not* of critical philosophical and scientific thought, as he thought he had done.

According to Cassirer, myth has a truth of its own distinct from that of other cultural forms since the mythical mind is creative and gives expression to its own form of objective reality. That is why he insists that myth is to be interpreted literally and is opposed to allegorical interpretation on the ground that the latter reduces myth to some other mode of cultural truth such as philosophy, religion, or history, and does not account for the unique and irreducible element in mythical expression.

We are then faced with the problem: what is this ideal, distinctive function of myth? What is myth apart from its expression in primitive word-magic, ritual-magic, and image-magic? If myth as narrative is merely the mediate interpretation of the immediately given rite, in what sense is myth an autonomous expression with a truth of its own? Since all mythical thinking is said to confuse the ideal and the real, the symbol and its object, in what sense then does myth convey a truth of its own through its autonomous symbolic forms?

Cassirer has demonstrated how language gradually frees itself from the mythological context, and how the notion of language as a distinct symbolic form emerges. There is crisis or breaking point in the development of language at which the symbolic, semantic function of language becomes clearly differentiated from its objects. Similarly, religion breaks away from its mythical foundations and assumes its own form. Religious dogma is said to be the form assumed by pure religious meaning when men seek to express this meaning in terms of objective representations. In religious mysticism both the mythical and the dogmatic elements of faith are rejected and the incarnation of God is understood as a process which operates continuously in human consciousness. In the religious consciousness, however, the conflict between the pure meaning and the mythical image is never really resolved. Only in the sphere of art, Cassirer maintains, does the opposition between image and meaning become resolved, for only in the aesthetic consciousness is the image recognized as such.[2] The aesthetic consciousness which gives itself over to pure contemplation finally achieves a pure spiritualization of symbolic expression and a maximum of freedom.

One is compelled to conclude reluctantly that in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer has not demonstrated his thesis that myth is an autonomous form of symbolism. For him, as for the ethnologists and philosophers whom he criticized, myth is a stage in the development of culture. Far from being an autonomous and integral segment of universal human culture, it is rather a mode of thought based on the confusion of the symbolic ideal and the existential real which manifests itself historically at a given stage of cultural evolution. In the progressive development of human conciousness the symbolic functions of language, art, religion, and science are gradually differentiated from the mythological-magical complex, though traces of their mythic origin remain. At most it may be said that for Cassirer myth is a necessary stage in

[2] Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II, 261.

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the creative expression and self-liberation of the human spirit. But since Cassirer acknowledges no metaphysical Absolute as does Schelling, the mythic symbols may not be said to express an implicit religious truth, but only the delusions of the primitive human consciousness as it struggles to interpret the world of experience and reality. Ironically, it may be said that Cassirer's Neo-Kantian vision of a synthesis of symbolic forms each of which is constitutive of objective reality is in agreement with the implicit assumptions of mythological thought, but fails to account for the critical, transcultural validity and objectivity of philosophical and scientific thought which he himself sought to establish.

In his later works, notably in the *Essay on Man* and his posthumous *The Myth of the State,* Cassirer returned to the problem of myth, apparently feeling dissatisfied with his treatment in the earlier work. In his *Essay* he stated that in myth one observes not objective but "physiognomic characters."[3] The world of myth is said to be a dramatic world, a world of conflicting powers, and mythical perception is impregnated with these emotional qualities. While all efforts of scientific thought are directed towards eliminating the subjective, physiognomic perception of nature, the "anthropological value" of the data of physiognomic experience remains unchanged. "Science delimits their objectivity, but it cannot completely destroy their reality." The mythic perception is just as real as the scientific since every feature of our human experience has a claim to reality. Thus myth may be said to contribute a truth of its own as a distinct, qualitative way of envisaging reality through its own symbolic forms and categories.

It is important to note here that myth has no explanatory value as an interpretation of nature. The nature myths with their poetic language and physiognomic characterizations comprise a record of uncritical human experience and constitute "a step on our way to reality." The "truth" of myth is a purely subjective, psychological truth and expresses how reality appears in terms of our human feeling-qualities. In this sense myth is real, just as every psychological experience is real to the subject.

