

I. The Organization of Myth

1. TALES, TEXTS, AND REFERENCE

To modern man, the word 'myth,'¹ while retaining a certain fascination even outside classical circles, has quite an ambivalent appeal: to denounce some opinion or attitude as 'myth' means to reject it as irrational, false, and potentially harmful;² at the same time, 'myth' has a nostalgic ring, indicative of some meaningful reality hidden or lost in the depths of the past or of the psyche, which might be resuscitated as an antidote to a present that seems both rational and absurd. Scholarship, however, is bound to be rational and concerned with facts; I am afraid that I am not going to fulfill escapist hopes.

What is myth? A simple definition³ will not do. A few years ago Geoffrey Kirk gave in this series a brilliant survey of the varying approaches of modern interpreters to myth,⁴ without arriving at any simple, clear-cut answer to this question, but nevertheless clearing the ground within a wide horizon of systematic and historical perspectives. I am not going to retrace his steps or review once again the history of mythological studies.⁵ But since I am going to probe into a few Greek myths and rituals in an attempt to understand them in terms of meaningful, essentially human tradition, I have to justify this approach in advance by reflecting in general terms upon the meaning of 'myth.' Thus I shall try to formulate some theses which may add up to form a tentative theory of myth, without Hellenocentric bias; though I am presupposing that whatever the exact definition of myth may be, Greek corpora such as Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Catalogues* or the Greek tragedies or the *Bibliothèque* of Apollodorus will be included in any such definition.

I gladly take my first thesis from the study of Geoffrey Kirk: *Myth belongs to the more general class of traditional tale.*⁶ This seems to be trivial, and scholars usually hasten to take the next step, to separate 'true' myth

from other kinds of folktale; still it is worthwhile to reflect, first of all, on the fundamental consequences of this thesis: if myth is a traditional *tale*, it is a phenomenon of language, and not some special creation analogous to and outside of normal language, as has been maintained from Mannhardt to Susanne Langer;⁷ and if myth is a *traditional* tale, this should at a stroke dispose of the question which has dominated scholarly mythology ever since Antiquity: 'How is myth created, and by whom?' It is not the 'creation,' not the 'origin' of myth which constitutes the basic fact, but the transmission and preservation, even without the use of writing in a 'primitive,' oral civilization. Whatever creative agents have been proposed to account for the origin of myths, whether inspired poets or lying poets, '*Volkgeist*,' the universal human mind, or the unconscious dynamics of the psyche,⁸ they seem to belong rather to a creation myth of myth than to a rational approach. A tale becomes traditional not by virtue of being created, but by being retold and accepted; transmission means interaction, and this process is not explained by isolating just one side. A tale 'created'—that is, invented by an individual author—may somehow become 'myth' if it becomes traditional, to be used as a means of communication in subsequent generations,⁹ usually with some distortions and reelaborations. At any rate, it is a fact that there are traditional tales in most primitive and even in advanced societies, handed down in a continuous chain of transmission, suffering from omissions and misinterpretations but still maintaining a certain identity and some power of regeneration.¹⁰ The fundamental questions thus would be: How, and to what extent, can traditional tales retain their identity through many stages of telling and retelling, especially in oral transmission, and what, if any, is the role and function of such tales in the evolution of human civilization?

But what is a tale? If, dealing with language, we adopt the triple division worked out by analytical philosophy and linguistics of (1) sign, (2) sense, and (3) reference,¹¹ a tale belongs evidently to the category of sense, as against an individual text on the one side, and reality on the other. It is taken for granted that tales can be translated without loss or damage;¹² they are therefore not dependent on any particular language; and even within one language the same tale can be told in quite different ways, in longer or in shorter versions, with more or less of detail and of imaginative situations. Thus, within Greek literature, the same myth

may appear in such diverse forms as a book of Homer, a digression in Pindar, a whole tragedy, an allusion in a choral ode, a passage in Apollodorus, or a scholion on Aristophanes. A myth, qua tale, is not identical with any given text; the interpretation of myth therefore is to be distinguished from the interpretation of a text, though both may evolve in a hermeneutic circle and remain mutually dependent on each other. We know, after all, that we can remember a good tale, and a myth, by hearing it just once, without memorizing the words of a text. What is it, then, that we do remember?

It is not anything 'real.' A tale, while not bound to any given text, is not bound to pragmatic reality either. I think this holds true on quite a fundamental level. A tale has no immediate reference,¹³ in contrast to a word or an atomic sentence: this is a rose, this is red, this rose is red. A tale is not, and cannot be, an accumulation of atomic sentences; it is a sequence in time, linking different stages by some internal necessity. There might be immediate evidence only for the last stage, but usually the whole tale is in the past tense, and there is no immediate way to verify things past. In fact there is no isomorphism between reality and tale; it seems increasingly as if piles of computerized information were more representative of reality than any tale; it is not by coincidence that modern writers are more and more unwilling, and unable, to tell a straightforward tale. Reality does not automatically yield a tale. Even a reporter in a live transmission of, say, a football game can only give a personal selection of what is going on simultaneously; and if anyone tries to retell what has happened, there is immediately much more selection, condensation, structuralization. The form of the tale is not produced by reality, but by language, whence its basic character is derived: linearity. Every tale has a basic element of *poiesis*, fiction.

Myth, then, within the class of traditional tales, is nonfactual storytelling. This keeps us close to the sense of the Greek word *mythos* as contrasted with *lógos*: *lógos*, from *légein*, 'to put together,' is assembling single bits of evidence, of verifiable facts: *lógon didónai*, to render account in front of a critical and suspicious audience; *mythos* is telling a tale while disclaiming responsibility: *ouk emòs ho mythos*,¹⁴ this is not my tale, but I have heard it elsewhere. Just by disregarding the question of truth one may enjoy myth, or wonder, and start thinking.

Yet myth is generally held to be not a passing enjoyment, but some-

ing important, serious, even sacred. How can this go together with the alleged lack of reference to reality? Ever since antiquity, scholarly mythology has felt the problem, and has tried to evade it by a kind of short circuit, by substituting some direct reference on which the seriousness and stability of the myth is said to depend. This meant looking for a supposedly original, 'real' meaning as against the apparent absurdity or involuntariness of the tale. The favorite reference was to the events of nature,¹⁵ and, secondly, to history: Zeus is the sky, Apollo is the sun,¹⁶ the Chimaera is the earth-fire near Olympus in Lycia,¹⁷ Phaethon's catastrophe is just sunset or, more spectacularly, the eruption of the volcano of Thera,¹⁸ Oedipus is Akhnaton, and the dragon Siegfried slew is the Roman army in the *saltus Teutoburgensis* annihilated by Arminius.¹⁹ Schliemann thought he had recovered evidence for the murder of Agamemnon from the shaft graves at Mycenae,²⁰ and some seem to think that if the names of Menelaus and Helen should turn up in Linear B, Homer would finally be explained. To remain serious: there is no denying that tales were associated with phenomena or events of this kind; but it is naive to assume that any tale would arise directly from facts. All interpretations on these lines must use Procrustean methods to make the tale isomorphic with the purported reality, must cut off excesses²¹ attributed to uncontrolled 'fantasy,' and thus really kill the tale, and the myth.

There is a much more subtle method of interpretation which is still, I think, liable to the same error as the 'short circuit.' This is to substitute direct reference not any empirical reality, but meta-empirical entities from the realm of metaphysics or, in a more modern vein, of psychology. This method has found favor from Plutarch down to modern theology²² and to C. G. Jung.²³ It has the advantage of admitting neither of verification nor of refutation, since those nonempirical entities may be constructed to fit exactly the presuppositions of some set of myths. Still it has been notoriously difficult to maintain any kind of consistency in such constructs, keeping in touch at the same time with the myths as attested and not losing all contact with empirical reality. Granted that there are unconscious dynamics of the psyche, there is no reason to assume that they are isomorphic with any tale, which belongs after all not to the realm of the unconscious, but to language. Myths are multivalent: the same myth may be applied to nature or history, to metaphysics or psy-

chology, and make some sense in each field, sometimes even striking sense, according to the predilections of the interpreter;²⁴ but the very plurality of applications must caution us; a myth, qua tale, cannot be pinned down as referring specifically and immediately to any kind of reality, to one 'origin' outside the tale.

2. PROPP'S HERITAGE AND ILLUYANKAS

This leads to a second thesis, which claims no more originality than the first: the identity of a traditional tale, including myth, independent as it is from any particular text or language and from direct reference to reality, is to be found in a *structure of sense* within the tale itself. Structuralism in general, and the structural study of folktales and myths in particular, has seen a luxuriant growth in recent years;¹ an exposition and critical discussion of the theories involved could easily fill more than one book. I have no intention of doing this; nor shall I produce yet another variant of structuralism, with appropriate terminology and, if possible, diagrams and mathematical formulas. What I shall try to do is describe the method I am tentatively adopting, and give reasons for not probing too deeply into other possibilities.

