

Theories of Myth
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THEORIES OF MYTH*

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This is a survey and assessment of theories of myth. But it is also intended as a theoretical exercise. Anthropologists were, for a long time, and particularly under the influence of Malinowski, concerned with the functional interdependence of different items of social structure and culture. Nowadays, and especially since the first Malinowski Lecture, they are less wedded to this holistic enterprise (see Leach 1961). But in giving up some forms of functional analysis they have paid little attention to another: that of establishing the interconnexions between the different functions performed by the same item of culture. One of my purposes is to argue that this can, in some cases, be extremely fruitful. For it is not simply that a cultural phenomenon like myth has different functions, but that these may be so closely interrelated that the performance of one lends strength to the performance of another. If this be so, then some of the different theories of myth might be seen not as competing but as complementary. This does not mean that all theories are good in all respects. The task here is to weed out bad theories or bad elements in theories and to seek a synthesis which is not simply a device for avoiding choice.

In popular usage the term 'myth' is almost always intended pejoratively: here, my beliefs are a strong conviction, yours a dogma, his a myth. Myths, on this view, are erroneous beliefs clung to against all evidence. The term is then synonymous with fallacy and old wives' tale, and its usage conveys the implication that the believer lives, at best, in cloud-cuckoo land and, at worst, in a state of savage perdition.

Now myths are really not errors; they are certainly *not* like the errors in which science abounds: for they always contain reference to some objects and events which could not possibly exist and occur. This being so, there are no statements of observations which could test them scientifically. They are not errors, for their truth, for those who accept them, is preserved for eternity.[1]

The chief characteristics of myth are as follows: a myth is a narrative of events; the narrative has a sacred quality; the sacred communication is made in symbolic form; at least some of the events and objects which occur in the myth neither occur nor exist in the world other than that of myth itself; and the narrative refers in dramatic form to origins or transformations. The narrative quality distinguishes a myth from a general idea or set of ideas, such as a cosmology. The sacred quality and the reference to origins and transformations distinguish myth from legend and other types of folk-tale. The narration of events and reference to objects unknown outside the world of myth differentiates myth from history or pseudo-history. One might raise the question of whether or not to mention that myths are believed

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and, therefore, to be distinguished from fictional narrative; but that would drag me into controversy with either Dr Leach or Professor Spiro, and I shall leave them to the mercy of each other's strictures.

A theory of myth should explain something about the phenomenon: that is, it should explain a statement which refers to some aspect or aspects of the phenomenon. There are many theories of myth, but they are not necessarily rival theories: the reason for this is that different theories often explain different statements about myth. Particular theories may, of course, explain several statements about myth and they may therefore compete, partly or wholly, with other theories. But there is inevitable confusion in the debate between different proponents of different theories if they do not make it clear whether they are true rivals and what the area of their rivalry is. In such a state of confusion, a clearing operation may help.

Malinowski was very much responsible for creating the state of affairs which calls for such an operation. He proposed a theory of myth which held the field until very recently. Furthermore, in proposing it, he suggested that it should oust those that had held the field until then. But he did not give a satisfactory explanation of why his theory was better than those which it was thought to have ousted. For that matter, no one has given a good reason for replacing Malinowski's theory by that of Lévi-Strauss. Perhaps no one intends to. But if there is no such intention then one might at least enquire what the relationship between these theories ought to be; and what the relationship of both ought to be to those theories which were thought to have been ousted by Malinowski's.

* * * * *

Classifying theories of myth is not easy. In offering a classification I do not presuppose that theories are pure in character, but only that they emphasise one or more components more than they do others; my real interest is in the components themselves. Furthermore, I do not submit this classification as exhaustive; I am concerned only with theories which, in my judgement, are still, in some ways, valuable.

There are seven main types of theory of myth: that which treats myth as a form of explanation and, in particular, a form which occurs at a certain stage in the development of human society and culture; that which treats myth as a form of symbolic statement which has the function, not of explanation, but of expression as an end in itself, and which reflects a particular type of thought, the mythopoeic; that which treats it as an expression of the unconscious; that which accounts for it in terms of its function in creating and maintaining social solidarity, cohesion, etc.; that which stresses its function in legitimating social institutions and social practices; that which treats it as a form of symbolic statement about social structure, possibly linked with ritual; and, finally, there is the structuralist theory.

The first type, which treats myth as explanation, is an example of what has come to be known as nineteenth century intellectualism, a mode of anthropological thinking which, apparently, attributes to primitive or early man characteristics of intellectual curiosity not unlike those of nineteenth century anthropologists. (There is much irony in this situation, considering how intent the Victorians were on

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emphasising the evolutionary distance between themselves and mere savages.) Nineteenth century intellectualists would not have cared to be lumped together, though this has become their posthumous fate. For Frazer, myth is to be read literally, and treated as an explanation of certain phenomena: for example, the story of the tower of Babel is simply one way of explaining the variety of human languages and cultures (Frazer 1919: 362–87).

Tylor also treated myths as explanations, but considered that they were peculiar explanations: for him, the chief peculiarities are that myths make use of the language of metaphor and that metaphor is used by primitive man to *personalise* the forces of the natural world which he seeks to understand and control (Tylor 1958: 368–416).

The chief weaknesses of these theories are that they do not explain why myth is social in character, and why the possession of certain myths is not only collective but is significant in marking the identity of a particular social group; and they provide poor accounts of the symbolic content of myth. The chief merit of the intellectualist doctrine is that it does recognise that men, including savages, have intellects and, moreover, that they might also have intellectual curiosity.

