

# PERSPECTIVES

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This issue marks the inaugural appearance of “Perspectives” in *Folklore Forum*. “Perspectives” features short responses from noted individuals to a specific question and will be a regular section in future issues of *Forum*. For this issue, our guest editor asked ten individuals to respond to the deceptively simple question:

## What is Myth?

WALTER STRAUSS

In *An Essay on Man* (1944) Ernst Cassirer wrote, “Of all the phenomena of human culture myth and religion are most refractory to merely logical analysis,” thus stating the dilemma that confronts any student of myth. Yet he also understood the power that myth exerts upon the human mind and upon human imagination: “There is no natural phenomenon and no phenomenon of human life that is not capable of mythical interpretation, and which does not call for such an interpretation.”

The above reflections may serve as our starting point. It is evident that myth is closely bound to religion, and that myth is integral to human culture (even in ages that demote myth in favor of logic or reason). Because human culture, as it is understood here, is derived from religious sources in which myth plays an essential narrative role (*muthos* is Greek for story, tale, a spoken account) in an increasingly secularized culture such as Western culture, myth becomes interpretation, history, literature.

In this way, the biblical myths that serve as a foundation of the Old Testament become transposed into “sacred” history and ultimately into secular history. Greek myths, on the other hand, are quickly converted into literature: Homer, Sophocles, Plato. This means that in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, the metaphors of speaking and hearing remain dominant, even though the concept of myth is rejected in critical interpretation. But it is interpretation that necessarily illuminates the meaning of mythical events. The Greeks, lacking the concept of the Holy Word, relied on the purely verbal and visual content of myth, which is then incorporated into the discourse of concepts or allegories.

Logic analyzes; the imagination synthesizes. Our Western tradition has abundantly been built on this double heritage—the Greek way of seeing and thinking and the biblical way of hearing and interpreting—since the High Middle Ages (Dante) and the Renaissance. The common element in this double legacy is language. Language, the sole instrument of articulation of things seen and heard, is crucial and essential to our capacity of situating ourselves in this world and situating the world within our consciousness.

And thus our preoccupation with myth remains an intellectual and existential necessity. As a matter of fact, in a phase of civilization that has been emptied of transcendent significance by the extreme claims of logic and technology, our recourse to myth becomes a mandate, if only to make us aware of the deeper ties that bind us to transcendental meaning, to a challenge to hold in balance the demands of reason in our lives and the need for a probing and restless inwardness encompassing our quest for values and, possibly, for faith. For, as Mircea Eliade insisted, the Sacred has been “camouflaged” by the secular, yet it continues to beckon behind it, underneath it, eager to be revitalized. In mythical terms, the convergence of opposites (if reason and the imagination are seen as opposites) has been incarnated in our modern world by the mythical metamorphosis of Orpheus, the ancient singer and culture-hero, into the modern archetype of a reinvigorated poetry, art, and music—a topic which has occupied me for some time (*Descent and Return: The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature*, 1971). The problem that remains for our time, at the turn of the millennium, is to examine whether this myth is or is not viable still, or whether it needs to be reinterpreted. In any case, the real objective is to hold on to myth, to derive strength and confidence from it, since it is the only link to Spirit that we now have.

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GREGORY SCHREMPF

Two Distances, Two Terms—The root semantics of “myth” are often sought in an opposition that gained saliency in the formative period of classical Greek philosophy. The root opposition is something like “myth” as ill-considered popular opinion vs. “philosophy” as teachings arrived at through rigorous dialectical reasoning. Through various routes this basic opposition has been connected with other important epistemological contrasts, most notably that of the oral vs. literate representation. Marcel Detienne’s work, *The Creation*

*of Mythology*, shows us how complicated—and how prone to overgeneralization—such contrasts are; there is plenty more work to be done in ferreting out just what we have received from this historic source.

But I do not think that we should get lost in the “Greek miracle.” For there is a second more recent opposition that has had enormous significance for the semantics of “myth,” further refracting the consequences of the first opposition. This second opposition is of special importance to students of folklore and anthropology; in fact, it is nothing other than the distinction between folklore and anthropology as academic disciplines. This opposition arose out of the division of labor between folklore and anthropology in the context of nineteenth-century evolutionism, which, like it or not, has left important residues in our current disciplinary terminology. My brief comments will deal with some general tendencies in this division of labor. I acknowledge that there are numerous, ever increasing exceptional cases, and that what I have to say does not really apply to “myth” when invoked strictly as a genre term. My claim is that, among the resonant polarities of the terms “folklore” and “myth,” we find a tendency to link the former with a sort of proximate cultural distance, and the latter with a major, if not ultimate, distance.