Structure, in the most general sense, means a system of definable relations between the parts or elements of a whole which admit predictable transformations;² and structuralism tends to assume that it is exactly this bundle of relations which constitutes the parts as well as the whole. In a more specific way, structuralism is termed the science of signs, to coincide with 'semiology,' while at the same time the concept of 'sign' and 'language' has been expanded to cover nearly every aspect of civilization. As to the structure of traditional tales, and myth, there are, as far as I can see, two prominent names which stand for two types of structural analysis, Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss; there are by now also several theories aiming at a synthesis of both approaches.

Vladimir Propp, in a book which appeared in Russian in 1928, and became known to the Western world thirty years later,³ set out to reduce the whole corpus of Russian fairy-tales to one recurrent pattern, a linear series of thirty-one 'functions.' These 'functions' are units of plot action; Alan Dundes has preferred to call them 'motifemes.' Propp's theory can be summarized in three theorems:⁴ 'functions' (or 'motifemes')—and

not the persons involved—are the constant elements in fairy-tales; their number is limited; their sequence is fixed. This does not mean that all of the 'functions' must turn up in a single narrative, but rather that all the 'functions' of a given tale are to be found in due course in the ideal series. That is to say: a folktale—including myth—is a fixed sequence of motifs; the persons are interchangeable. It is reassuring to note that this comes remarkably close to Aristotle's definition of *mythos* as a 'combination of actions' with a fixed sequence of beginning, *arché*, reversal, *peripéteia*, and ending, *lysis* or *katastrophé*.⁶ In fact even before Propp's book became known, other scholars had been using rather similar methods to reduce many variants of a tale to one basic pattern, at least since von Hahn's 'Freja formula' and 'Aryan expulsion and return formula';⁷ Propp's contribution was to restrict the series to 'functions,' excluding characters and their qualities and all special, however striking, details. As a first step in analyzing myths, Lévi-Strauss has advocated a similar procedure.⁸ Propp did not claim to have established the structure of tales in general—though some post-Proppian theorists seem to start from this assumption;⁹ his claim was made only for tales of one type, represented by thirty-one 'functions,' which may be called 'the quest.' Alan Dundes, who successfully applied Propp's method to Amerindian folktale, has been working with four more general sequences: Lack—lack liquidated; Task—task accomplished; Deceit—deception; Interdiction—violation—consequence—attempted escape.¹⁰ Prominent in Greek and other mythologies, but hardly to be found in fairy-tales, are sets of stories concerned with sex and procreation, and with the problem of how to handle the dead; this overlaps with a sacrificial pattern of killing and restoration.¹¹

To give one example from Greek mythology of how a set of apparently unrelated myths can be analyzed as covering the same basic structure, I take those sentimental stories about the mothers of important heroes: Callisto, the mother of Arcas, ancestor of the Arcadians;¹² Auge, the mother of Telephus, the founder of Pergamum;¹³ Danaë, the mother of Perseus, the founder of Mycenae;¹⁴ Io, the mother of Epaphus, ancestor of the Danai;¹⁵ Tyro, mother of Pelias and Neleus, the kings of Iolcos and Pylos;¹⁶ Melanippe, the mother of Boeotus and Aeolus, ancestors of the Boeotians and Aeolians;¹⁷ Antiope, mother of Zethus and Amphion, the founders of Thebes.¹⁸ Such a catalogue of seven mothers, ten boys,

five cities, and four tribes seems to put quite a strain on the memory, and details multiply, if we add parents and further offspring, to make up the dreary pages of mythological handbooks. But the tales told adapt themselves neatly to a sequence of five 'functions,' easy to understand, which I would call 'the girl's tragedy': (1) leaving home: the girl is separated from childhood and family life; (2) the idyl of seclusion: Callisto joins Artemis, Tyro takes a lonely walk to the river, Auge and Io become priestesses, Antiope becomes a maenad, Danaë is incarcerated in a tomb-like vault; (3) rape: the girl is surprised, violated, and impregnated by a god—it is Zeus for Callisto, Danaë, Io, and Antiope, Poseidon for Tyro and Melanippe, Heracles for Auge; (4) tribulation: the girl is severely punished and threatened with death by parents or relatives—Antiope and Tyro are enslaved to a kind of stepmother, Melanippe is blinded and incarcerated, Danaë is enclosed in a coffin and thrown into the sea, Auge is sold to strangers, Io is turned into a cow and chased away, Callisto is turned into a bear, hunted, and shot; (5) rescue: the mother, having given birth to a boy, is saved from death and grief, as the boy is about to take over the power to which he is destined. The agents, places, motivations and all the details vary; but there is the fixed sequence of departure, seclusion, rape, tribulation, and rescue as a prelude to the emergence of the hero.¹⁹ Yet there is a complication with regard to the animal metamorphosis of Callisto the bear and Io the cow: our texts are conspicuously at variance as to the occurrence of this transformation, before or after mating with the god, or much later.²⁰ It would be begging the question to postulate that, since animal metamorphosis is 'primitive,' it should happen as early as possible in the tale, turning the god animal too. We must rather state that metamorphosis and sexual union are not in a fixed motifeme sequence; the linearity of the tale structure is suspended at this point. In fact metamorphosis is not a 'motifeme' in this series or elsewhere, let alone an independent tale type, but a widely applicable motif to mark a change of roles, or to hint at some reference outside the tale; both bear and cattle are of special, ritual importance. This, however, will lead from folktale to myth.²¹

Another example may illustrate how far this method of analysis can succeed in establishing identity or nonidentity of parallel versions of ancient myths. I take the Hittite myth about the dragon Illuyankas²² and the Typhon myth as transmitted by Apollodorus; the basic similarity of

the Hittite and the Greek version has struck scholars ever since the Hittite text became known.²³ But the Hittite text already puts two versions side by side, a "version which they no longer tell" and "the way in which they told it later." This poses the problem of the interrelation of both these versions, which at any rate have a common reference to the New Year festival, Purulli. It is, however, easy to set the texts in parallels:²⁴

Old version

The Storm-god and the Dragon came to grips.

The Dragon vanquished the Storm-god.

The Storm-god besought all the gods . . .

Inaras (a goddess, helping the Storm-god) encountered Hupasiyas, a mortal. He slept with her.

Inaras took Hupasiyas to the place and hid him; Inaras lured the Dragon up from his lair; the Dragon came with his children; they drank every amphora dry; they are no longer able to descend to their lair; Hupasiyas came and trussed the Dragon with a rope.

The Storm-god came and killed the Dragon.

Inaras instructs Hupasiyas: "Thou shalt not look out of the window!"; that man opened the window and he saw his wife and his children; Inaras killed him.

This can be brought into one sequence of motifs, which turns out to be a characteristic variation of the combat tale: (1) the champion fights the adversary; (2) the adversary defeats the champion; (3) the champion is helpless; (4) a mortal helper is provided; (5) the helper beguiles the ad-

New version

The Dragon vanquished the Storm-god, and took his heart and eyes away from him.

The Storm-god sought to revenge himself.

He took the daughter of the poor man; he begat a son; when he (sc. the son) grew up, he took the daughter of the Dragon in marriage.

The Storm-god instructs his son; he (sc. the son) asked them (sc. his wife and the Dragon) for the heart and they gave that to him; he asked for the eyes and they gave him those, too. The Storm-god got back his heart and his eyes.

When he had engaged the Dragon in battle, he came close to vanquishing him.

The son of the Storm-god shouted: "Spare me not!"; the Storm-god killed the Dragon and his son too.

versary; (6) the adversary loses his advantage; (7) the champion, resuming action, defeats the adversary; (8) the mortal helper is killed too. A straightforward combat tale, leaping from (1) to (7), is not too exciting; much more thrilling is the inversion, temporary defeat and disarmament of the champion (2,3)—as is to be found in innumerable variations down to present-day movies and comics²⁵—which makes it necessary to resort to tricks instead of force (5, 6).

The unique, paradoxical and disconcerting feature of the Illuyankas myth, in both its versions, is the introduction of a mortal helper who gets killed finally, though the god's victory is largely due to him. It is here that the two texts diverge conspicuously as to the identity and motivation of this 'actant,' though the basic sequence, the tragic paradox, is unaltered. Hupasiyas' grim fate seems to be a kind of novella of its own, loosely attached, following the Interdiction—violation—consequence pattern; in the 'new' version, the death of the helper is integrated into the main action, though the text does not make it very clear why this was unavoidable; it is indicated, instead, that he accepts his death out of his own free will. This is suspiciously reminiscent of sacrificial ideology;²⁶ some form of real or symbolic human sacrifice in the context of the New Year festival, helping the gods to overcome chaos, may well be in the background.