The theory of mythopoeic thought probably has its modern origins in the doctrines of Müller who was, in some respects, an intellectualist. One of Müller's chief concerns was to interpret the content of myth as an attempt to explain solar phenomena. But he also asserted the existence of a mythopoeic form of thought which he accounted for in terms of what he called the 'disease of language' (see Dorson 1965).

An elaboration of the doctrine of mythopoeic thought has been made by Ernst Cassirer, who seeks to ground his theory in neo-Kantian epistemology. (Perhaps ground' is, after all, an inappropriate term.) Cassirer's initial assumption is that myth-making can no more be explained or explained away than can the making of poetry or music: myth is one way of using language for expressive purposes, through the symbolic devices of metonymy and synechdoche, and myth-making is, in some respects, an end in itself. Mythical thinking is opposed to that of science and philosophy: the latter is oriented to the perception of things, while the former is rooted in 'the perception of expression itself'. (I am not quite sure what Cassirer or his translator means by 'the perception of expression' as opposed to 'expression'.) In myth 'there is no fixed and separate "world of cause". Every shape can metamorphose into another: anything can come from anything' (Cassirer 1961: 94). The human mind experiences reality in a double mode: on the one hand, it finds things in the world akin to itself; on the other, it finds that they are realities *sui generis*. The former mode gives rise to myth, the latter to science and philosophy. In other words, what Cassirer seems to be saying is that myth is fantasy in which the world is imbued with the characteristics of mind alone. For mythical thinking, unlike science and philosophy, is unconstrained by the requirement of comprehending real objects, and is stimulated by mind to invent their properties (1961: 94–6). Cassirer does not explain *why* these *two* modes of thought exist, nor why one should predominate in some circumstances: he does think that once scientific thought emerges it sets itself in opposition to myth, so reducing its cultural importance.

The weakest feature of Cassirer's theory is his resort to the concept of mytho-

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poeic thought: this is in the worst tradition of essentialism. If mythopoeic thought is inferred from myth then it can scarcely explain it. On the other hand, if the concept is to have explanatory value, then there must be independent evidence and argument concerning the assumption that there are two, or perhaps more, modes of thought: neither argument nor evidence are satisfactorily provided by Cassirer. The important merits of the theory are: firstly, that it recognises that mythical thinking is a mode of symbolically structuring the world, and that this, like poetry or even ritual, might be, at least in part, an activity in its own right; and secondly, that myth is to be treated as relating to the processes of the mind as projected on to the world.

The idea of projection brings one logically to psycho-analytic theories of myth, which actually antedate Cassirer's. These theories come in a variety of forms. Perhaps the best known is the Jungian, because Jung and his followers bring myth into their basic theoretical suppositions about the nature of the human mind, while the followers of Freud treat the phenomena of myth as derivative from other fundamental properties. The kernel of all psycho-analytic theories of myth is the assumption that the symbols of myth and, possibly, the themes underlying the plots are constructed in, or well up from, the unconscious: and when psycho-analysts use the word 'unconscious' they do not mean by this what most laymen mean by the term 'subconscious'. The material of the unconscious is not on the tip of the conscious tongue; it cannot readily be made conscious, except by using a theory which, firstly, interprets the symbols of the unconscious in the language of consciousness and, secondly, unravels the processes of condensation, displacement, splitting, etc., which are characteristic of it.

For Jung, the symbolic structure of the unconscious is a reality, *sui generis*: it cannot be fully reduced to any other level of experience. Some of this symbolic substratum is shared by all humans; other parts are shared only by members of the same race, nation or cultural group. (Neo-Jungians would opt for cultural group and stress socialisation as opposed to racial-genetic inheritance.) The universal characteristics of the collective unconscious of mankind takes local forms which are expressed in the varieties of myth (Jung 1961).

This brief summary may do little justice to Jung. His own achievement in this field has been his ability to discern repeated motifs in a variety of mythical contexts. But I must confess to little enthusiasm for his theory. Here, once again, myth is treated as an irreducible mental property. There may be something to this: but to adopt this position with little justification is to succumb to the phenomenon without even an intellectual struggle.

The Freudian theorists—and here I include not just those who claim to be close followers of Freud, but Kleinians as well as neo-Freudians—treat myths, as they do many other phenomena, as expressions of other mental forces. These theories seek to explain not only why myths take the form they do, but what the source of mythical expression is. In short, they seek to answer two closely related questions: What produces myth? And what do mythical symbols mean? (See, for example, Rank 1952: 1–11; Roheim 1945.)

In this view, myths are like day-dreams. Dreams which occur in full sleep involve a process known as the dream-work, of symbolically reconstructing messages which emit from the unconscious. In this process two main things occur: the

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message is disguised; and the body of messages is condensed. The unconscious mechanisms involved are very different from those of the ordering of conscious experience: for example, the whole structuring of time is different, and sequences may even be reversible. In day-dreams *some* of this occurs, but there is much greater conscious control in the ordering of events which occur in narrative form, of the choice of material to be used and processed, and of the symbols which are found appropriate for the representation of a number of ideas, images and sentiments which are drawn together; nevertheless, the unconscious does exercise a great influence. The main reason for this is that the unconscious fantasies and mechanisms are checked only when consciousness itself introduces the feed-back of external reality; and in a day-dream this check is partly absent, so that some reality is processed into the world of fantasy, and the picture of the world is partly a controlled projection of the unconscious.

Since myth is a type of day-dream it makes use of the symbolism of dreams, expressing unconscious wishes and conflicts. But since it is only a *day*-dream, and the conscious element is strong, it is more readily communicable than a dream; furthermore, the manifest content plays a greater part in the message to be communicated, and is not simply a device for the unconscious. But there are all the signs of the dream mechanisms of condensation, displacement and splitting: the first of these is a process of linking together a number of ideas and sentiments in one symbol; the second is a process of shifting an idea or sentiment from one all too obvious object to another, which is adequate to represent it in some way; the third involves dividing an object into two parts, each bearing only favourable or unfavourable attributes (see Freud 1952).