On this evaluation, the "truth" of myth is then purely subjective and differs in no significant way from the purely subjective "truth" of a delusion. This is hardly an argument for the autonomy of myth as a distinct symbolic form with an objective validity comparable to that of science. To argue for the reality of mythical experience in the minds of certain believers is not to establish its autonomy as a distinct symbolic form. The significant question is whether myth may be said to have an objective truth and value of its own, and Cassirer's argument, so far, suggests that it has none. If it be true that "in the new light of science mythical perception has to fade away,"[4] and that myths have no cosmological value, then their so-called "anthropological value" is of no significance other than as a record of precritical human experience.

Far from denying that myths have no objective explanatory value, Cassirer makes a special point of admitting it. The unity of myth is said to consist in a unity of function rather than of object, but this function is not that of explanation. In *The Myth of the State* he develops the thesis that myths are primarily emotional in origin, and that their function is essentially practical and social, namely, to promote a feeling of unity or harmony between the members of a society as well as a sense of harmony

[3] Ernst Cassirer, *Essay on Man* (New Haven, 1944), p. 76.

[4] Cassirer, *Essay on Man,* p. 77.

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with the whole of nature or life. This theory of the pragmatic function of myth is one which Cassirer admittedly derived in large measure from Malinowski, to whom he often refers.

Here we must differentiate between Cassirer's views as to the psychological motivation of the mythopoeic mind and his evaluation of the sociological function of myth. The psychological motivation of myth-making explains the origin of this activity as a direct expression of human feeling rather than of intellectual thought. "The realm substratum of myth is not a substratum of thought but of feeling."[5] Religion and myth are said to give us a "unity of feeling," whereas art provides a unity of intuition, and science comprises a unity of thought.[6] On this psychological premise, myth provides a rationalization and validation of human emotions rather than an objective explanation of nature. In this respect Cassirer's position is anti-intellectual since it reduces the function of thought in primitive culture to a secondary position and gives the primacy to feeling and action. Man acts first and rationalizes his conduct later. This is the psychological basis for Cassirer's acceptance of the historical priority of ritual to myth.

The notion of a "unity of feeling" turns out to be rather complex. First, it refers to the fact that myth and religion have a common origin in human feeling considered as a separate mental faculty. Second, "unity of feeling" has an ontological import and refers to "the solidarity of life." This renders intelligible the outstanding feature of the mythical world, "the law of metamorphosis"[7] in virtue of which everything may be turned into everything. Hence primitive man's view of nature is said to be neither theoretical nor practical, but sentimental and "sympathetic." Primitive man has a deep immediate feeling of the fundamental solidarity of life that underlies the multiplicity of its forms. "To mythical and religious feeling nature becomes one great society, the society of life."[8] When, therefore, Cassirer speaks of the sociological function of myth he finds it easy to make the transition from this metaphysical principle of cosmic sympathy to the notion of the solidarity of human society. With Durkheim and Malinowski he maintains that the pragmatic function of myth is to promote social solidarity as well as solidarity with nature as a whole in time of social crises. Mythical thought is especially concerned to deny and negate the fact of death and to affirm the unbroken unity and continuity of life.[9]

I would differentiate, therefore, the *unity of feeling* considered as a mental faculty from the *feeling of unity* which is a metabiological assumption of the indestructible unity of life. One may maintain the theory that mythical thought implicitly presupposes the latter metaphysical assumption without affirming the former psychological thesis that myth originates in the faculty of feeling rather than of thought. Cassirer, however, does not make this distinction clear and speaks as if unity of feeling and feeling of unity were identical.

Cassirer makes the point in his *Myth of the State* that he does not wish to maintain the thesis that myth originates solely in emotion. "Myth," he states, "cannot be

[5] Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, p. 81.
[6] Ernst Cassirer, *Myth of the State* (New Haven, 1946), p. 37.
[7] Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, p. 81.
[8] Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, p. 83.
[9] Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, p. 84.

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described as bare emotion because it is the *expression* of emotion. The expression of a feeling is not the feeling itself—it is emotion turned into image."[10] Mythical symbolism leads to an objectification of feelings; myth objectifies and organizes human hopes and fears and metamorphosizes them into persistent and durable works. Myth is then a symbolic expression of emotion and instinct with an objective character of its own and it is this symbolic expression which differentiates the work of myth from animal reactions.