The kingpin of the evolutionary perspective was the notion of human progress, a course of increasing truth and sophistication in the human understanding of nature, and in the attendant technology of controlling it. The cutting edge of evolution and progress was thought to be unified in the idea of science. The trailing edge of evolution was more complex. One part of the trailing edge was to be found in the slower, backward parts of European civilization: the rural peoples, the lower classes, religious and spiritualistic survivals, women and children. The other part of the trailing edge was geographically distant “savage” peoples. Evolutionary theory argued that one could correlate these two large branches of our inert and regressive tendencies, yet there was never a perfect correlation. The regressive European—the folkloric—was never quite as distant or unfamiliar as the savage—the mythic—in part because s/he was never entirely over the horizon. Even if the mental processes of the folk and the savage could be described, abstractly, in identical terms (e.g., “magical thought”), the former—by an historical, linguistic, cultural, and biogenetic link—was nevertheless “me” in a way that the savage was not.

Just as with the myth/philosophy contrast, the myth/folklore contrast needs working through. There will be a number of curiosities. For one thing, reconciliation with the proximate is in some respects more difficult than with the ultimate. The shorter leap lands one in a mid-ground strewn with actual experiences and memories, including the many absurdities and

tyrannies of one's parents, grandparents, and nation. One can avoid all that by leaping to the primordial. There is also the issue of the extent to which either perspective reduces to a personal preference; certainly one can find examples in which ultimate distance is approached with the attitude of familiarity or in which the proximate is approached as the exotic (these are the sorts of things that define literary and oral genres). Particularly revealing in all of this will be differentials of attitudes in which the "folk" and the "mythic" are taken up into European aesthetic traditions—a long and complex business.

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CAMILLE BACON-SMITH

When you asked me to define "Myth," I had to smile. The answer is so easy, as the profound usually is. Myth is the narrative that unifies us as a people, that structures our lives in relation to each other. Not in the Lévi-Straussian way, that all myths, plundered sufficiently, reduce to the same structure, but that all myths, elaborated upon lavishly, evoke that which is specific to us, not me or you or them. Take Japanese pop music. The Japanese girl dances to the empty space between the notes while I move to the beat she does not hear as meaningful. The theory I have made about the Japanese culture, and its music, is defeated. Secure in the knowledge of Western music, I cannot hear the spaces that mark the structure of her culture.

What does music have to do with myth, you ask? Music is the structure, pure. As we move into language, we are confounded by images: metaphors, signs, symbols. Metaphor becomes sign, logic is still at work, and logic does not operate at the level of myth, where the back brain takes over and clicks the puzzle together silently. We cross where the light is green and stop where the light is red. Red. Digging for signs, we stumble upon a symbol; it resonates, like a violin string, somewhere between the crotch and the throat, squeezed tight against the danger. Red, the color of blood. Prick the finger and die for a hundred years. Fairy tale crosses into myth with the touch of a spindle. Spindle. A sign. Spinster. No husband, doomed to sit in the ashes spinning cloth alone. Tightly woven into the pattern of our culture, still it can be unthreaded, as blood red prick upon the finger cannot be. Blood is danger. Menstrual blood, suicide blood, blood in battle. Evil magic or powerful magic, but the magic of life.

We know. We know deep, where mind cannot touch us, where the real knowledge rests, that the universe is more powerful than we are, that we are small, small in our concrete canyons, our jungles, our mountains. We send

our stories spinning out into our universe—perhaps the act of spinning too is a symbol. The spindle turns, vertigo, delirium, allowing ourselves to control the conscious experience of our own powerlessness.

So. How can this knowledge make me a buck? We know in the business of creating fictions what myth is: find the “hot button” and push it. Catch the zeitgeist and surf it. The trappings are always fictions. The truth of our selves, as a people, rests in the structure. The question for the marketplace: What truth are we longing to hear today? Yesterday’s truth bores us, tomorrow’s truth frightens us. When today’s need comes together with today’s truth, structured within the signs and symbols the market feels safe in accepting, we have caught the zeitgeist, and we can push that hot button with impunity. As consumers of our own mythologies we cruise the shelves and screens for the narratives that fit our niche and moment, that give us confidence in our rectitude or confirm our belief in our own invulnerability.