In psycho-analytic theory myths deal, for the most part, with the elementary facts of life. Mythical symbolism expresses a universal concern with such themes as: the dangers, horrors and attractions of incest; infantile sexual curiosity, and the fantasies which accompany these, which often link sexuality with aggression, and which confuse different bodily functions; the processes of physical and psychological incorporation and expulsion; the fear of abandonment and destruction; the yearning for admission or re-admission (after exclusion); rivalry between parent and child, and between siblings; and, in doing so, it makes use of the common devices of the unconscious.

But none of this interpretation of the symbols of myth, none of the analysis of the mechanisms of mythical presentation, none of the likening of myth to day-dream, explains why men construct myths rather than just any other day-dreams (are all of our day-dreams myths?), why these myths ring true for others, and why the sharing of myths is a significant social and cultural fact. There are three possibilities open to psycho-analysis if it wishes to meet these objections: it can make the modest claim only to explain the meaning of some mythical symbols, though this would no more explain myths than it would explain dreams, day-dreams or poems, since all use the same symbolic and other devices; the second possibility would be to assert that myths exist *in order* to ensure that certain day-dreams are collectively recognised; and the third possibility is to go beyond the day-dream analogy while still depending upon psycho-analytic theory to explain the attraction of myth.

The first possibility needs little comment: though few anthropologists pay attention to the psycho-analytic interpretation of myth, few can doubt that these

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interpretations are often meaningful to those who recount these myths. Let me cite what to me is a clear example of this—a New Guinea myth reported by Burridge, whose informants provide the evidence for a psycho-analytic interpretation of symbols. And I do not comment on Burridge's own fascinating analysis, which may well stand alongside others. The story goes as follows:

> Once upon a time the leading man of the village was fishing by the light of his bamboo torch in Cipenderp stream when it came on to rain. The leading man and all the other men and women of the village took shelter under the lee of a large stone. The last to come were a boy and his sister, orphans. They were dirty, unwashed and smelly. 'Hey! You two can't come in here!' exclaimed the leading man, 'You smell too much!' The storm increased in intensity, the rain poured down, the two orphans sought shelter in a hollow tree.
>
> Seeing what had happened, the Great One on High sympathised with the orphans. He caused the stone to envelop the villagers.
>
> The orphans returned to the village, mourning their fellows. Later they tried to crack open the stone. It was no use. They killed all the pigs in the village, collected piles of foodstuffs and, with the help of neighbours, put all the meat and tubers by the stone.
>
> It was no good. The villagers died of hunger inside the stone (Burridge 1967: 102–3).

According to Burridge and according to his informants, these are the main meanings of the symbols. 'Bamboo-stick' evokes bamboo slivers used for circumcision. The term 'shelter' evokes club-house, which, in turn, links with circumcision. Then we have the surviving orphans who, Burridge speculates, must commit incest to restart the community. We are told that 'rain' symbolises semen, and the storm represents attributes of maleness; that 'light' is associated with moral responsibility, also linked with circumcision, while darkness is associated with blindness, unawareness and communal exclusion. Now it should be emphasised that Burridge presents these associations and symbolisations as coming from his informants, but that he does not himself use them for psycho-analytic interpretation: in other words, there seems to have been no danger in his reading things into the mythical symbols because of a Freudian bias. Yet the myth makes classical, Freudian sense. The brother and sister are excluded from the shelter for being orphans, unwashed and smelly; as a result they are later to commit incest. Here is a simple reversal; the orphans are smelly because they are incestuous. To exclude them is, in effect, a denial of incestuous possibilities. But tacitly, the myth acknowledges the incestuous wish by rewarding the orphans, or by permitting them to destroy the villagers; alternatively, the myth may imply a recognition that the smelly, orphaned pair represents the repressed unconscious, for which the community must be punished by extinction. The denial of incestuous wishes is a cardinal element of moral responsibility, and the moral responsibility of men is related to membership in the club-house and to circumcision; the latter may also, symbolically, represent token punishment for incestuous wishes; and dirtiness and immorality are made unconscious equivalents.

This brief, perhaps superficial, interpretation raises many questions and leaves many unanswered. But it is my guess that pursuing this line complements and does not substitute for or weaken other interpretations.

The second possibility for psycho-analysis is to assert that myths exist to ensure that certain day-dreams are collectively recognised. The argument here could be that achieving such subliminal recognition could, in some way, support the moral rules, which are always at stake, especially by communicating the ambivalences

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and conflicts surrounding them. But this does not explain why the mode of communication should be a narrative.

This brings one to the third possibility. The essence of this theory would be that narrative is important in itself: that myth locates particular moral values at an earlier point in time, by creating a time-sequence of events. The events recounted may relate to cabbages and kings: but they also have their unconscious referents. (In this case cabbage equals a spherical object fit to be eaten, or incorporated, grown close to earth; kings equal commanders of men, who may also command the use of cabbages.) The significance of creating an original time reference would be that this links moral affirmation with an earlier or original state, namely childhood; myth expresses a recognition that morality is rooted in the early processses of identification, and employs devices which are characteristic of a childlike mental process known as the omnipotence of thought, or, if one prefers, the omnipotence of fantasy.

This third possibility, which is an attempt to explain the significance of mythical narrative in psycho-analytic terms, does not represent any psycho-analytic theory actually known to me; it is rather an attempt to establish a case for such a theory.