On the other hand, man's metabiological impulse to identify himself with, and participate in, the life of nature as a whole leads him to express himself directly in symbolic rites of a religious-magical character in order to ensure his survival and well-being. In myth these ritual acts are "explained" and validated. Thus myth is a unique form of symbolism which supervenes upon the symbolism of ritual in order to validate and perpetuate it. It is not at all clear from Cassirer's account why myth may not be a direct symbolic expression of human emotion without prior reference to ritual. In any event, myth is not a conscious creation or invention of individuals but is rather a product of man's spontaneous expression of emotion and feeling of unity with nature as a whole. Myth differs from art precisely in the fact that the mythical imagination and intuition imply a *belief* in the reality of its object.[11] The mythopoeic mind does not regard myth merely as a symbolic expression or representation of some independent reality; the mythic symbols are identical with the reality.[12] Hence mythical reality is accepted as given and is not subjected to critical evaluation.

Here I would distinguish further two distinct points which are implicit in Cassirer's argument: first, myth is said to be *based on belief* in the reality of its objects and the truth of its intuitions of the unity of nature and solidarity of life; second, myth is said to have the pragmatic function of *promoting belief* in the solidarity of life and society and in overcoming the fear of death. According to the first argument, ritual acts already presuppose an intuition of cosmic unity of life and a feeling of identity of man with nature. On the other hand, if the function of myth is to promote belief in the solidarity of life then this mythic belief is independent of ritual and the latter becomes intelligible only as a function or consequent of myth. There is, it seems to me, a real issue here which Cassirer did not resolve. He tended to agree with Malinowski in stressing the social and pragmatic function of myth in the crises of life and with Robertson-Smith in granting the priority of ritual to myth. He did not realize that his pragmatic, utilitarian approach to myth failed to account for the *fact of belief* which is presupposed in myth but which the myth itself does not produce. Malinowski's pragmatic theory implies the notion of myth as a kind of unconscious, or conscious, fiction which supervenes upon institutional rites—a thesis which Cassirer himself rejects as incompatible with his evolutionary approach to symbolic forms.[13]

To my way of thinking, the central and inescapable issue is the relevance of the question of truth to mythic belief. If myth be conceived as an intrinsically subjective mode of experience, then it may be said to have a purely psychological and ethnological value as a record and expression of uncritical, "physiognomic" emotional

[10] Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, p. 43.
[11] Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, p. 75.
[12] Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, p. 47.
[13] Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, p. 74.

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experience. The "truth" of myth would then lie in its factual and historical subjectivity. But if the mythic and religious intuition of the solidarity and continuity of cosmic life be accepted as true in the sense of being in accord with a non-mythic reality, then myth may be interpreted allegorically. Since Cassirer does not acknowledge any reality other than symbolic reality, the idea of a non-symbolic reality as a referent for myth is precluded. His only alternative is to suggest, following Durkheim, that myth has a sociological or anthropological value. Not nature but society is the model of myth.[14] Myth refers to a social reality, to the rites and institutions of society, and hence the truth of myth consists in its symbolic representation of social rites.[15] In this way Cassirer thought to avoid an allegorical interpretation of myth while providing an objective social referent for mythic symbolism.

Cassirer saw no contradiction in following simultaneously both a metaphysical and a sociological approach.[16] According to his metaphysical approach, myth is based on a primitive intuition of the cosmic solidarity of life and hence he affirms that myth is potential religion. In so far as he follows the sociological approach of Durkheim and Malinowski myth is said to rationalize and validate ritual and metamorphose human hopes and fears, especially the fear of death.

The truth of myth is then a function of the interpretation of myth. If one accepts the truth of the original intuition of the solidarity of life and the dramatic character of its underlying forces then myth symbolizes allegorically a fundamental metaphysical and religious truth. For the sociological approach, however, the truth of myth consists in its symbolic expression of ritual and has no cosmic reference. Cassirer, it appears, was not prepared to acknowledge the rational validity of the primitive intuition of the organic and cosmic solidarity of all life. His only alternatives were to accept either a purely subjective truth of the reality of mythic experience, or else an objective sociological truth which reduced myth to the secondary role of symbolizing ritual. In either case, it is difficult to see how he could defend his original thesis that myth is an autonomous form of symbolism comparable to language, art, and science.