The question for the scholar, then, is: “Why do we need the stories, the trappings? Don’t they just obscure the truth of the structure?” The answer, of course, is in the question. We need the story to obscure the truth. We need to know, but need also to pretend we do not know. A boy sets out on quest to find his manhood, to tame the chaos of turbulent youth and supplant his father. But fathers are dangerous, so the truth must be obscured. *Star Wars*. The chaos, represented by a friend, must be tamed, not defeated; after all, it is a part of the man, that chaos, and that control. The fathers are many, and the last, most phallic, defeated in a clash of swords of light. He whose sword stands longest (ahem) wins the contest. Fathers smile leaving the theater. They did not see their sons in Luke Skywalker, but themselves confronting their own fathers.

For over twenty years, members of the motion picture industry have tried to copy the success of *Star Wars*. They fail because, as men, they are afraid to look at what George Lucas’s Rites-of-Passage movie says about attaining manhood. They are the fathers now, and will not suffer the father to die, not even for money. Blood is danger, after all, and no more so than when it is your own.

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JOHN H. MCDOWELL

First and foremost, myth is a story, that is to say, a discourse (verbal or otherwise) capturing a sequence of events imputed to the world of actual or imaginary experience. Myth differs from other kinds of stories by virtue of its focus on a certain kind of event as well as its standing as a highly resonant

form of narrative discourse. The heart of the matter resides in these particularities of focus and standing, so let's inspect each of them in turn.

The events that feed mythic discourse are primordial, foundational, and frequently counter to normal understandings about the workings of the world: *primordial* in the sense of transpiring in an initial phase, *foundational* in describing formative moments when the world was acquiring its present shape, and *counter-factual* in featuring actors and actions that confound the conventions of routine experience. These dimensions of myth's narrative focus are organically intertwined: the extraordinary feats and traits of mythic protagonists are possible only because they attach to a primary and formative period in the growth and development of civilization.

Myth is generally cherished as a form of narrative discourse that articulates a framework underlying immanent truth. In settings where myth retains a link to religious belief and practice, it may be a marked discourse evincing strict regulation of its form, content, and performance context. Mythic performances explore and refine the groundwork for collective identities. Such narratives, though focused on events in a remote past, curiously shimmer with significance in the present. These stories, because they are foundational, can be drafted to advance almost any cause. People seek and encounter authority for institutions, attitudes, and behaviors in the animated vein of mythic narrative.

Myth, then, is a highly-valued narrative discourse recounting, and sometimes replaying through vivid enactment, those events taken as formative and foundational within a social grouping. It is, in essence, an account of the emergence of civilizations as that process is imagined in thousands of finite settings around the world. It has been my good fortune to witness at close hand one such rendering of civilization's rise, the account provided by indigenous peoples of Colombia's Sibundoy Valley in the high Andes just north of the equator.

For the Indians of the Sibundoy Valley, myth is a clearly marked category of discourse called *antioj palabra*, "ancient words," and belonging to the broader category of *bngabe soy*, "our things," as opposed to *xkenungabe soy*, "white people's things." The focus of these narratives is the life and times of the ancestors, treated collectively as "the first people." The ancestral period is conceived as a time when celestial bodies walked the earth, when humans and animals were interchangeable, and when remarkable transformations across ontological boundaries were commonplace. Sibundoy myth records the gradual taming and muting of this charged spiritual universe, as precedents are established governing the proper modes of sexual reproduction, kinship affiliation, food production and consumption, and ritual

expression. In one dramatic episode, Wangetsmuna, the culture hero, sounds a trumpet across the world, forever fixing the boundary between human and animal. Eventually a solid center emerges, where social institutions can flourish, though the spiritual vitality of first times and first people remains accessible at the physical and experiential margins of society.

The account of civilization's rise within the verdant ellipse of the Sibundoy Valley is what we might call a *saturated* or *replete* instance of myth. In moving away from this matrix, we can discern various levels of attenuation, such as narrative discourse with mythic allusions, or talk, belief, and action retaining a flicker of mythic consciousness. From root cases like the Sibundoy, we can trace readily enough the horizontal expansion of the word "myth" to encompass the vast spectrum of meanings, both legitimate and corrupt, it acquires in contemporary thinking. But it is sanguine, I believe, to return to finite locales like the Sibundoy Valley so that we may recuperate the vibrant specificity of myth in its original and most complete manifestation.