There are a number of difficulties with psycho-analytic approaches to myth. First, it is by no means clear that all myths need to be interpreted psycho-analytically: putting it another way, one might argue that the significance of real unconscious processes, as interpreted by psycho-analytic theory, may be relatively slight in some myths and relatively great in others. If there is such a variation then it is unlikely that psycho-analytic theory can account for the appeal of all myths, for their source, and for their narrative form. It seems likely that some myths lend themselves far more than others to this kind of treatment. Second, psycho-analysis does not really explain the social significance of myth. If all men recognise the subliminal message of myth, then they should be independently capable of inventing the fantasies which underly them. Third, the unconscious meaning of mythical symbols and the unconscious significance of myth-making may itself only be understandable if myth is also interpreted in other ways. I hope to return to this third point.

So far I have been dealing with non-sociological theories of myth. Sociological theories arose largely as a reaction to these. Since they are still part of the stock of anthropological theory, I shall discuss them very briefly. Although such theories can be traced back to the Greeks, they are associated, in recent times, with Durkheim and Malinowski. For Durkheim, myth is part of the religious system, and expresses in words what ritual expresses in actions: both have a social function of maintaining and expressing solidarity. The content of the myth, like that of ritual, is symbolically significant: in the first place, it represents certain values which are embodied in social life; secondly, it reflects certain features of social structure. Thus, for example, totemic myths concern the objects which have sacred value for the group and so symbolise its unity; but, furthermore, the linking of a myth with a group gives *it* an identity as against another group with another such myth. The concrete objects or persons which are the *dramatis personae* of the narratives are accorded sacredness; and the sharing of sacred attachment binds the social group and differentiates it from others. Durkheim also points out that myth, along with other religious beliefs, provides the basis of all cultural means of categorising the

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world: and this forms the basis of philosophy and science (Durkheim 1961: esp. 419–20).

Malinowski's theory derives from Durkheim's, but differs from it in two important general respects: it lacks the epistemological dimension which, however faulty, gives to Durkheim's thinking a special awareness of symbolisation, categorisation, and so on; however, it contains an element of earthy pragmatism so often lacking in Durkheim. Malinowski's Trobrianders are business-like men, very much of this world; and if they believe stories about original witches it is because, like all men, they run up against the limits of reason and fact. To legitimate their institutions they need some sort of charter which is beyond fact, beyond reason, and refers to events beyond memory and ordinary time. The rules which govern everyday life are always, in some respects and to some extent, in doubt: real history, real patterns of migration and settlement, real claims to property and power, always involve inconsistencies and irreconcilable demands: myths, in recounting the events of an invented or partly-invented past, resolve these inconsistencies and affirm one set of claims as against another. The introduction of imaginary events takes the point of origin out of the realm of memory; and the introduction of unreal events gives the story a quality which transcends the mundane. If the story is about the arrival of flying witches, it sanctions clan rights; if it is about original people who emerge from holes in the ground, it affirms territorial rights; if it concerns fights between pigs and dogs, in which the former triumph, it affirms the superior status of one sub-clan over another. Malinowski does not argue that all myths have significance only for political and property rights: some myths, for example, are necessary to give authenticity to magical practices (Malinowski 1948).

Malinowski's incomparable description and analysis show clearly that he did not ignore the content of myth. Its importance, for him, lay neither in symbolic representation nor in explanatory power, but in its justificatory message. Malinowski doubted that the Trobrianders were interested in explanation as such; nor did he see them as symbolists. In fact, his Trobrianders were almost as positivistic as he was. They have become less so in the hands of his successors.

Other anthropologists in the sociological tradition have tended to follow some aspects of Durkheim's thought more closely than Malinowski did, often combining it with other elements. They have either stressed the connexion between myth and ritual or have elaborated the theory that myth contains a sociological message; sometimes they have done both. Raglan (1955) has asserted that wherever research has been pursued far enough, it has found that myths are traceable to rituals with which they are enjoined. When faced with myths that are not obviously associated with rituals, Raglan merely affirms his belief that such a connexion might still be found. The expansion of Raglan's argument is that myth is needed to validate a rite, and validation is required so as to have the details of the rite precisely stated. Doubtless there are myths which validate rites; but there are equally others which do not appear to do this. An obvious example is the genesis myth of creation. Of course, this myth is sometimes recited in ritual situations; but that is hardly the point; it is not recited along with a ritual which dramatises either creation or anything specifically to do with it.

Robert Graves (1955) also links myth with ritual. He disavows the aim of proposing a general theory of myth, stating only an interest in Greek myths which,

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he argues, have always been associated with rituals. He states: 'True myth may be defined as the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals . . .' (Graves 1955: 10). But when it comes to cases, Graves does not necessarily interpret myth as simply reflecting ritual. An example is the myth of the birth of Athene, who springs from an orifice in the head of Zeus after he has swallowed Metis. Graves interprets this as follows. The Achaeans suppressed the female cult, but, as a compromise, accepted the temples of Athene as subservient to the sovereignty of those of Zeus, a patriarchal god (1955: 20–1). Thus the myth is a cryptic statement, not of ritual, but of an historical development in which one ritual comes to dominate another; which is rather different.