The Apollodorus version of the Typhon myth almost automatically falls into place: (1) Zeus and Typhon come to grips; (2) Typhon defeats Zeus; (3) he takes away Zeus' weapon and his sinews, which are guarded by a dragoness in a cave; (5) Hermes and Aegipan steal the sinews and (6) fit them again to Zeus; (7) Zeus, resuming action, defeats Typhon. There is a close resemblance to the 'new' version of Illuyankas in the motif that the adversary disables the champion by taking parts of his body away from him—'heart and eyes' in Hittite, 'sinews' in Greek—which are to be recovered through a dragoness. As the Greek tale is explicitly located in Cilicia, a 'late Hittite' intermediary between the Boğazköy text and Apollodorus' source is to be assumed. What gets lost in the process of transmission is the human character of the helper and his paradoxical death; this strengthens the supposition that this was rooted in ritual and therefore not easily transferable.

Recently, Volker Haas has drawn attention to quite another Greek myth which bears a surprising resemblance to the Illuyankas myth as

told in the 'older' version: Jason and Medea.²⁷ Here, as there, a goddess—there can be no doubt about Medea's divine status—takes a mortal man as her lover, and the two cooperate to overcome the dragon; but then the mortal man turns away from his superior spouse, and he is destroyed in consequence. Add that 'fleeces of the sun' are prominent in the Purulli festival, while Jason's task is to bring the Golden Fleece from Aia, the country of the sun;²⁸ Aia is the name of the Sun-god's wife in Mesopotamian and Hittite religion.²⁹

I do not think this can be coincidence. But in spite of these suggestive parallels, it turns out to be impossible to integrate the Hittite and the Greek tales into one 'Proppian' sequence: on the Greek side there is nothing like the characteristic duality of champion and helper; thus the whole frame of the Hittite combat myth will not fit; on the other side, the fleeces, though well attested in Hittite ritual, do not enter into the tale, whereas the Golden Fleece is the very goal of Jason's expedition. In fact the Argonaut tale, as established by Karl Meuli long ago,³⁰ belongs to the type of 'Helfermaerchen,' and it would finally fall into Propp's sequence of the fairy-tale but for the abnormal continuation, the Medea tragedy. Let us not try to analyze the complex Argonaut tradition any further,³¹ but get back to the more general, basic problems. There has been some migration of motifs from Hittites to Argonauts, but the tales in which they appear are different.

3. THE IMPACT OF LÉVI-STRAUSS AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Propp's method has proved workable in the hands of different scholars. His theorems seem to hold true: a tale is a sequence of motifs; in linguistic terms: a syntagmatic chain with 'paradigmatic' variants; in more human terms: a program of actions—taking 'action' in a large sense, including plans, reactions, and passive experience in the sequence of the plot. Critics may point to the problem of segmentation:¹ Which are the joints that separate two 'functions' or 'motifemes'? Is it not possible to make arbitrary subdivisions ad infinitum? In fact 'action theory'² has provided a certain formalism to describe how comprehensive actions are represented by series of minor actions, by single steps; conversely, the whole series of 'functions' could be engulfed in one major

'action' which, in the case of Propp's series, would be the 'quest.' Practical analysis, however, has to take advantage precisely of the alternatives and variants presented in a set of parallel tales, which make clear the turning points and 'joints.'³

What is more generally troubling about structuralism in the wake of Propp is the apparent lack of system: thirty-one 'functions'; this seems quite a random series. Every Platonic mind will try to reduce this multitude to some neat, preferably binary, scheme from which they can be generated: "from chain to system"!⁴ Dundes has introduced some binary motifs, such as 'Lack—lack liquidated,' while retaining an open group of various sequences. Much more systematic models have been worked out by Greimas and Bremond,⁵ still on the basis of Propp's achievement but aiming at a general, formalized 'narrative grammar.' One may wonder, though, how one can ever get back from such neat and barren systems to describing any identifiable tale in its dynamics, as Propp's quest series did.

Less systematic, but much more radical, is the other variant of structuralism, headed by Lévi-Strauss.⁶ His impact has been compared to the advent of abstract painting.⁷ I do not think Lévi-Strauss has proved anything, but he has shown in an unprecedented way what scholars can do with myths. For him, a folktale, taken as a 'syntagmatic chain,' makes no sense at all.⁸ Thus the sequence of the tale is broken up, and all its elements—persons, objects, properties, and actions—become free to serve just as terms in abstract relations: oppositions, proportions, reversals, logical quadrangles, 'functions' in the mathematical sense. As Nathorst put it: "He has perhaps found the harmony, but he has certainly lost the melody."⁹ We are told there are multiple levels of coexisting 'codes' which must be decoded by setting out the fundamental, binary relations. Lévi-Strauss usually arrives at two columns of concepts representing the basic opposition and an intermediary between the two, and he seems to show that this '*médiation*' is the real achievement of myth.

The method, carried out with an inelligence that keeps surprising the reader, may work an irresistible spell on the humanities' craving to become, after all, scientific. And the bewildered objection that this structuralism produces structures which nobody had seen or understood before¹⁰ is countered from the start: these are unconscious; a native speaker does not usually know the grammar of his own language in any

explicit way but still keeps to it, and with other cultural phenomena it may be the same.¹¹ I gladly confess that structural interpretations have taught me to notice certain phenomena which had escaped the more naïve, impressionistic view before. Still there are, I think, limits to the impact of structuralism beyond which it is not reasonable to expect verifiable results. I know, however, that structuralism seems to be so delicate that every criticism of Lévi-Strauss has hitherto been countered by the assertion that the critic has misunderstood Lévi-Strauss;¹² I shall have to face the same accusations of simple-mindedness. These are my objections:

1. There is a limit to the use of mathematical formulas, however apt they are to impress the noninitiate. Mathematical formulas make sense only if they contain true variables, that is, if they are applicable to more than one case, and if they are specific enough to get beyond banalities. If we should tell a physicist that the basic formula of electricity is $-1 + 1 = 0$, with the notable inversion that $+1 - 1 = 0$ too, he would not be too enthusiastic about that; but is the thesis that every myth is a mediation between a binary opposition¹³ really above this level? Besides, it is not true of every myth. Lévi-Strauss's formula of mediation, $F_x(a):F_y(b) = F_x(b):F_{a-1}(y)$ is complicated enough to suffer from misprint continually,¹⁴ but if applied correctly—as it was by Köngäs and Maranda¹⁵—it can equally pertain to songs, lyrics, riddles, and jokes, and to these especially, but not to every tale. Thus it is a structure, but not the structure of myth.

2. Science claims to deal with facts outside itself. But to what extent are structures 'factual'? Besides objective structures, there are projective structures, structures in the mind of the observer or interpreter which sometimes are difficult to separate from the objective. We all know those deceptive drawings of, say, a cube in perspective, which we clearly see from above, or from below; with some practice, we can even switch—the spatial structure is not in the drawing, but is brought out by the processing of information in an experienced brain. Furthermore, there are 'structures' which are objective but absolutely irrelevant, such as the relations of *i*-dots to commas in any given text. Has structuralism ever tried to distinguish the essential from the accidental, the objective from projections?¹⁶ Personal confessions—"the pattern is there; I did not invent it"¹⁷—cannot replace critical method. But in fact structuralism is

hunting for the unconscious, and seems to set store on infinite adaptability to ever increasing materials, as in Lévi-Strauss's famous statement that a myth consists of all its versions, so that the Oedipus myth should include even Freud's interpretation,¹⁸ and in consequence Lévi-Strauss's own. The controversy about 'God's truth' versus a 'hocus-pocus position' is old, and cannot easily be settled.¹⁹ Structuralism, it has been said, is just the consequence of the thesis that 'God is dead.'²⁰ But how, then, could it cling to the claim of being a 'science,' which had been a starting point of the structuralist approach? Uninhibited structuralism will discover absolutely arbitrary superstructures, replacing objectivity by ingenuity. In fact Lévi-Strauss's concept of mediation is distinctively Hegelian. The nature-culture antithesis appeals to contemporary anxiety about culture crisis. And if Lévi-Strauss reduces the Oedipus myth to the opposition of 'overrating' and 'underrating' of blood relations,²¹ as if killing and mating were dealing with exchange rates, we cannot but remember that he wrote his first important book on 'les structures élémentaires de la parenté.'