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WENDY DONIGER

Defining myth requires building up the sorts of boundaries and barriers that I have always avoided; I do not wish, for instance, to limit myths to stories involving supernatural beings (though many myths do), and, though there are important differences between myths on the one hand, and epics, legends, history, and films on the other, there are many ways in which these texts function similarly and should be studied together. I certainly would not limit myths to written texts, let alone ancient written texts; they may be written or oral, ancient or contemporary. On the other hand, I would also narrow the field of definition: all myths are stories, but not all stories are myths. Myths raise religious questions: *Why are we here? What happens to us when we die? Is there a God?* In this sense, at least, they differ from folktales.

Let me begin by saying what I think a myth is not: a myth is not a lie or a false statement to be contrasted with truth or reality or fact or history, though this usage is perhaps the most common meaning of myth in casual parlance today. But in the history of religions, the term "myth" has far more often been used to mean "truth." What makes this ambiguity possible is that a myth is above all a story that is believed, believed to be true, and that people continue to believe it in the face of sometimes massive evidence that it is, in fact, a lie. In its positive and enduring sense, a myth is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important

meanings in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past or, more rarely, in the future, an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered; it is a story that is part of a larger group of stories.

Because myths have the power to remain open and transparent, they can be retold, within one culture or in several cultures, with several very different meanings. Myths are retold over and over again for several reasons: because the community becomes attached to the signifiers, which become authoritative and historically evocative, taking on the added weight of the moss gathered over the centuries; because they are at hand, available, and using them is often easier than creating new stories from scratch; and because they are intrinsically charismatic. But perhaps the greatest of all of myth's survival tactics is its ability to stand on its head. We might even single this out as one of the defining characteristics of a myth, in contrast with other sorts of narratives (such as novels): a myth is a much retold narrative that is transparent to a variety of constructions of meaning, a neutral structure that allows paradoxical meanings to be held in a charged tension. This transparency is what allows myth, more than other forms of narrative, to be shared by a group (who, as individuals, have various points of view) and to survive through time (through different generations with different points of view). It is this tension that keeps a myth alive.

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LEE HARING

No Answer—At the beginning of an undergraduate myth course once, I asked the students the question the editor of this issue has asked the contributors: What is myth? The students said myth is a magical story that comes out of a need to explain things. The creative work it portrays, they said, is magical, but it applies to reality. It *brings you in*, someone said; it's a key to understanding the society it comes from. So we had a table of contents for our course, which went pretty well after that. Looking back over the list today, I see the ideas as having been implanted in the students' minds, directly or indirectly, by earlier generations of folklorists. The definitions were instances of *Rücklauf*, the returning of folklore to the folk. Take the idea of myth as pseudoscientific explanation. This was wisdom received from antique philosophers and Victorian thinkers who agreed that the language of myth was nature allegory. Or take the idea of a personal myth: didn't that come from Bill Moyers' television interviews with Joseph Campbell? So what my



students were answering was not "What is myth" but "What ideas of myth have people received from the scholars of the past?" I wonder if folklore graduate students would have answered any differently.

Mythology and folklore have a common history. In antiquity, myth underwent the process we have recently learned to recognize as the very invention of folklore. It is well-established that European folklorists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries singled out certain elements and stamped them as "folk," convincing the bourgeoisie that these elements were symbols of the peasantry. Identifying certain cultural elements as folk made them portable and exportable: thus began the culture industry, exposed so vehemently by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972). Identifying colorful and attractive elements of regional life made them available to be cultivated for the pleasure of visitors: thus began folklorism. So in antiquity, the philosopher singled out certain stories, images, beliefs, and stamped them as "myth," convincing succeeding generations that these were relics of the irrational. Thus, says Marcel Detienne in *The Creation of Mythology* (1986), did mythology begin. Thucydides, for instance, prosecuted myth, attacking tradition because memory is too fallible. He even attacked people's tendency to prefer inherited ideas over evaluation of sources. No criticism of tradition could be more radical.