Among American philosophers, W. M. Urban follows most closely the Neo-Kantian views of Cassirer on the positive value of mythic symbolism. In his *Language and Reality* Urban agrees that myth is a unique way of apprehending the world and has its own categories and presuppositions. Urban accepts the mythical origin of the primary religious symbols and hence maintains that myth provides the material of religious symbolism. Nevertheless, myth and religion are not identical. "Neither the form nor the spirit of the two is the same."[17] While the religious consciousness expresses its insights in the language of myth, this does not mean literal acceptance of, and belief in, myths. Myths are interpreted "symbolically" for their ideal meaning. In religion mythical language is used to symbolize a non-mythical reality. Myth is said to be "indispensable" to religion for the reason that it is impossible to separate the language of myth from that of religion. From an epistemological point of view myth is said to be indispensable because it is a primary and unique way of appre-

[14] Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, p. 79.
[15] Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, p. 28.
[16] David Bidney, *Theoretical Anthropology* (New York, 1953), p. 317.
[17] W. M. Urban, *Language and Reality* (London, 1939), p. 592.

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hending reality, which gives expression to qualities and values which elude the symbolism of science.[18] Finally, myth employs a dramatic language and only dramatic language is ultimately intelligible. Myth is, therefore, to be taken seriously, but it may not be taken literally.

It should be noted that while Urban agrees with Cassirer in his positive acceptance of myth, he does so for different reasons. According to Urban, all symbolism has a dual character and embraces the real and the unreal, truth and fiction.[19] Hence the symbol is not identical with objective reality, even though it is only through symbolic forms that the mind comprehends and communicates its knowledge of reality. Mythical symbols are, therefore, said to symbolize a non-mythical, non-symbolic reality. For Cassirer, on the other hand, the symbol is constitutive of reality; there is no objective reality or thing-in-itself other than symbolic reality. Hence, if myth is to be taken seriously, it must be taken literally as well.

Cassirer's theory of the function of human emotion in originating myth and religion is reminiscent in many essentials of Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* to which he refers. According to Bergson, there are two sources of morality and religion, both of which are biological in the sense of being rooted in the nature of man. First, there is the infra-rational social impulse, which man shares in part with animals, to seek solidarity with his group as well as with nature which is the source of life. Second, there is the supra-rational intuition, characteristic of man alone, whereby he comprehends the absolute or divine source of his being. The infra-rational impulse is the source of the closed, static society and social morality; it manifests itself culturally in the presence of society and conformity to social customs. The supra-rational intuition is the source of the open, progressive society, of a human morality and heroic, individual aspiration. There is a difference in kind, and not merely in degree, between these two types of morality and religion.

The role of the intellect is conceived as secondary to emotion and intuition; intellect mediates between the unconscious impulses of the infra-rational and the mystic intuitions of the supra-rational. According to Bergson, "Man, fresh from the hands of nature, was a being both intelligent and social, his sociability being devised to find its scope in small communities, his intelligence being designed to further individual and group life."[20] The primary function of intelligence is to find means of promoting social solidarity and regulating it by means of rules and principles. Reason itself is not the source of moral obligation as the Kantian idealists maintain; moral obligation is rooted in emotion and impulse, in the biological necessities of life.

But rational intelligence tends in time to defeat this "intention" of nature by alienating the individual from his society and from nature. The function or utility of the myth-making imagination, and of religion which is its product, is to counteract this tendency of the intelligence to break up the cohesion of society while promoting individual freedom and initiative. "Religion," according to Bergson, "is a defensive reaction of nature against the dissolvent power of intelligence."[21] In particular, reli-

[18] Urban, *Language and Reality,* p. 593.

[19] Urban, *Language and Reality,* p. 420.

[20] Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion,* Doubleday Anchor Books ed. (New York, 1954), p. 57.

[21] Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality,* p. 122.

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gion is a defense reaction against the intellectual notion of the inevitability of death. Religion is not motivated by fear, but is a positive reaction against the fears induced by the intellect.

Myth in general (including religion) is a joint product of instinct and intelligence introduced to counteract the destructive and devisive activities of intelligence and to promote belief in the solidarity of life. The myths and superstitions of man have a positive biological function in promoting life and in counteracting the excesses of intelligence which threaten the individual and his society. Hence we are confronted with the apparent paradox "that an essentially intelligent being is naturally superstitious, and that intelligent creatures are the only superstitious beings."[22]

Bergson's position on myth is then characterized by a positive as well as negative attitude. Like the rationalists he tends to identify myth with unconscious fiction and superstition, but at the same time he recognizes the pragmatic, biological value of myth in its religious form in counteracting the excesses of intelligence and in promoting a positive faith in the continuity of life. The final objectives and consequences of religious myth are sound and are in accord with the "intentions" of nature and in this sense myth may be said to conceal the wisdom of nature. But myth is not the only social instrument of nature in the service of man. Through supra-rational intuition and divine revelation there is revealed an absolute truth and a transcendental morality which inspires man to free himself from his mythical superstitions and the pressures of static, closed society. A true, dynamic morality and religion do not require the myth-making functions characteristic of primitive cultures.