3. Structuralism does not lead to understanding, to decipherment. It would be a 'structural' statement that, in Latin capitals, $I:L=F:E$, since the second letter can be generated from the first by the addition of one horizontal stroke; but this tells us nothing about the use of the alphabet. The sequence OEOI heading Greek inscriptions allows of perfect structural analysis: from right to left, it contains the very elements of Greek writing, straight line and perfect circle, and a repetition of both with their essential properties marked out, beginning, middle, and end of the line, and for the circle, the center. But of course we know the letters mean 'gods,' invoked to witness the record. This is joking—and still a little bit more than that. Significantly enough, Lévi-Strauss has taken modern phonology as his model of a structural system successfully established;²² but phonology, important as its achievements may be, will not lead by itself to understanding a single word of any given language. We have to know what language is about. There may be a philosophy which does not recognize any reality, but only 'structures,' signs pointing to signs, merging the objective with the subjective in some esoteric '*esprit*'; structuralism, in this sense, seems to become the last resort of idealism, as methodological caution is transformed into ontological assertion.²³ Maybe I am too clumsy to join the absolutism of semiology and get rid

of objective reality. A sign system cannot be self-contained: there are no signs without signification, and signification is void without reference. And I would still find that, contrary to Lévi-Strauss's thesis that a tale, taken by itself, makes no sense, there is much interesting and subtle sense in each of the myths treated in *Mythologiques*. Myth number 1,²⁴ for instance, explicitly refers to initiation: a boy rapes his mother, and therefore he is abandoned by his father; after he has learned hunting, and has been wounded and healed, he kills his father and lays him to rest in the sea, but is capable at the same time of providing fire for the whole community. This is full of meaning, not just in Freudian terms. And the more abstract antithesis of nature and culture, so dear to Lévi-Strauss and his followers, is still within the realm of meaningful content, to be understood not by formal logic, but by human experience. Structuralism, it is true, can go far beyond that; it is the one method for dealing with even the unintelligible, the absurd. This might be the final game of nihilism.

4. PROGRAMS OF ACTION

Now we seem to be caught in the trap of a contradiction: it was said that a tale, including myth, has no direct reference, and yet that there is no meaningful sign system without a reference. Is not structuralism the only way out of this dilemma, sacrificing naive meaningfulness to its own logic which emerges even in the absurd? Definitely not. The concept of a 'structure of sense without direct reference' is not self-contradictory.¹ Meaning, though linked with reference, is not identical with it. It is impossible to treat in any detail here the controversies of referential, operational, and structural semantics.² But there might be agreement that meaningful speech, while dependent upon life experience, presupposes at the same time rules of how to use the variables of language.³ In a theoretical language, meaning as designated by the sign would consist of concepts and propositions as constructs;⁴ the attempts at a 'narrative grammar' introduce similar constructs, abstractions apt for convenient formalization, such as the 'transfer of objects' between subjects in the system of Greimas.⁵ This is neat and civilized, but cannot account for actions such as 'killing': although this may be expressed by 'taking somebody's life' in certain languages, it is definitely not a 'trans-

fer' of an object.⁶ The meaning of a tale, even at the level of a 'Proppian' sequence, is much richer, and more complicated. The very sequence, however, represents one major semantic 'rule,' which determines the meaning of the elements.

But such a rule has its very special dynamics. The 'sequence of motifs' could as well be described as a 'program of actions'; the linguistic representative of 'action' is the verb. In fact if we look more closely at Propp's sequence, the major part of his 'functions' can be conveniently summarized in one verb, 'to get,' corresponding to the substantive 'the quest.' And this three-letter word does imply quite a complicated program of actions. To 'get' something means: to realize some deficiency, or receive some order to start; to have, or to attain, some knowledge or information about the thing wanted; to decide to begin a search; to go out, to meet partners, in a changing environment, who may prove to be helpful or antagonistic; to discover the object, and to appropriate it by force or guile, or, in more civilized circumstances, by negotiation; then, to bring back the object, while it still may be taken away by force, stolen, or lost. Only after all that, with success established, has the action of 'getting' come to its end. Now these are in fact Propp's functions 8-31, leaving out the role of the helpful partner, and this well-structured sense is more specific, and more complicated, than any zero-formula such as $-1+1=0$, or even 'Lack-lack liquidated.' This structure is not directly derivable from formal logic; note the asymmetry: the search is quite different from the return or flight; neither Odysseus nor the Argonauts can get back on the route whereby they came to Circe or Aia. Even this, though, has a ring of reality.

In fact if we ask where such a structure of sense, such a program of actions, is derived from, the answer must evidently be: from the reality of life, nay, from biology.⁷ Every rat in search of food will incessantly run through all these 'functions,' including the peak of agitation at the moment of success: then the rat has to run fastest to find a safe place before its fellow rats take its prey away. In the Propp series there is the motif sequence called the 'magical flight,'⁸ which often constitutes the most thrilling part of a fairy-tale, when the magical object, or the bride, has been gained and the previous owner starts a pursuit. This probably is just a transformation of the action pattern described.

Protest will arise that now we have committed the worst *metabasis eis*

allo genos, plunging headlong from the sublime heights of structuralism into the depths of zoology. But the transition can be justified. Natural language, after all, is language of living beings; if sequences of motifs correspond to action programs, we are right in the field of bio-cybernetics. Of course, even if action programs are not a privilege of the human race, only man can speak about them. Actions are represented by the verb; and the verbal root, the 'zero form' of the verbs, in most languages—including English, German, French, Latin, Greek, and Turkish—is the imperative; and communication by imperatives is more primitive, and more basic, than communication by statements.⁹ The deepest deep structure of a tale would, then, be a series of imperatives: 'get,' that is: 'go out, ask, find out, fight for it, take and run.' And the reaction of an audience to a tale is in perfect accordance with this: under the spell of a thrilling tale, we will ourselves perform one by one the actions described—in idle motion, of course. Thus communication in the form of action sequences, in the form of a tale, is so basic and elementary that it cannot be traced to 'deeper' levels; we may note, in passing, the parallel with dreaming, which also involves action patterns in idle motion. At the same time, we are still in a field which is anything but simplistic; even a rat's brain is quite a marvelous computer, more complicated, in any case, than any structuralist formula. And can we expect at any level of life phenomena which are simpler than the simplest DNA molecule?

The biological perspective is confirmed, if we look at the other tale structures we have been dealing with. We need hardly mention the combat tale. It is part of the Propp series, but may become independent, since there are societies which make the heroic-aggressive values prevail over economic interest. Remarkably often there are males fighting for the female. Lack-lack liquidated is indeed the most basic mechanism of bio-cybernetics.¹⁰ The girl's tragedy can be seen to reflect initiation rituals; but these in turn are determined by the natural sequence of puberty, defloration, pregnancy, and delivery. If, as observed in certain tribes, the girl has to leave her father's house at first menstruation and only acquires full adult status with the birth of a son,¹¹ the correspondence to the tale structure is almost perfect. The other motif sequences of Dundes, Task-task accomplished, Interdiction-violation-consequence, are situated at a distinctly human level, but still represent some of the most basic functions of society: authority and morality. Deceit-

deception adds the functioning of intelligence, which may well clash with both authority and morality.

Thus "the plot has a general human character," as Franz Boas put it.¹² There are some features of a plot which easily admit formalization: beginning and ending usually correspond, as in Lack-lack liquidated, and this makes up a binary opposition which is dear to the computerized mind. But it does not follow that what happens in between should be equally simple and symmetrical, a neat transformation from minus to plus. Actions such as 'to get' or 'to fight' have their own complex, asymmetrical dynamics. Even as to beginning and ending, the Greeks preferred to speak of the 'feet' and the 'head' of a tale: you could not stop in the middle of a tale, or else the *mythos* would walk around without a head, a haunting spirit.¹³ Tale structures are ineradicably anthropomorphic, or biomorphic.

Reducing the structure of tales to programs of actions, we are not falling again into the trap of the 'short circuit': we are not explaining the tale by some 'original' reference to any objective fact. Even if we were to assume that the first tale told was a report on, say, a successful hunt, it was understood and retold because the members of the audience were potentially active themselves. The action pattern establishes a principle of synthesis which is a priori with respect to any specific tale. It explains why it is possible that the listener becomes speaker in turn—which is the principle of the traditional tale—and why good tales can be memorized so easily, by hearing them only once: there are not terribly many items to memorize, since the structure has largely been known in advance. By virtue of this, traditional tales can retain a certain stability, even some power of regeneration: misunderstandings can be corrected and omissions restored, as storytellers and listeners consciously or unconsciously agree as to tale structures.

Probably this would be the place to start an inquiry into the unconscious dynamics of the psyche, which are situated somewhere between biology and language, and which no doubt are involved in understanding and retelling tales. Ever since Freud, psychoanalysis has been keenly interested in myth.¹⁴ One basic question would be the relation of sexual drives to other action patterns, and the "tendency to form" certain "representations" of these moving forces, which C. G. Jung has called 'archetypes.'¹⁵ This, however, is far beyond my capabilities and compo-

tence. And I shall not probe deeper into the delicate problem of 'symbols.'¹⁶ Let us keep to thesis number three:¹⁷ *tale structures, as sequences of motifemes, are founded on basic biological or cultural programs of actions*, and pursue our way in the other direction, from the unconscious toward verbalization.