The real issue for folklorists, I suppose, is whether we should claim continuity with myth, as Joseph Campbell advocated, or let it go, as folklore programs have done. If ancient philosophers sought to repress myth, moderns have often sought to establish continuity with it. The Renaissance, says Jean Seznec in *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, had already sensed its irrevocable detachment from the ancient world. It "had to make a conscious effort to establish harmony between two worlds separated by a lapse of centuries" (1953:322). Yet that harmony is impossible, Seznec implies, and the Renaissance was left with nostalgia. So are we. Frederic Jameson, in his 1976 essay "Criticism in History" (reprinted in *The Ideologies of Theory*, 1988), rightly castigates the modern critic who seeks myth in literature. He or she is the prisoner of a Utopian vision that nostalgically postulates the existence of a preindividualistic state that literature can tap into. But the fragmentation of modern consciousness is itself a topic for folklorists, and that is where mythology is relevant.

So folklorists could decide to know more about myth. Mythologists certainly know too little about folklore. Jaan Puhvel, in the introduction to his 1987 textbook, *Comparative Mythology*, postulates that the study of myth should be autonomous because myth itself is autonomous. In a time of the dissolving of disciplinary barriers, it will be difficult to justify

such autonomy. Advanced studies in folklore should include books like his; they map an essential part of the history of the discipline. What Marcel Mauss told French students in the 1920s takes on a new meaning: "It is obligatory to believe in myth" (cited in Detienne 1986:103).

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*STEPHANIE KANE*

So—a definition of myth

An abstract logic

attractor of disorderly emotions

Crucial images in narrative bricolage

controlling, exploring, dreaming

Unpredictable

(even more so than history)

Immeasurably effective

Circulating through fields of human endeavor

finding source of restraint

A cognitive mode

part of all knowledge

All the fish in the sea

(both poisoned and free)

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*DONALD WILLIAMS*

As a Jungian psychoanalyst, I commonly think and talk about everything but the one thing expected of Jungians—myth. In contrast to the practices described in much Jungian literature, I do not interpret dreams using parallels from mythology and folklore, and I scarcely ever use the words "archetype" or "myth." For Jung, myth was the language of the psyche—we have only to read his autobiography to know this—but for most people, I no longer believe that this is truly the case.

When Jung wrote about his "confrontation with the unconscious" and his visions of Philemon and Salome or about dreams that took him back to alchemy, to Mercurius, to Gnosticism, and to the Greeks, he wrote about his authentic experience. Jung's life was indeed one of mythic proportions.

However, for better or worse, most of us do not live such lives. Most of us do not dream of goddesses, gods, demi-gods, or of dramas that embody, as Joseph Campbell called it, "the power of myth." We may wish that we dreamed such dreams, but that wish only testifies to our already failed myths. Instead, we do dream of apocalyptic wars, crime, poverty, disease, emptiness, and aging. We think anxiously about global economic crises, about major climate changes, water shortages, polluted water, air, and food, and about nuclear explosions and radiation poisoning. These are our stories.

Jung argued that analysis leads to the experience and authority of a "personal myth." The fact that Jung experienced archetypal realities does not mean that analysts today can promise or deliver such experiences. For people in an age that Jung characterized as "spiritually bankrupt," the idea of a personal myth is seductive and compelling. But analysis should not seduce; it should not be an exercise in credulity. Instead, it is good analytic practice to reflect on and to analyze wishes rather than to gratify them. I have found, in more than twenty years of analytic practice, that understanding the psychology of the wish for a personal myth yields more meaningful insight into an individual's life than could her or his desired myth.

Jung emphasized the authority of archetypal, ancestral experience while Freud emphasized the authority of biology. Both men looked for bedrock and thought they had found it. Their wish for bedrock, in the golden era of modern science, made perfect sense in the first half of the century. But no authority is credible for us today, or not for long, despite our own wishes for a finally solid place to stand. Any legitimate authority will be the result of our best reflections and of the creative thinking we pursue whether wide awake or dreaming, but even this authority will be transitory at best. In times of rapid change, changing stories are the only ones we can trust.

Even when analysts prefer to use a language without archetypal, mythic overtones, their book publishers and their colleagues exert pressure on them to stay within the mythic fold. For the most part, people pay to hear what they want to hear; analysts are subject to the same pressures that beset most professionals. For example, the editor of a Jungian collection told me recently that her publisher would accept almost any title as long as it included the word "soul" or "spirit" or "myth." The soul, for this possibly brief interlude in human history, is marketable: even the mere mention of it satisfies a wish, but not because such soul-talk is, in itself, either transforming or sustaining.