Another defence of the myth-ritual thesis is contained in the writings of Edmund Leach before his acceptance of a modified structuralism. Leach says that myth and ritual are different modes of communicating the same message, both being symbolic, cryptic assertions about social structure (Leach 1954: 13–14). It is doubtful whether Leach really intends to assert a universal statement, or whether he really intends one to treat ritual as the semiotic *equivalent* of myth. What he is, in effect, saying is that in some cases myth corresponds to ritual and both refer to social structure. For example, myths about ancestors and the rituals of ancestral cults may both signify the ideal conception of lineality; and the idealisation may be necessary where the realities of unilineal descent, inheritance and succession create inconsistent and irreconcilable claims. But if myth and ritual do this, does not this depend on their both having properties which enable them to do it. Perhaps it is the recognition of this which has led Leach, more recently, to pay greater attention to the intrinsic nature of myth (see for example, Leach 1961; 1966). In fact, the chief weakness of most sociological theories of myth is that they do not really explain why the social function of myth should be performed by myth and not by some other device: to do this they would have to explain something more about the properties of mythical belief which would, in turn, require further examination of the nature of mythical symbols and of the structure of mythical thought. Does Lévi-Strauss's structuralism help to overcome this weakness?

If Lévi-Strauss has achieved one thing in the study of cultural phenomena, it has been to persuade anthropologists not only to attend more to the mind of primitive man, but also to try to generalise more about its properties; and if this has sometimes led to a confusion of the collective representations of primitive societies with the Cartesian cogitations of a Professor of the Collège de France, we should be willing to make allowances. The trouble with trying to state Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth is that he has never fully stated it himself. He has written three large volumes analysing myths, and these were preceded by one which contains many of the elements of a theory: and he has also written an essay on the study of myth. But nowhere has he presented us with a coherent, explanatory theory. So in putting together this version of the theory I may be guilty of trivialisation or of reading things into Lévi-Strauss which are not there. But I can argue in defence that I am not alone in having difficulty with the thoughts of this great man. I must also confess to not being entirely sympathetic to an obscurantist tradition which encourages the belief that if a problem is complex then its complexities are best conveyed with the maximum of ambiguity (see Lévi-Strauss 1963; 1964; 1966; 1967; 1968).

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In presenting Lévi-Strauss's theory, let me start with a question: does myth explain the events of the natural and social world? To this he answers 'No', since primitive men do have other means of explaining and categorising the world. But he strongly affirms the intellectual significance of myth, seeing it, in some important respects, as the precursor of science: not the science of the concrete, as he calls it, but the science of abstract relations, a characteristic which myth shares with totemic ideas (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 1–33). The main function of myth, the main cause promoting its existence as a mode of thought, is that it is a device for 'mediating contradictions' or 'oppositions' as experienced by men. The myth recounts certain events, but its significance for those who recite and attend to it lies not in this narrative description, but in the structure, in which significant 'contradictions' are posed and 'mediated'.

One of the best-known examples which illustrates the method, as well as this part of the explanatory theory, is Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the Oedipus myth. It should be emphasised that Lévi-Strauss is not merely demonstrating a method; for he uses the words, 'We may now see what it means' (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 216). The myth is broken down into four main elements: 1) Oedipus marries his mother; 2) he kills his father; 3) he kills the sphinx; 4) he becomes swollen-footed. It should be noted that the elements are not listed in narrative order, for what is important is the structural relation between them. The first element, incest, signifies an over-rating of blood relations. (Quite an understatement.) The second, parricide, signifies the under-rating of blood relations. (Another understatement.) The third, slaying a monster, denies the autochthonous nature of man. The fourth, the limping Oedipus, who symbolises the emergence of man from the earth and who is, therefore, defective in walking, affirms the autochthonous origin of man. The structure of the message is that 1:2::3:4. That is, over-rating kinship is to under-rating, as non-autochthony is to autochthony. In other words, the meaning of the myth is this. If man is autochthonous, then, in theory, he is born of one: but, in fact, he is born of two; therefore he is not autochthonous. But since it appears to be necessary to believe that he is simultaneously autochthonous and born of two, he must be the product of incest. The myth sets up the contradictions and then, by an intellectual trick, mediates them.

This is a mere skeleton of one analysis. Much of Lévi-Strauss's recent work consists in using the method to read a whole set of myths, including a whole set of versions of the same myth, as one structural set. This demonstrates the repetition of a particular message whose underlying structure may be clothed in different narrative content. But Lévi-Strauss is *not*, as some of his supporters and denigrators would assert, interested in structure as something opposed to theme, motif or content: there may be analysts of mythical content who are not interested in structure; but there are none who are interested in structure without content; and if there are some of these last, Lévi-Strauss is not one of them. Much of his attention, in two great volumes of analysis of myth, is devoted to the central problem of the opposition between nature and culture. Thus, in every society, ties of kinship rest on certain facts of nature; but, equally, in every society these ties rest on rules which are, from nature's viewpoint, arbitrary. This opposition between the two is recognised, or at least sensed, and finds expression in myth, and may be represented in the use of the symbols of food. For food, in its raw state,

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belongs to nature, but in its cooked state is of culture: the need for food is natural, but the prohibition and prescription of certain food usages is cultural, as are the rules for its distribution. Hence myths about growing, hunting, cooking, eating, stealing of food, or about deprivation of it, may be interrelated with themes of consanguinity, affinity, incest and its prohibitions, exogamy, inclusion, exclusion, and so on. Genesis, after all, contains a significant apple and a slightly less significant mess of lentil soup.