5. CRYSTALLIZATIONS: KUMARBI AND KRONOS

There is no denying that in any good tale, many additional structures may be discerned beyond the fundamental sequences of motifemes, disregarding still further stabilizing structures of individual languages, such as meter, assonance, and rhyme. What makes a tale specific, effective, unforgettable, as it seems, may be the interplay of multiple structures. I call this the crystallization of a tale.¹ Its elements may thus be heavily overdetermined on account of superimposed structures, so that every change of detail results in deterioration; this is the mark of art. The question remains, however, whether a traditional tale is transmitted as an elaborate work of art, or in some more basic form.

Among the principles involved in crystallization of meaning are contrast and symmetry. 'Tall stories' need strong contrasts, to fill in an ideal way the slots provided by the action pattern. Thus the combat tale,² the ending of which is victory, will not introduce two medium-sized, medium-minded, average people to fight—they would rather shake hands. The prospective victor and the antagonist are made opposites in every respect: the victor will be bright, handsome, nice, young, perhaps slim and small, but tough and virtuous, while the adversary will be dark, ugly, repulsive, old, big and powerful, but dissolute and lecherous. The contrast between light and darkness obtrudes itself. There may be still other 'codes' to bring home this opposition to the audience. In fact most of Lévi-Strauss's 'codes' seem to enter on this level of crystallization, with the operations of analogy, proportion, and inversion implied.

Thus the principle of contrast may give color to the peripeteia of a tale: the champion may be heavily underprivileged at the beginning, to make his victory all the more overwhelming; or what precedes ca-

tastrophe will be especially idyllic and serene. Hence the beautiful flowers in the meadow plucked by Little Red Riding Hood as well as by Persephone before the big bad wolf or Death himself enters into the action.

Another form of contrast is to duplicate the tale by introducing alternatives: the hero has more than one chance. He may fail at the first attempt but succeed at the second; examples range from the Storm-god and Illuyankas³ to well beyond Parsifal; or success may be followed by failure. Or else contrasting characters are introduced, one destined to fail, one to succeed: the two brothers, or sisters; the good and the bad, the silly and the clever; this fits with the Interdiction-violation series, as well as with the combat tale.

A more effective crystallization, with contrasts integrated into symmetry, is achieved by the clash of two standard action-patterns, notably sexuality and aggression. Mating and procreation are actions which define the roles of male and female, parents and offspring. A combat of men with women is a startling inversion—the Amazon myth, or the wife killing her husband; worse still is the father killing his daughter, or the son killing his mother, perverting in addition the bonds of family descent. These then are most concise and memorable narrative structures, which may even combine to form an almost systematic series: a father killing his daughter, a wife killing her husband, a son killing his mother—the *Oresteia* tragedy.

'Fantasy' has often been invoked as the major force in folktale and myth; that "everything becomes possible"⁴ has been repeatedly claimed. But sparkles at the surface may be just reflections produced by some deep rhythm of the waves. In fact the element of the 'fantastic'—in the sense of the 'impossible,' from our point of view—is not indispensable in myth and not even in fairy-tale; there is nothing impossible in "Hänsel and Gretel," one of the best-known fairy-tales of the Brothers Grimm collection,⁵ just as there is nothing supernatural in the Oedipus story⁶ besides the well-established use of an oracle. There are elements of magic or shamanism in other tales, no doubt, and there are elements of ritual especially in myths; the remarkable role of animals largely belongs to these levels. Not being bound to reality, the tale may skip the finality of death and introduce 'fantastic' reversals such as cutting off heads and putting them back on, or being swallowed and

coming out of the belly again. This is action inverted by logic; and many other 'fantastic' motifs are merely logic disregarding reality—straight-forward, uninhibited action, such as infinite strength, unattainable swiftness, inexhaustible food. Or take that favorite character of Near Eastern and Western mythology, the dragon.⁷ He is only the perfect crystallization of the role of the adversary in the combat tale. He is a snake, because this is the most dreaded and hated animal, having resorted to chemical warfare so long ago;⁸ he has a huge devouring mouth, because being swallowed and eaten is a most basic anxiety of every living being; he may have wings, making him ubiquitous and unassailable; he may exhale fire, because this was the most destructive kind of energy known—his modern counterparts in science fiction wield nuclear bombs or laser machines. The dragon may abduct and guard a virgin, to add the fury of sexual rivalry to the combat; but he is old and ugly; and thus the dragon is invariably overcome, for he has grown out of the tale structure expressly for this purpose. So far there is no reason to postulate a special kind of logic⁹ or even an elaborate store of symbolism; a good tale, overdetermined and 'crystallized,' may just be too logical to be true.

It is another question to what degree oral transmission can preserve crystallizations over a longer period of time in the absence of poetical, metrical form. This should be an empirical question. Evidence seems to show that structures are broken up. There are all those variants of folktales, and sets of evidently related tales in different civilizations, which presuppose some process of transmission yet still exhibit different structural features. In this case scholarly discussions may arise as to whether two tales are 'the same' or have 'nothing at all' to do with each other, whether there is 'superficial similarity,' or whether some ubiquitous, free-floating 'motifs' may account for the resemblance or even identity. Behind this is the question of what really constitutes the identity of a tale in different versions. Propp's theory seemed to provide an answer. Let us test this with another concrete example, the relation between the Hittite Kumarbi myth and Hesiod's Kronos.¹⁰

Ever since the Hittite text was published in 1945, the similarity of these myths has struck interpreters; and there can be no question as to the priority of the Hittite version. Thus transmission from Hittite to

Greek—probably by way of intermediaries, Hurrians, Phoenicians—had been generally assumed. Geoffrey Kirk, however, imbued with the refinements of structuralism, struck a note of caution: there is a clear symmetry in the Greek version which is totally missing from the Hittite: the sexual overactivity of Uranos, retributed by castration, on the one side, and the pseudo-pregnancy and pseudo-abortion of Kronos on the other; as Kirk puts it, Kronos behaves like a possessive mother in contrast to Uranos the super-father. There is nothing of this in the Hittite, where, moreover, the castration of Heaven and the pregnancy of Kumarbi are intimately linked by the motif of swallowing the genital organ, which is absent in the Greek. "The plain conclusion is that neither borrowed from the other."¹¹ But how, then, can we retain the concept of myth as a traditional tale? Kirk cannot even postulate a common source, because the problem of incompatible structures would reemerge at the critical joints of any possible stemma; thus he vaguely speaks of a "complex set of mythical themes"¹² as a possible source, a kind of storehouse of mythical traditions with various structures, thereby multiplying the unknown without an attempt to define interrelations.

Yet the problem can be solved, if we acknowledge that there is more than one level of structures. If we take the sequence of actions well set out by Kirk himself, the Hittite and the Greek myth can be seen to coincide; and this confirms the Propp hypothesis. The motifemes—simplifying Kirk's exposition¹³ and omitting the Greek additions, Aphrodite of Paphos and the stone at Delphi—are: (1) Heaven rules as king; (2) Kumarbi/Kronos rises against him and castrates him; (3) Kumarbi/Kronos swallows what is a threat to him; (4) Kumarbi/Kronos cannot hold what he has swallowed; (5) Kumarbi/Kronos is defeated and displaced by the storm-god Zeus. We are evidently dealing with a symmetrical duplication of the combat tale, making a mischievous, finally dethroned god the intermediary; by negation of negation, heavenly kingship is reestablished. The means used in the combat are castration and swallowing, two most primitive methods indeed; the connecting of the two may be original, but it was replaced even in a Hittite variant by more civilized means, a copper knife, to separate heaven from earth.¹⁴ Still the main sequence remained intact, the

transfer of kingship from Heaven to the ruling god of the pantheon; and it was not only the tale structure but also this double reference to heaven and the ruling god which was transmitted from Hittite to Greek—that is, myth, not just a tale. But the versions preserved have evolved their own additional 'crystallizations'—an extension of the tale structure by adding 'Alalu' the Highest at the beginning and embellishment by direct speech in Hittite, and the correspondences of excess and retribution in Hesiod, as stressed by Kirk; Kronos as pseudo-mother in opposition to Uranos is, I dare say, Kirk's projection; the anxiety of being swallowed is basic and irreducible. The result then would be that there are superstructures, effective and important narrative structures, which are broken apart in a process of cross-cultural transmission,¹⁵ but that the basic structure of the action pattern may transcend language barriers and provide communication and understanding over a wide range of adjacent civilizations and periods.

6. THE TALE APPLIED

Thus far we have been concentrating on traditional tales in general, though in some cases myth, in a special form, seemed to come in. What, then, is peculiar to myth, in contrast with other folk-tales? As has often been stated, the difference cannot be found at the level of form or structure.¹ But all attempts to define myth from its content seem to cut through living flesh, to tear apart what belongs together. If myth is defined as a tale about gods, or as a sacred tale, this would exclude central parts of Greek mythology, including Oedipus.² Anthropologists have found workable a definition of myth as a tale about origins, things that happened in the remote past,³ *in illo tempore*. But as to Greek myths, most of them are situated in an epoch which the Greeks themselves regarded as historical, the epoch of the Trojan War and a few preceding generations. In various cultures there are differentiations of tale classes, one of which may be called 'myth';⁴ none of these is universal, and hardly any are applicable to the Greek evidence.