If the myths do not provide a vocabulary for contemporary dreamers to think with, then what are analysts to do? We return, simply and respectfully, to our analysands' stories. We give up the seduction of the high-priced language of the soul, of myths and archetypes and totems, for the rich, evocative, symbolic language of everyday life.

The great legacy of Jung and Freud is that they gave us the ability to begin every session of analysis with three convictions: each person has a story, each story makes sense, and each is worth listening to. Every session of psychoanalysis for the past one hundred years has asserted, and ultimately confirmed, that we each have a unique, compelling, and coherent tale to tell. This was, and still is, revolutionary. Together, analysts and analysands examine, analyze, edit, and rewrite the old stories of childhood, family, and culture, of love and work. They come up with the new stories, living histories, revised maps, and dreams that cast forward into the future.

Our psychological talking and listening sometimes uncovers, and at other times creates, the new truths of the human heart and the new stories that arise with them. Stripped of its mythic depths, analysis is a practice of profound respect for the individual, and to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, respect is endless.

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BRUCE LINCOLN

Who speaks in myth? It is possible—and useful—to consider myth not as a *content*, but a *style* of narration. To take a convenient example, Hesiod begins his *Theogony* by invoking the Muses and goes on to tell how they made him a poet not only by teaching him, but by placing their breath inside him, where it literally supplied the substance of his speech. In this crucial passage (lines 22–34) his poem legitimates itself by insisting that we do not hear just Hesiod's voice, but that of the goddesses mediated through him. In the moment that an audience accepts his claim, the *Theogony* constitutes itself as myth: a narrative with more-than-human status.

In ways, the author-ity of a myth depends upon its author-ship—or more precisely—on the ways its authorship is portrayed and perceived. As another example, consider the healing rituals of the Weyewa (eastern Indonesia), which build toward their climax when someone chants,

a category of charter myth that is closely guarded and cloaked in "sacred authority" (*erri*). This essentially monologic style known by the cover term *kanúnga* consists largely of a series of place and personal names which evoke the story of the ancestral migration from the past to present, during which the major patterns of Weyewa social life are established. . . . [These] are delivered by a single individual who acts on behalf of the "voice" of the ancestors, whose words he directly conveys.<sup>1</sup>

Weyewa assume that difficulties follow when someone deviates from the original and proper order of things. Such difficulties can be rectified, however, by recalling that order and returning to it. Their rites' efficacy thus depends on participants' acceptance of the *kanúnga* narratives as a conduit through which the ancestors remind people in the present about that original order.

In the Weyewa *kanúnga*, as in the *Theogony*, two narrators—one proximate and palpable, the other putative and ultimate—are brought into relation with an audience. The proximate speakers minimize their importance in favor of the ultimate speakers, who, like the Muses and ancestors, are idealized representations to whom transcendent wisdom is imputed and from whom it is purportedly derived.<sup>2</sup> Should an audience assent to these claims, certain consequences follow. First, the social identity and personal or corporate interests of proximate speakers are effaced and they are shielded from criticism on these grounds. Second, the exalted status of the ultimate speaker is transmitted to the narrative, which assumes an aura of the sacred and transcendent. Third, members of the audience organize themselves as believers and hermeneuts of the narrative, toward which they adopt reverent attitudes while probing its interpretive possibilities.

Analysts ought to take seriously the claim that the ultimate authors of myth transcend the human, at least in the sense that they stand beyond the living members of the community. With rare exceptions, myths are not the creation of individual authors, but collective products elaborated over relatively long periods of time. In them, past narrators continue to speak as narrators in the present repeat and adapt their stories. Myths are thus simultaneously repositories of traditional knowledge, vehicles for the transmission of that knowledge, and instruments through which skilled narrators can attempt to modify that knowledge in subtle or blatant fashion. Should they succeed in introducing changes, this will have consequences for the accepted social and cultural patterns of the group as a whole. But should audiences recognize innovations and reject them, the narrators who introduced them can lose their credibility. In such a situation, authorial agency results from somehow finessing the contradiction between the proximate author's self-effacing claim of inert mediation and his or her practice of strategic revision.