The first part of Lévi-Strauss's theory answers the question: What is myth for? And his answer is: to 'mediate' 'oppositions' or 'contradictions'. The second set of questions which the theory answers are these: Is there a mythical form of thought? Is it an inferior or primitive mode of thought? Is it pre-scientific or antagonistic to scientific thought and, therefore, superseded by it? To show how Lévi-Strauss answers these questions one must synthesise the rest of his theory. For Lévi-Strauss, one of the essential structuralist principles is that all cultural forms express basic structural characteristics of the mind. The mind works through a process of binary discriminations: it divides things first into those which are X and not-X; and then does the same operation on these, *ad infinitum*. This, by itself, produces the science of the concrete. But abstract thought, of which myth is the original form, is more interested in relating different categories systematically, particularly those categories which are opposed; and in this, myth is a precursor of science. But what is of paramount importance is the mental operation; and in myth this proceeds by seizing on whatever material is to hand and which lends itself, structurally, to the communication of a message in which oppositions are mediated. This mental operation Lévi-Strauss likens to the activity of the 'bricoleur', the handyman who constructs objects from odds and ends (1966: 16). Included in such material to hand are also existing myths and, indeed, other such mental products of culture. All of this results in a narrative of events; but the account is of relatively little importance in the process of communication. What is important is the structure; so that, in effect, the message of the myth is reversible. If A:B::X:Y, then X:Y::A:B. In a narrative the continuity of events is important; and for this reason, myth is not just narrative; mythical thought transcends narrative. For this reason, myth, unlike poetry, does not suffer in translation. (Though apparently the writings of Lévi-Strauss do.) Transformations are of the essence of sets of myth; for they demonstrate the continuity of the hard structural core.

Lévi-Strauss's contribution to the study of myth has been profound and will certainly be lasting. And since he has not always claimed exclusiveness for it, his approach should lend itself to co-operation with others; the advantage of this, as Leach has shown in a number of cases, is that one method serves to increase the value of another (see, for example, Leach 1966). One can illustrate this by randomly choosing any myth: but I use the story of the Tower of Babel because I have already referred to it in discussing Frazer, who made so little of it. The story is roughly as follows. All the descendants of Noah spoke one language and founded a single city; whereupon they decided to build a tower towards heaven. But this activity angered God, who scattered the men and confounded their languages, declaiming that their linguistic unity was responsible for their presumptuousness (Genesis: 11, 1–9).

Now Frazer interpreted this as a simple explanation of cultural and linguistic

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diversity. But there are surely other ways of doing that. Let us go further by using a modified, though perhaps slightly weaker, version of Lévi-Strauss's theory and method. In the first place, we have a seeming paradox: if men are descendants of common ancestors they are one people; on the other hand, although all men are thought to be descended from common ancestors, they are not one people. Secondly, there is the seeming paradox that God provides men with consciousness but denies them ultimate knowledge of his own being or whereabouts. And there is a third difficulty to resolve: men, especially in their collective efforts, demonstrate their power over nature; on the other hand, they are seemingly at the mercy of forces which they cannot control. I do not propose to show that A:B::C:D:: E:F, nor that a contradiction is mediated. I would argue that ideas and sentiments which are felt as irreconcilable are presented and that the tension is resolved by an event—the destruction of the tower and the creation of permanent divisions between social groups.

Leaving Lévi-Strauss and looking at the sociology of the myth, one can push the foregoing interpretation a little further. Politically, the myth justifies certain claims to territory and denies the legitimacy of others: for, if there are different political groups, whose boundaries can be perceived and recognised, then their claims cannot be challenged by or confused with those of others. But the myth recognises that such boundaries are not clear-cut, so that the claims of some groups to incorporate or subjugate others must be disputed. The myth may also be saying something about the conflict of principles which may emerge in processes of segmentation.

But why, one may still ask, does the myth, at least at the outset, give a positive value to unity? Some contemporary enthusiast of the United Nations might suggest that it reflects an inherent wish for an end to national, ethnic and tribal divisions between men. Or a Freudian might argue that this is, once again, an instance of the primal horde rebelling against the father—and *this* time being thoroughly defeated by him. But it seems to me that this positive affirmation of unity implies a recognition that if one believes in descent from a common ancestor, then at least one consequence follows: namely, that the descendants are, or need to be, united for certain purposes, even though divided for others.

A word or two about the symbolism: the tower, stretching heavenwards, could symbolise a line of continuous descent. It could also symbolise masculinity and, hence, power. The destruction of the tower is punishment for presuming to solve the mystery of the whereabouts and nature of God, who is also the source of the mystery of the origin of the descent line, and whose abode is the original location of human descent; destruction and disruption are also punishments for presumptuousness, as such, and for the attempt to usurp power.

The myth may also be an explanation of human cultural diversity; but it is my guess that it is more a device for blocking curiosity and the search for further explanations. This is an argument to which I shall return.

The great strength of Lévi-Strauss's theory and method is that they direct attention to a central characteristic of myth, the expression of conflicting principles and attitudes; and they point to a level of enquiry—the subliminal intellect—which has been neglected or ignored for too long. But there is a seeming arbitrariness in the way in which Lévi-Strauss imposes his scheme of oppositions and their mediation.

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Thus, in some myths, man is opposed to jaguar in the following way: one eats cooked food, the other raw; man does not eat jaguar, jaguar eats man. But if man *did* eat jaguar, there would still be opposition between them; very strong opposition, one would have thought. A similar arbitrariness can be observed in the analysis of the Oedipus myth, to which I referred earlier.

Apart from this, I have a strong objection to the whole dialectical mystique which permeates the work of Lévi-Strauss and so many other contemporary intellectuals. One wishes that they would finally decide whether the dialectic is a law of psychological process, whether it is a universal law of all process, or whether it is simply a word which conveniently tricks the reader or listener into believing that true 'logic' (or pseudo-logic) also reveals empirical truth. If Lévi-Strauss were saying that people experience unease in reconciling different ideas to one another, and that this unease is expressed in myth, then he would be saying about the cognitive structure and manifest content of myths what psychoanalysis is saying about the unconscious mechanisms of dream formation and the meanings of dream-symbols. But when he insists on a more exact formulation of this, by applying the unwieldy scientism of communications theory, wedded to Hegelian dialectics, I, for one, can see nothing but difficulties. For when is an opposition genuine, and when is it arbitrarily conceived? Opposites are characteristics at polar ends of a continuum, which latter may be a series of only two items. In certain contexts, nature is the opposite of culture; and in all contexts cooked and raw are opposites, though Lévi-Strauss also suggests that the concept of the rotting or the rotten might be introduced to complicate this particular polarity. But in a traffic situation, it is red and green that are opposites, though it might just as well have been red and blue; for the binary discrimination is between red and non-red, and either green or blue would fit.