The specific character of myth seems to lie neither in the structure nor in the content of a tale, but in the use to which it is put; and this

would be my final thesis: *myth is a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance.*⁵ Myth is traditional tale applied; and its relevance and seriousness stem largely from this application. The reference is secondary, as the meaning of the tale is not to be derived from it—in contrast to fable,⁶ which is invented for the sake of its application; and it is partial, since tale and reality will never be quite isomorphic in these applications. And still the tale often is the first and fundamental verbalization of complex reality, the primary way to speak about many-sided problems, just as telling a tale was seen to be quite an elementary way of communication. Language is linear, and linear narrative is thus a way prescribed by language to map reality.

The phenomena of collective importance which are verbalized by applying traditional tales are to be found, first of all, in social life. Institutions or presentations of family, clan, or city are explained and justified by tales—'charter myths,' in Malinowski's term;⁷—or knowledge about religious ritual,⁸ authoritative and absolutely serious ritual, and about the gods involved, is expressed and passed on in the form of such tales; then there are the hopes and fears connected with the course of nature, the seasons, and the activities of food supply; there is the desperate experience of disease. But also quite general problems of human society, such as marriage rules and incest, or even the organization of nature and the universe, may become the subject of tales applied; still it is only philosophical interest, both ancient and modern, that tends to isolate the myths of origin and cosmogony,⁹ which in their proper setting usually have some practical reference to the institutions of a city or a clan.

A clear and well-known indication of the difference between myth and fairy-tale is the appearance of names. Proper names need not have a 'meaning,' but they have a reference.¹⁰ From the viewpoint of tale structure, the persons are blank entities, left nameless in the fairy-tale or gratuitously filled in with some Hans, Jack, Ivan. Also the name of 'Polyphemus' the 'much-famed' Cyclops is a filler, produced by accident in the oral tradition;¹¹ the dragon or dragoness at Delphi can be nameless¹²—but 'Delphi' gives the reference, and 'Apollo': gods and heroes are present powers in collective ritual, beyond any tale. Even Odysseus

was worshiped in Ithaca.¹³ The reference is partial, fillers abound; in the myth of Antiope, for instance, the villainous king is providentially named Lykos, the 'wolf'; Antiope's sons, however, are prototypes of Theban cavalry, and Amphion's tomb is a place of cult.¹⁴ In this way Greek myths are connected with families, tribes, cities, places, rituals, festivals, gods, and heroes: the story about abducted Helen, brought back by brothers, could be just a general type of story; with Agamemnon of Mycenae, Menelaus of Sparta, the Argives, Danai, or Achaeans fighting the non-Greek Trojans beyond the Hellespont, it is a myth through which the self-consciousness of Greeks versus barbarians first asserts itself. 'Prometheus' is a character of myth because of the general importance of fire and technology for the real situation of man, and, in addition, because of the explicit reference to Greek sacrificial practice. If the reference is deleted, myth turns into folktale. We may state how in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* myth comes quite close to 'Maerchen,' though elaborate poetic skill combines with a quite general reference to extreme human possibilities and the merging of man and nature. But contrast Pindar, where myth is alive by virtue of immediate reference and relevance to all aspects of genealogy, geography, experience, and evaluation of reality. There is, by the way, no reason to distinguish myth from saga in the Greek view;¹⁵ this distinction is rather due to the Christian tradition, monopolizing the religious aspects, allowing for a side branch of legend, and leaving saga outside.

Mythical thinking, then, is not spontaneous invention of myths; we may dispose of the nostalgic idea of a golden age when a race of poetically minded primitives uttered myths instead of plain speech.¹⁶ An age of myth, in our sense, would be an epoch when adaptation of traditional tales is the only or the main method of general speculation and communication, in order to verbalize phenomena, to give them coherence and sense. Such a method is anthropomorphic, or biomorphic, but not at all simplistic; it is playful in the sense of Piaget,¹⁷ adapting reality to activity rather than activity to reality, but not arbitrary.¹⁸ Mythical thinking takes as operators neither class-inclusion nor the true/false dichotomy, but actions or sequences of actions. Logic, from Aristotle to the logic of sets and classes, is based on the nominal phrase: *S is P*; Socrates, insisting on the phrase *tí estin*,¹⁹ 'What is it?' definitely destroyed

mythical thinking, which had prevailed in the archaic and still largely in the classical age down to the sophists.

Mythical thinking was, and is, not a mechanical repetition of absurdities, but a mental activity which can be quite subtle and effective. It provides, most of all, a synthesis for isolated facts. To take the simplest example, genealogy. Hellen had three sons, Dorus, Xuthus, and Aeolus; Xuthus sired two sons, Ion and Achaeus.²⁰ That means: the Greek tribes know they belong together. Dorians, Aeolians, Ionians, and Achaeans: they are all Hellenes, though Ionians and Achaeans are somewhat closer to each other, which, incidentally, has been confirmed by the study of Greek dialects.²¹ Xuthus therefore must be introduced as a filler, to produce the subclass. Evidently the question of 'historical truth' is absolutely irrelevant in such a tale; it is neither more nor less effective even if it is true;²² in its application, it creates a system of coordinates to cope with the present or even with the future. In fact the preestablished structure of myth is a convenient tool for dealing with new facts, with the unknown. Wherever the Greeks, in the course of colonization, met adversaries of an equal cultural standard who effectively resisted Greek domination, these became somehow 'Trojans' for them, Trojan allies or Trojan offspring: Phrygians and, more prominently, Lycians fight for Ilion in the *Iliad*, Thracians arrive in one of the latest strata, the '*Doloneia*'; with the penetration of the West, the Elymi of Sicily, the Venetians of Patavium, the Etruscans, and the Romans were all provided with Trojan ancestry.²³ The mythical war anticipates and illustrates the confrontation, and gives it some style of enmity with dignity.

Thus myth may constitute preformation of decisions, motivation, and certainly propaganda. The historical seer Tisamenus copied, in his dealings with Sparta, his mythical ancestor Melampus;²⁴ the Athenians, bringing their women and children to Troezen in 480, remembered the refuge Theseus had taken there,²⁵ and this may even have revived their hope, since Theseus had triumphantly come back from Troezen to Athens. Caesar, the new Romulus, was murdered in the Senate like the mythical founder of Rome,²⁶ and Brutus was bound to kill the tyrant just because he bore the name of the mythical liberator. Living the way prescribed by myth may become a tragical burden.²⁷

Enough of examples. Mythical thinking proves to be a major force of

conscious life. This is not to forget that even below these operations of adaptations and reinterpretations which constitute the life of myth, there is also the function of telling a tale just for pleasure, even in the form of 'Maerchen.' This is practicing—out of gear, as it were—basic action programs, which are at the same time sequences of psychic experience, and thus discharging depression and anxiety, to translate what Aristotle said about tragedy into more modern terms. Certain experiences, attitudes, and expectations are preformed, processed, and socialized by telling stories; they do not contain much of a 'message,' much information value; rather they tend to reestablish and to confirm preexisting patterns. Leftist sociologists are justly suspicious of 'Maerchen.'²⁸ Yet the mere pleasure of storytelling—to which the Greeks often allude²⁹—points to a basic biological value, as the attraction of 'sweet' taste points to the basic value of carbohydrates in nutrition. This value may consist in the mere existence of a stock of shared, verbalized experience³⁰ which is difficult to replace by computerized blueprints.

7. THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION

One modification, or at least clarification, of the definition of myth as a 'tale applied' is still necessary. This is not to be understood as postulating two distinct historical epochs, one of 'pure' storytelling, one of myth;¹ it does not even presuppose two distinct operations. In fact the operators used in mythical statements may be simpler, more elementary, than those in any complete tale. 'A man begot three sons' or 'a dog gave birth to something strange' does not make up a tale, though it could be a beginning; the myth about the offspring of Hellen, referring to the extant Greek tribes, is complete, as is the myth about the dog of Orestheus giving birth to the vine,² with reference to the connection of Sirius the Dog Star with viticulture. The reference is stressed in this case by perspicuous names in the genealogical line Orestheus—Phytios—Oineus: from 'mountain' via 'growing' to 'wine,' and it becomes more specific with Oineus' offspring settling in Aetolia.

There are some cases where the tale elements and their application seem to be intimately fused, and this gave rise to the illusion that myth originated directly from there. Language, however, let alone myth, is

not produced by facts. More often the incongruence, the tension, between facts and verbalization will become manifest. The tale tends to crystallize, by way of contrast and symmetry; it needs distinct and plausible characters, motivation, and continuity to be effective. On the other side there are simply facts, stubborn and often annoying. The tale is flexible, it may accommodate itself; there are many possibilities of reinterpretation and relaboration to make the tale fit the circumstances. But the tale may also break loose again, starting into a flight of free fantasy according to its own, nonreferential logic.