Finally, according to the ethnological work of the French ethnologist Maurice Leenhardt, as interpreted recently by Eric Dardel in his essay on "The Mythic,"[23] myth is to be understood as a "reaction to reality." For Dardel, myth is infra-rational but coexists with reason and complements it. Myth is said to be "neither 'true' nor 'false'; it is beyond our logic's horizon, in that 'pang' which comes upon man in the midst of things. In the myth and by means of the mythic image, there is an externalisation of the inner stirring, the emotion of man as he meets the world, his receptivity to impulses coming from 'outside,' the communality of substance which welds him to the totality of beings."[24]

Man's interpretation of the world is said to have evolved through three stages: a mythic stage, an epic stage, and a historical stage. The mythic stage changes into the epic stage when man bases his conduct on some notion of "the model man," or the cult of the hero. The historic stage emerges when man ceases to look to the exemplary past and sets up for himself rational objectives and means for their attainment.

Following Lévy-Bruhl, Cassirer, and Bergson, Dardel stresses the point that myth is closely bound up with emotion and "renounces reflection." Myth involves strong emotional attachments and beliefs in "verities" which are declared to be true. As Dardel puts it, "Every period declares 'its' truth in this way and is warmly attached to it. Our 'truth' of the moment is often only a myth that does not know it is one, and, as M. Jourdain put it, we make myths every day without knowing it."[25] The

[22] Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality*, p. 109.
[23] Eric Dardel, "The Mythic," *Diogenes*, No. 7 (Summer, 1954), pp. 33-51.
[24] Dardel, "The Mythic," p. 36.
[25] Dardel, "The Mythic," p. 37.

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myth-making function is a universal and fundamental phenomenon of whose emotional motivation the mind is largely unconscious.

Dardel is also in basic agreement with Bergson and Cassirer that myth is the common source of morality and religion. The fundamental religious myth, he maintains, is not the story of the gods, but the totemic myth from which the myth of the gods evolves. In this respect his position conforms to that of Durkheim.

With the advent of rationality or the *Logos,* myth loses ground and is "driven back into the shadows." Dardel agrees with Bergson that the victory of *Logos* is not necessarily beneficial to man. The ground lost by myth is not always won by reason and freedom. Unlike Bergson, however, Dardel has no alternative to myth other than reason. He is, therefore, inclined to fall back on Jung's theory that myth is always a typical story, an archaic type with exemplary value. Hence, far from disparaging and distrusting myth, he counsels that "it is better above all to lend an ear to this mythic, underlying our own reason and knowing, which the work of Jung and his school have brought to light as one of the great realities of our mental life."[26] Myth, though based on instinct and emotion, contains an unconscious wisdom; it is not something to be superseded by science, even though it may assume the face of science and the diction of reason. Our basic social faiths, like those of primitive man, are grounded in myth. This explains "the impassioned tonality which makes certain 'verities' vibrate inside us, which ought to remain serene and indifferent to contradiction. The myth is what we never see in ourselves, the secret spring of our vision of the world, of our devotion, of our dearest notions."[27]

In sum, myth is beyond truth and falsity. The "truth" of myth is a function of its pragmatic and dramatic effectiveness in moving men to act in accordance with typical, emotionally charged ideals. The effectiveness of myth depends in large measure upon ignorance or unconsciousness of its actual motivation. That is why myth tends to recede before the advance of reason and self-conscious reflection. But myth has a perennial function to perform in providing a basis for social faith and action. Our myths are rooted in the collective unconscious, and we are most in their power when we are unconscious of their origin.

The history of mythological theory demonstrates that there have been two basic approaches to the interpretation of myth, the literal and the symbolic. On the whole, ethnologists have tended to interpret myth literally as an expression of primitive thought but have differed in their evaluation of myth. Evolutionary, positivistic ethnologists, such as Tylor, have regarded myth negatively as a mode of explanatory thought destined to be superseded by scientific thought. Functionalistic ethnologists, such as Malinowski, have evaluated myth in terms of its pragmatic function in resolving critical problems which affect the welfare and destiny of the individual and his society. Myths are then said to validate institutions and rites. They are rationalizations introduced to justify established social facts. Pragmatic philosophers and sociologists, such as Sorel and Pareto, have recognized cynically the fictional character of myth but have nevertheless justified its use as an instrument of policy and social control. Bergson, we have seen, saw in myth an expression of the cunning of

[26] Dardel, "The Mythic," p. 42.
[27] Dardel, "The Mythic," p. 50.