In fact, Lévi-Strauss's method does not require the theoretical assumption that myth exists in order to mediate genuine contradictions. All that is needed are two weaker assumptions: first, that there is unease in reconciling different ideas, attitudes, etc.; and second, that this is expressed dramatically in terms of opposition. Thus, this aspect of myth can be seen as a recurrent narrative device, rather than as a reflection of 'dialectical' thought.

The emphasis on myth as an abstract mode of thought leads Lévi-Strauss to treat the narrative aspect of it as secondary, if not irrelevant. Perhaps one of his motives is to destroy the picture of the savage as a story-telling simpleton. But substituting the dialectician is not the only alternative.

* * * * *

In my view, the fact that myths are narratives *is* of primary importance. A narrative is an ordering of specific events. This activity requires the establishment or creation of a moment of origin, or a moment of transformation. The time sequence, or what Lévi-Strauss calls the diachronic aspect of the construction and recital of myth, is not irrelevant. Some aspects of the structure of myth may be reversible; but the fact that myth has a narrative form is not accidental: for a narrative has a beginning, a moment of time in which a series of events is anchored. Thus, I would argue, one of the important functions of myth *is that it anchors the present in the past.*

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This is done by establishing a dramatically significant series of events: and the drama is conveyed by the style, which may well consist of using oppositions and their resolution; and it is also conveyed by dredging deep into unconscious symbolism, so that the message communicated by the myth does have an impact at a number of levels. The advantage that myth has over cosmology is that the latter may merely provide a set of ideas which set limits to conceptual exploration; while myth does provide a time reference, it does presuppose that circumstances can be traced to particular, if only imaginary, events. To locate things in time, even if the exact time is unspecified, creates a far more effective device for legitimation, for example, than simply creating a set of abstract ideas which are timeless.

Perhaps I can make this point better by revealing the original source from which it does, in part, derive. This lies in the Hebrew Midrash, in a commentary on the problem of creation. The question that is posed is as follows: Why is the world created with the letter 'Beth'? (The Hebrew letter 'ב' when used as a prefix is the preposition 'in'; Genesis begins with the word 'BeRashit', or 'In the beginning'.) The solution given to this puzzle is as follows: 'Beth is blocked on three sides, and open only on one; therefore one has no right to demand knowledge of what is above, what is below, what is before, only of what comes after, from the day on which the world is created' (Bialik & Rabinitsky 1939: 5).

Another linked interpretation, from the Oral Law, states that the story begins with 'Beth' because it is the second letter, not the first; the first 'Aleph' is before time, and signifies God—Elohim.

The gist of this is that myth, by establishing a narrative, locks a set of circumstances in an original set of events. And the effect, and perhaps the unconscious motive for this, is to provide a point of reference in the past beyond which one need not go.

This possibly suggests why myth is so significant in traditional societies. For in these there must be constant reference to the past, at least to legitimate existing social practices. In societies where social status, claims to property and power, and even the selection of marriage partners are governed by rules of descent, reference to the past, or the need to anchor the present in the past, is part of present social life. As Lévi-Strauss and, before him, Durkheim pointed out, the symbols of myths are also records or archives. But their power in this respect is dependent upon the impact of the symbolism. Now it may be true, as Lévi-Strauss says, that the symbolic process is what is important, while the choice of objects might be, to some extent, fortuitous: the myth-making mind uses any material which is to hand. But this activity is not simply that of assembling what is immediately perceived to be at hand. It involves drawing in material from hidden places, and this process has a magnetic quality to it; for what are drawn to the myth-making process are those things which are attracted to it. If myth is a way of anchoring the present in the past, then it will draw to it the symbols and images of primordial awareness which, in most human minds, will be linked with what is infantile and repressed in the unconscious. An example of such symbol and image is that of nakedness in the Garden of Eden. The story employs such symbols and images because they lend themselves so well to its other purposes, which are simultaneously those of setting limits to explanatory curiosity about the world, about descent, incest, exogamy and so on, and the legitimation of moral values and social practices. For the whole

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world, not just man, is imbued with moral significance: if claims are made to territories, and the borders of these are defined in terms of rivers and mountains, then these too become morally significant. It has also not escaped attention that the style as well as the symbolism of the story of Genesis lends itself so well to its several purposes. For not only does it make blatant use of much Freudian symbolism, but also of the most glaring binary oppositions, beginning with heaven and earth, and ending with the head of the serpent and the heel of man, taking in, on its way, many more, both concrete and abstract (see Leach 1961).