And this is what must have happened again and again to myths in history: consecutive changes of crystallization and application. A well-structured tale, taken to elucidate some complex phenomenon or situation, may become, in a certain cultural environment, the established verbalization. It may take over characteristic details from there, which enlarge and modify its own structure; it may acquire sacred status and become immobilized; but if retold in a new situation, it will tend to crystallize again, still preserving some elements of its former application; in its new form it can again be applied to new circumstances, and so over and over again.

This is the historical dimension of myth, as of language in general. If we are to understand any given myth in all its details, we have to face the fact that it bears the marks of its history, of multiple levels of application and crystallization. It is possible to disregard this, to build up an all-embracing structural pattern; but the effects of transmission are there. Tradition is history, and the traditional tale cannot be exempt from it. In modern linguistics, and folklore, the synchronic, structural approach has been prevalent for some time; the historical schools appear to be old-fashioned. And in fact we could hardly accept the claim once made that folklore is a "historical science . . . largely concerned with origins":³ the concept of 'origin' is mythical thinking, applying the tale of birth or creation to the constant flux of reality. Preoccupation with the 'origin' of myths is bound to result in the perspective of etymology: there should be a 'true' original meaning of a myth; and this must end up in a vicious regress. Yet the renouncing of 'origins' in the absolute sense should not prevent us from taking account of the dynamics of tradition. More pertinent than 'etymology' would be the analogy of metaphor.⁴ In

fact metaphor is a basic trick of language to cover the unfamiliar with familiar words on account of partial similarity;⁵ in this sense, myth can be defined as a metaphor at tale level. The effect of metaphor is to widen the scope of the vocabulary, to keep the sign-system finite by a kind of generalization, to provide a context by analogy, while remaining conscious of the fact that this reference by metaphor is somewhat twisted, preliminary, tentative, one-sided. One could say as much about myth; though a word metaphor can lose its character and become the only current designation (an exploding grenade hardly calls to mind the fruit Persephone ate), myth, on tale level, remains incongruous to reality. This, however, is common to both: to understand a true metaphor one must know the primary meaning, else one does not get the point of the secondary application; to understand myth, similar knowledge of historical levels is required. There are at least two levels, the more general tale and the more specific application; both are subject to the forces of history.⁶

One might object that such a way of interpreting myths, though plausible in theory, would be a hopeless enterprise in practice, in view of the innumerable changes wrought in the course of tradition—as if one were to sort out gravel in a river bed in the hope of reconstructing 'original' rocks, an activity that would not progress beyond the mere pastime of playing with pebbles. Surely structuralism offers much more ingenious rules for more rewarding games. But there is reason to be less pessimistic. Myths are not amorphous pebbles, but meaningful structures transmitted, and sense must be prior to nonsense. It can be seen evolving in consecutive layers, if we do not methodically shut our eyes to what tales are about. In addition, there are clues pointing to definite epochs. Certain features are intimately connected with identifiable cultural strata, such as the prominent role of animals, or a ritual pattern such as collecting the bones of a slaughtered victim. This is rooted in Paleolithic hunting;⁷ the importance of animals for men has drastically, though gradually, declined since the Neolithic revolution. Sometimes there are concrete details, objects or tools, preserved in a tale which are directly datable; 'requisites,' though, can change place in the course of transmission.⁸ There may be names,⁹ though this criterion seems to be the least reliable: are there any Greek myths in which names can be used

to retrace history?¹⁰ The name Kronos, to be sure, bears no resemblance to Kumarbi. Still there are indications which, if used with due caution, allow one to get an idea of the historical dimensions in which a myth has come to be.

8. SUCCESSIVE LAYERS AND PREHISTORIC BEGINNINGS

To give two examples of the multiple levels of application and crystallization, and of the historical dimensions involved, I begin with a set of stories about change of sex. To the structuralist, they present a model case of a binary opposition overcome by imaginary 'mediation.'¹ Let us still note that the myth, qua tale, does not describe concepts: it relates a sequence of actions in which even 'male' and 'female' are not qualities, but active or passive experience. A general reference to the fundamental human condition will be granted from the start; every person finds himself, or herself, ineluctably male or female. But there is more to it. A change not of sex but of sexual roles is deeply rooted in ape prehistory, to mark submission and domination;² so in this case not even the metamorphosis is a mere flight of fancy. In fact it is acted out in certain rituals of puberty initiation. Since their function is to produce the fully adult male, the opposite status, which is to be overcome, is currently termed 'female.' In Greek, *paîs*, in contrast to either *anér* or *gyné*, is both male and female. In homoerotic ideology, the *paîs* definitely plays the female role. It was in Crete that initiation rituals persisted down to the classical period; we have a description of the custom whereby a *paîs* was abducted and raped by a man before he received his arms, the emblems of manhood.³ Cretan Phaistos is the location of a corresponding myth about a girl miraculously transformed by Leto into a mature boy, Leucippus.⁴ This tale clearly accompanies the ritual; Leto's festival was called *Ekdýsia*, 'Undressing,' as Cretan youths called themselves 'those who undress,' *ekdyómenoi*,⁵ in contrast to the children who were not allowed at the *gymnásion*. Detached from identifiable ritual, but popular in archaic and classical art, there is the corresponding story of Caeneus: a girl raped by Poseidon is transformed into a man not only armed but even invulnerable. Crystallization in this case brings in an

appropriate end for the uncommon warrior: he is driven upright into the earth by the blows of Centaurs,⁶ the wild men of the woods who still belong to the context of initiation. 'Weaker' variations of the same myth introduce the boy in girl's clothes: Theseus arriving in Athens, or Achilles amid the daughters of Lycomedes at Scyrus; the ritual reference is maintained in Athens: at the sanctuary of Apollo *Delphinios*, Theseus, when ridiculed as a 'girl,' strips and performs the act of 'lifting the bull';⁷ Scyrus, on the other hand, the faraway island, is a convenient background for crystallization, be it in a heroic or a burlesque vein;⁸ the climax remains the moment when the supposed girl proves to be an unmistakable man.

A different reference for the same type of tales is provided by the special situation of certain ecstatic priests and seers attested in Mesopotamia and all over Anatolia: being distinct from and in contrast to normal men, they behaved as females and are called 'effeminate' by classical authors.⁹ Myth presents an explanation for the phenomenon in terms of metamorphosis: Tiresias became a woman while observing copulating snakes, and a man again when repeating the experience.¹⁰ It is difficult to say in this case whether elements of real initiation ritual are still present in the tale; the extant versions do not even mention that Tiresias acquired his prophetic gifts in the process. Still the symbol of the copulating snakes, which is identical with the well-known 'staff of Hermes,' doubtless points to the oriental traditions.¹¹ (See figs. 1, 2.) Probably the Greeks met seers of this type in the early orientalizing period¹² and so the name of the most prominent of epic seers, Tiresias, got into the story. In Greek literature, however, it appears detached from any pragmatic reality and crystallized to form an element of a burlesque tale: Zeus and Hera quarreled over the question whether male or female enjoys orgasm more, and they accepted Tiresias as a witness because he alone had experienced it as both; he made the female win with a score of 9 to 1, which, oddly, infuriated Hera, who blinded him in revenge. This joke, as contained in the old epic *Melampodeia*, sometimes ascribed to Hesiod, is still 'mythical' by its reference to the general human problem transposed to the supreme divine couple; it does not present any solution, though, but rather a piece of ammunition in the continuing war of the sexes.

The other example belongs to the most famous among Greek myths:



FIGURE 1

ENTWINED SERPENTS, ORIENTAL. Relief goblet of Gudea, c. 2200 B.C., Louvre. (H. Gressmann, *Altorientalische Bilder zum Alten Testament* [Berlin 1927²] fig. 367.) See I 8 n. 11.