Mythic narration thus proceeds within a complex field of maneuver, where the question "Who speaks?" is deceptively simple. In evaluating any variant of a myth, audiences draw on all others they have heard and reflect not only on the specific elements of that variant, but also on the broader questions of who they are, where they come from, and what they believe. All members of the group—living and dead—potentially have a voice and a stake in these discussions, but some have more leverage than

others. Those with the most social, political, and cultural capital—i.e., those best connected and most highly regarded within the group—tend to speak most loudly in myth, but in this, myth is like many other genres. Its distinctive feature is a narratological structure that accords with minimal recognition to (proximate) narrators, while investing their stories with maximal authority by attributing them to transcendent others.

### Endnotes

1. Joel C. Kuipers, *Power in Performance: The Creation of Textual Authority in Weyewa Ritual Speech* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), pp. 138–39.

2. By way of contrast, it is useful to consider the conventions through which non-mythic genres produce credible narrators and attentive audiences. One thinks, for instance, of Conan Doyle's Dr. Watson or George Orwell's autobiographical persona in *Homage to Catalonia*, who win the trust of their audience through frank admission of their human failings (frailty, relative ignorance, limited perspective, etc.) and an assertion that they witnessed the events to which they bear faithful testimony. What we take to be their honesty in the first instance disposes us to trust them in the second.

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DONALD COSENTINO

My own understanding of myth begins with Durkheim's powerful observation, "a collective sentiment can become conscious of itself only by being fixed upon some material object." Durkheim described such reflexively-charged materials as "collective representations," with the inherent power to transform the profane into the sacred.

Durkheim was defining the power of the Australian *churinga*, but simultaneously he was staking common ground for all that is mythic in the social, the mimetic, and the sacred. He did not further prescribe the actual materials out of which collective representations are wrought, for reasons made clear by his countryman Roland Barthes a half-century later, "myth can be defined neither by its object nor by its material, for any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning... [its] substance is not unimportant: pictures to be sure are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it. Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: Like writing, they call for a lexis."

Alas, Durkheim and Barthes have had little effect on American definitions of myth. On a popular level, we invariably equate myth with untruth, and on a scholarly level, with narrative. Nowhere in American scholarship, from Newell to Dundes (inter alia) are non-narrative sources for myth described—or even acknowledged. Yet where does one find the best evidence of our collective Puritan sentiments: in the Starr Report, or the stain on Monica's blue Gap dress? Where do we look for contemporary evidence of the hero's return: in those random sightings of Elvis lurking down by Piggly Wiggly's parking lot? Or in Paul Simon's plaintive lyric, "Where are you please, Joe DiMaggio, an anxious nation turns it eyes to you, ou ou ou"?

The list of our collective representations is of course very long. There are Dorothy's Ruby Slippers; Jackie O's pink pill-box hat; Marilyn Monroe's white rayon skirt ballooning over a subway grate. These are concrete images, to paraphrase Aristotle, which have engraved themselves on our memories like signet rings. We are unable to conjure our myths of escape, of sacrifice, of love, without referencing them. They are pearls nestled at the very heart of our collective sentiments. Operating like Durkheim's *churingas*, these images conjure American dreamtimes through their correlate narratives.

While these objects emanate narratives, they are not necessarily less vital than those narratives. And in some cases, they may be more so. Consider "El Mito Guadalupano." The image of that dark little Virgin, La Morenita, imprinted on a 450-year-old *tilpa*, is the very essence of Mexico's myth of unique election. Only once did she appear to Juan Diego, only once did the legend of her benediction of roses, and the imprinting of her miraculous image on the Aztec peasant's *tilpa*, occur. The object she left to Diego and the world is her myth. It is the *tilpa* which rises above the legend (considered from the point of view of Diego) or the sacred narrative (if seen through Her image). It is La Virgencita on the *tilpa* which is the only part of the story which moves above time, which transforms legend into myth. That collective representation, painted on L.A. store fronts, now protects them from graffiti; or tattooed on the chest of a cholo, stops a knife or a bullet from ending his life.

Our scholarly inability to appreciate non-narrative myth has a long history, reaching back to the iconoclastic traditions of a Protestant revolution whose cultural baggage still burdens enormous areas of American intellectual life. Everywhere in our scholarship the written word is overvalued. We remain blind to the fact that the image of Guadalupe may have been more decisive than the Gutenberg Bible in shaping contemporary mythologies. If we are to appreciate the development of mythology in this emerging cyber age, we had better get rid of these aniconic prejudices pretty damn quick.