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nature and intelligence designed to counteract the excesses of intelligence in alienating man from society and nature. So understood, myth has a limited biological value which may be superseded in so far as man is motivated to act by his supra-rational intuitions and aspirations.

On the other hand, idealistic philosophers and theologians have, from ancient to modern times, interpreted myth allegorically as symbolizing some transcendental, timeless truth but have differed among themselves as to the nature of the object and truth so symbolized. In contemporary thought, myth has been evaluated positively owing in large measure to the influence of psychoanalytical theory, especially that of Jung. In philosophy and religion, Neo-Kantian philosophers, such as Cassirer and Urban, and theologians of the stature of Nicolas Berdyaev and Richard Neibuhr, have advocated a positive evaluation of myth. In the sphere of literary criticism, scholars such as Northrop Frye, Maud Bodkin, and most recently Philip Wheelwright, have taken myth seriously as symbolizing universal archetypes and "primordial images" emerging from the collective unconscious. The positive value of myth is affirmed by those who are skeptical of the power of reason to comprehend reality, or the revelations of intuition, as well as by those who accept the position of linguistic and symbolic relativism and adhere to the theory that symbols have no truth-value but only a moral, poetic value as regulative ideals.

My own thesis is that a scientific study of myth should be concerned with the comparative and historical analysis of myth and that myth should be interpreted literally. Myth has a positive value for the ethnologist and folklorist as a record of man's culture history and as a means of establishing universal patterns of thought. Myth, like great art and dramatic literature, may have profound symbolic or allegorical value for us of the present, not because myth necessarily and intrinsically has such latent, esoteric wisdom, but because the plot or theme suggests to us universal patterns of motivation and conduct. It must not be assumed, however, that the subjective, symbolic value of a myth for us and the actual historical beliefs of its originators are identical.

Further, as indicated in *Theoretical Anthropology,* I should maintain that myth is a universal cultural phenomenon originating in a plurality of motives and involving all mental faculties. As products of the creative intelligence of man myths may refer to any class of objects whatsoever, and hence I regard all attempts to reduce myth to some monistic class of objects as essentially misleading. I am inclined also to question seriously the notion of a mythopoeic mind, or a special faculty or form of mythic symbolism as advocated by Cassirer and Urban. Myth originates wherever thought and imagination are employed uncritically or deliberately used to promote social delusion. All mental functions may contribute to the formation of myth, and there is historically an essential similarity in the psychological functions involved in its emergence and diffusion. All that changes is the type of myth which prevails at different times and in different cultures. In prescientific cultures animistic myths and magical rites tend to prevail. In our secular, scientific cultures we have naturalistic social myths reflecting ethnocentrism and deliberate falsification in the interests of propaganda. The social and political myths of our time, the effective social faith which guides national policy, are often the product of the divorce of scientific thought from the social values and beliefs which motivate our conduct. The tragic element in

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all this is the fact that this separation of science and values has been brought about in no small measure by a deliberate restriction of the function of science and scientific method to non-cultural data.

My conclusion is that while in times of crisis the "noble fiction" may have its immediate, pragmatic utility in promoting social faith and solidarity, faith in reason and in the ability of democratic man to govern himself rationally requires a minimum of reliance upon myth. To my mind, contemporary philosophers and theologians, as well as students of literature in general, who speak of the "indispensable myth" in the name of philosophy and religion, and anthropologists and sociologists who cynically approve of myth because of its pragmatic social function, are undermining faith in their own disciplines and are contributing unwittingly to the very degradation of man and his culture which they otherwise seriously deplore. Myth must be taken seriously as a cultural force but it must be taken seriously precisely in order that it may be gradually superseded in the interests of the advancement of truth and the growth of human intelligence. Normative, critical, and scientific thought provides the only self-correcting means of combating the diffusion of myth, but it may do so only on condition that we retain a firm and uncompromising faith in the integrity of reason and in the transcultural validity of the scientific enterprise.

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