Odysseus and the Cyclops.¹³ Kirk has given an interpretation in the terms of Lévi-Strauss; he finds, not surprisingly, "a systematic confrontation between nature and culture" in "the orderly confusion of attitudes" as to civilization and savagery in the description of the Cyclopes.¹⁴ Most interesting, then, are the verses which give this general description (*Od.* 9, 106–12): the Cyclopes lead a life reminiscent of the Isles of the Blest and still without any regard for either law or religion. But what has made the Cyclops famous, *polýphemos*,¹⁵ is hardly this description; trying to memorize the tale, I would most easily forget just these verses. What is unforgettable is the action, the encounter with the ogre, the horror, and the narrow escape. The ambivalence of savagery is a by-product of crystallization, which needs the idyl as a contrasting

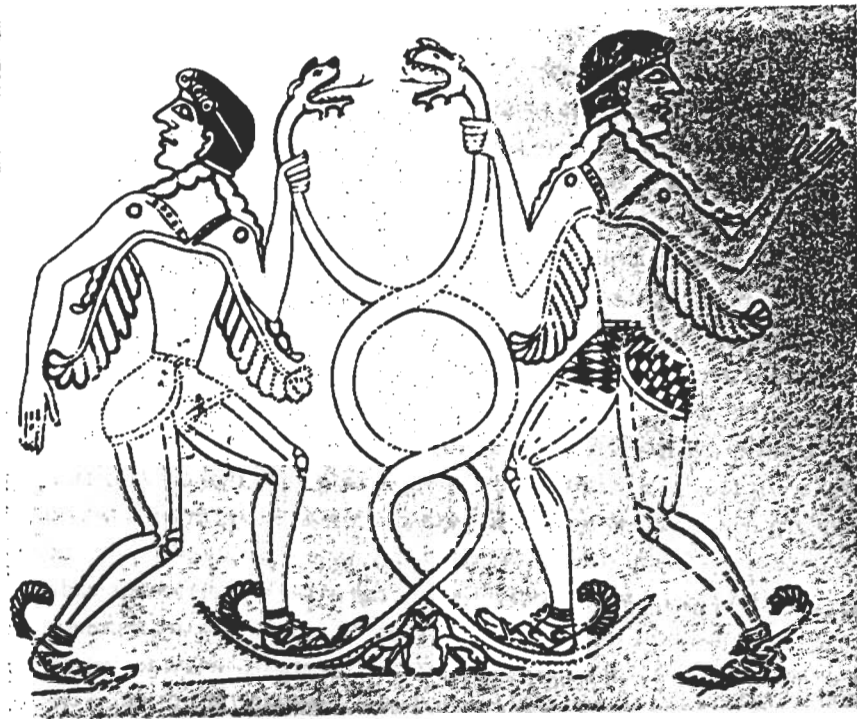


FIGURE 2

ENTWINED SERPENTS, GREEK. Engraving on bronze helmet from Crete, seventh century B.C., New York, Norbert Schimmel Collection. (D. G. Mitten, S. F. Oeringer, *Master Bronzes from the Classical World* [Fogg Art Museum 1968] 47 no. 27; drawing by Suzanne Chapman.) See I 8 n. 11.

background for cannibalism. Viewed from Propp's structuralism, the tale would correspond roughly to functions 11–22, but for the fact that the object to be retrieved, the flocks, is not at the center of interest, whereas the most striking features are not in Propp's series. The tale consists basically of a sequence of actions: coming upon a curious place never seen before; meeting a sinister stranger; finding oneself suddenly trapped in a cave; then the worst of horrors, cannibalism; then deliberation; manufacturing a weapon; giving an equivocal name; drugging the adversary; blinding him; his ridiculous failure to summon help; waiting for him to open the cave; escaping under the sheep; boasting, pursuit, narrow escape, and curse. In a more systematic way, one can notice a nucleus of cannibalism overcome by blinding, within a binary frame of

trap and escape, and a continuation of attempted revenge by the disabled antagonist, all in a larger frame of the successful quest; the play on the name is a possible, but not necessary, elaboration.¹⁶ More than two hundred parallels to the Cyclops tale have been collected; their similarity can be seen precisely in this sequence, though not every parallel tale contains all the 'motifemes.' The immediate, exciting effect consists, of course, in our imaginary identification with Odysseus—though a true structuralist, to be sure, is away above any feelings of excitement.

This is nearly pure folktale, or rather poetry, perfectly crystallized in Homer's text—except for the fact that Odysseus is, for the Greeks, a major hero of the Trojan War, king of Ithaca and Cephalonia, where he has even been worshiped in historical times¹⁷; there are even some obscure cults of the Cyclopes.¹⁸ The main action is a struggle for power as the combat theme outgrows the quest frame. There are two reversals, from superiority to desperate inferiority, and from inferiority to triumphant superiority.¹⁹ This final superiority displays itself in four 'codes': man with weapon against unarmed savage; the sober against the drunkard; the seeing against the blind; the master of language against the stupid. Thus the myth contains the triumph of cleverness against brute force, set in the elementary experience of trap and escape; but there is more to it. Ever since I was a child I have been angry with Odysseus for his sacrificing the good ram to whom he owes his life. But if the tale is seen within the general structure of the 'quest,' the object to be gained is precisely the flocks themselves, edible animals, and the solemn meal is the logical conclusion: the sacrifice. We find the combat myth entailed in the quest for food. This sheds light on the curious detail of the escape from the cave; in many parallels this is done by putting on sheepskins, and this masquerade may well be original.²⁰ To gain the edible animals, man has to assimilate himself to them. To be eaten, or not to be eaten but to eat, these are the two sides of the basic process of life. Man eats animals, and consumes them, disturbing the balance of life; to make up for this, myth introduces an agent who preserves the flocks and eats men. The ogre, master of animals,²¹ is a term necessitated by structural logic, as it were, not childlike fantasy.

But in this tale, in the text of the *Odyssey*, there is a remarkable historical clue: the weapon manufactured by Odysseus, the spear hardened by fire. This weapon is in fact superfluous: Odysseus has his sword, he

even considers killing the sleeping ogre with it; thus he could evidently blind his eye quite easily with his sword. But the tale postulates more special means. The wooden spear, hardened by fire, is, historically, the primordial weapon of man;²² during the entire early Paleolithic period, this was the only effective weapon for hunting. Finds prove that man hunted even elephants with this kind of spear. It is a simple truth that the invention of this weapon, which presupposes the use of fire, has enabled man to become the most destructive of carnivores himself. Thus at the center of the Cyclops tale we find the invention of the first weapon described, along with the use of fire. Some of the variants have introduced the next major step of technology instead, metallurgy: the ogre is blinded with melted metal, a motif present even in the text of the *Odyssey*, under the guise of a simile.²³

Does this mean that the Cyclops tale is Paleolithic? The wooden spear alone would not prove this; but in connection with the 'master of animals' theme, the problem of eating and sacrifice, such a provenience becomes quite probable, though it is impossible to tell how far either verbal or ritual tradition was at work, or both. Note that the spear is manufactured in the tale, 'invented,' not taken from outside. Wooden spears were still in use in the age of Herodotus and well beyond.²⁴ What is more important, they persisted in ritual, notably in Rome. The fetiales inaugurated war by throwing a *hasta praeusta* into the enemy's territory: to mark the beginning of hostilities, the primordial weapon is employed. Similar customs were preserved in medieval Europe.²⁵ And to kindle a fire by drilling remained a magical procedure to escape distress in Europe down to modern times.²⁶ Whether the Cyclops myth was connected with anything similar is an open question; we have no documents earlier than Homer;²⁷ to think of puberty initiations²⁸ or the magic of blacksmiths²⁹ remains possible, but these associations are unverifiable.³⁰

Still the historical perspective, while preserving the thrilling story, brings home a message about the situation of mankind which is not entirely antiquated. Rescued from a dead end by the use of violent technology more than once, man has triumphantly survived, but remains endangered by the curse³¹ of violated nature. The antithesis of nature and culture is more than a logical game; it may be fatal.

II. The Persistence of Ritual

1. THE BIOLOGICAL APPROACH

Stoic philosophy defined man as an animal endowed with speech, *zōon logikón*, and modern anthropology has not proceeded too far beyond this. Dealing with myth, I tried to make sense of the epitheton, the *differentia specifica*; turning to ritual now, I must perhaps ask for a certain humility while inquiring into more humble aspects of the *zōon*, which still belong to *zoé*, life, and which are important for understanding ancient religion, and perhaps religion as such. In fact religion has become quite a problem ever since the Greeks discovered their more modern variant of *lógos*.

The word 'ritual' may arouse even more ambivalent associations than the word 'myth.' 'Ritual' is something atavistic, compulsive, nonsensical, at best circumstantial and superfluous, but at the same time something sacred and mysterious. Ambivalent, too, was the response of classical scholarship to the concept. The impact of 'ritual' on classical studies can be dated to the year 1890, when within twelve months there appeared those three books which inaugurated the 'Cambridge school' of anthropology: Robertson Smith's *Religion of the Semites*,¹ Jane Harrison's *Mythology and Monuments of Ancient Athens*,² and the first—and slim—edition of *The Golden Bough* by James George Frazer.³ The most original thinker among these may have been Robertson Smith; his influence on Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud bears witness to it. But for the general public in the English-speaking world the books of Jane Harrison, with those of the outstanding scholars Gilbert Murray⁴ and Francis Macdonald Cornford⁵ in her wake, and above all *The Golden Bough* in diverse abridged editions, with the monumental third edition in the background, gained overall influence, looming large even in poetry and literary criticism as well as in general anthropology. Before Frazer, Wil-