Thus, clearly, all myth performs a number of functions simultaneously. One has here something which is common in traditional societies, an example of what one might call the principle of functional economy. By this, I mean the tendency to load an institution or cultural item with functions and significances, so much so that one function tends to influence the other, and each appears to have pride of place in accounting for the existence and characteristics of the phenomenon. For whatever reasons myths were originally invented, they were subsequently used as a vehicle for communicating or just expressing a number of things for which they may never have been intended. Let us say that myths were originally explanations of the origins or transformations of things or, as I would prefer to put it, let us say that they were originally devices for blocking off explanation. If they were valued as such, then their place in the cognitive scheme would make them eligible as means of legitimating social practices. But their power to do both of these would be enhanced by their use of symbolism which galvanised the deepest commitments and feelings of reverence and sacredness, and by use of style, which presents a dramatic tension between opposed objects or forces which is somehow resolved. But there is no need to start from any one point or aspect of myth. For one thing, it is a fruitless task; for another, it makes little or no difference to our understanding the questions: Why do men make myths? Why do these contain the significances which they do? Why do men make so much of the sharing of myths? What is it in myths which appeals to men so strongly that it enables them to treat them as sacred? I think that the answer to all of these questions is that because myths perform several linked functions, and because they contain levels of meaning which achieve an intuitively experienced correspondence, because myths are narratives with a time-anchored structure, because they deal simultaneously with the socially and psychologically significant, because they make use of what is perceived and available and link it to the primordial sense of a deeper level of reality, they have had the power which we rightly attribute to them in some societies. Thus, the Oedipus myth may be interpreted in terms of at least three sets of universal themes: autochthony, incest and descent, as analysed by Lévi-Strauss; parricide, incest and fantasy, as in Freud; and, of course, the theme of succession to positions of power and authority, one which has not been mentioned at all in commentaries on this and similar myths. That these three themes interlock is clear: and the interlocking is no accident.

It is also when the different functions of myth become detached from one another, as occurs with the process of structural and cultural differentiation, that myth loses some of its power and is either replaced or complemented by other systems of belief. One such form is prophecy. If myth anchors the present in the past, then prophecy anchors it in the future. Prophecy is a sort of myth in reverse.

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So prophecy should emerge in those social conditions where the basis of traditional legitimation is weak and where there has been, in any case, a weakening of other bonds of traditional, multiplex structures of relationship. The disruption of traditional society and, in particular, the promotion of tension between its secular and religious authority, may give rise to the kind of despair which produces a longing for an earlier condition or for a transcendence of present conditions: this encourages a focusing of attention on the future and away from the past. But prophecy and myth may co-exist and even feed on one another: thus myths lend symbolic content to prophecy, and the latter may compel the restatement of myths. Ultimately, prophetic statements may become incorporated into myth when the prophet becomes a mythical figure.[2]

Another possible substitute for myth is history or pseudo-history. Lévi-Strauss is rather eager to view certain interpretations of the French revolution as myth. His argument is that the selection and characterisation of major historic events is arbitrary, but that there is a tendency not to recognise this and to attribute to these events a reality which they do not possess (1966: 245–69). This, presumably, is done because such narrative then serves to mediate certain contradictions which are inherent in modern French society, or in popular thought about it; or perhaps such a device may only mediate the contradictions in the mind of Jean-Paul Sartre.

Now it is all very strange to see Lévi-Strauss resort to a pejorative use of the term myth when confronted with his fellow countrymen, but not when confronted with the inhabitants of the forest regions of southern America. Perhaps his generosity is well directed. But one takes his point. There is certainly an element of myth in a good deal of interpretation of history. And it is not only the worshippers of history to whom I refer. That there are mythical elements, as well as mythical reversals in, certain historicist theories is a point which need scarcely be laboured. But there is no less truth in the assertion of radical historians that in much conservative or liberal history, past epochs are often reconstructed with the full co-operation of fantasy.

Should we term this sort of thing myth? Why not ideologically interpreted history, which is, in any case, what all history is in some degree or another? There is, of course, much to be said for keeping the term myth fairly pure and, perhaps, uncontaminated by ideology. But what is important is not a word, but whether its use conveys anything valuable. In so far as some history or pseudo-history allows some scope to fantasy, tends to interpret the past in such a way as to anchor the present in a series of significant events, and acquires a sacred character, it has some of the qualities of myth. It is vestigial myth. Other properties of myth have been channelled into other cultural media.

It is essentially the splitting up of the functions of myth which constitutes what we mean by a decline in its significance. Science, as a general cultural fact, may have something to do with this decline. But I doubt that most members of our society give up myths for particular scientific beliefs.[3]

As to myth being the precursor of science—a belief held not only by Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss but also by others—it seems to me that no good case has been made out. I am prepared to believe that cosmologies, which may contain references to mythical beings or abstract forces, may be precursors of science. But I cannot see myth as such in this way. Myths may reflect operations of the subliminal intellect

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which are truly complex, and which display a remarkable facility for ordering relations between symbols. But I cannot see what this necessarily has to do with science. If one recognises the significance of the narrative element and the processes of establishing correspondences between layers of structure and meaning, then myth is akin to poetry and narrative fiction, not to science.

* * * * *

If I have dwelt in this lecture more on the characteristics of theories of myth than on the characteristics of particular myths, I offer no apology. It would not do to honour Malinowski as the founder of modern ethnographical method without honouring him also as a theorist of society and culture.

NOTES

Some of the ideas in this lecture were first presented under the title 'Modern myths' in *Clare*, the magazine of the students of the London School of Economics, in Spring 1966. I am particularly grateful for the comments made on these and other ideas developed in the lecture by my colleagues, Professor Ernest Gellner and Professor Donald MacRae. I owe the greatest debt to my wife, Ruth Cohen, who helped substantially in a number of ways, especially in matters of style, presentation and construction.

[1] By this I mean that to err is to fail in an attempt to do something correctly. Myths are not errors, since they are not failed attempts to make correct empirical statements.

[2] The kinds I have in mind are apocalyptic prophecies of the Old Testament, the beliefs associated with cargo cults and messianic movements.

[3] As Donald MacRae has stated, it is mistaken to hold that one set of beliefs is dislodged by another for lack of 'mental space'.

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