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THE NATURE OF GREEK MYTHS

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CHAPTER 2

THE RELATION OF MYTHS TO FOLKTALES

MYTHS are tales, and tales are a primary form of expression and communication in a traditional society. Yet tales told by story-tellers, or in less formal ways, have no absolutely fixed outline in a non-literate culture. The central themes remain fairly constant, but the details and emphases change with the interests of teller and audience. Much the same seems to have happened in ancient Greece with the oral heroic songs that became the basis of Homer's epics; and a similar variation could still be seen a few years back among the *guslars* or heroic singers of rural Yugoslavia, where literacy has only recently gained the upper hand over oral tradition.

The evidence for change in the emphases of orally transmitted myths is provided mainly by anthropologists, because it is they who have most closely studied non-literate societies in action. One of the best treatments of the flexibility of myths and tales was published some sixty years ago by the great American ethnologist Franz Boas in his monumental *Tsimshian Mythology*.[1] There he recorded many of the traditional tales of this Indian tribe from the Pacific coast of Canada. His methods of gathering versions were a bit casual by modern standards, but the scope of the work and the perceptiveness of many of its conclusions are still impressive. He was particularly interested in the way story-themes are transmitted from one tribal group to another, and discovered that there is a gradual unification of themes and tales as the tradition lengthens and cultural contacts broaden. European folktales, he concluded, are far more uniform in their contents than those of the North American Indians. This is the result of a background of ethnic

and social stability lacked by the Indian tribes, which have been involved in constant upheavals and migrations over the last thousand years.

Boas refused to draw any absolute distinction between folktales and myths. One might make rather firmer typological definitions than he did, but his main argument remains valid: that there is a persistent seepage from one kind of tale to the other – from 'serious' to 'entertainment' tales, by a naïve definition, and the other way about. 'The facts', he wrote, 'that are brought out most clearly from a careful analysis of the myths and folktales of an area like the north-west coast of America are that the contents of folktales and myths are largely the same, that the data show a continual flow of material from mythology to folktale and vice versa, and that neither group can claim priority.'[2] The Tsimshian distinguished between, and had different names for, historical or historicizing tales (which I prefer to call legends) and those set in the prehistoric or 'mythical' era when animals and humans were intermixed. Yet even here there is no complete separation, and animals find their way into the historical tales just as legendary details intrude into the timeless ambience of the creative ones. Boas's pupil Ruth Benedict made the same point a little differently, at the same time as adding the debatable refinement that myths are religious and associated with ritual: 'A story passes in and out of the religious complex with ease,' she wrote, 'and plots which are told as secular tales over two continents become locally the myths which explain the creation of the people and the origins of customs and may be dramatized in religious rituals.'[3]

Boas and Benedict made surprisingly little impact on the theoretical study of myths, mainly because of a new anthropological theory propounded in the early 1920s by Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski had been penned up in the Trobriand Islands, off the south-east coast of New Guinea, by the war, and was able to observe at leisure how closely the

traditional tales were connected with every aspect of Trobriand social life. Myths, he concluded, are not a reflection of cosmic events or of mysterious impulses in the human soul, but rather a 'charter' (as he called it) for social institutions and actions, a validation of traditional customs, beliefs and attitudes.[4] That was all very well, and a refreshing correction of armchair theories, but it tended to obscure Boas's important observation that myths bear some essential relation to folktales. Malinowski distinguished three categories of Trobriand tales, each with its own native name; they correspond roughly with serious myths, historicizing legends and tales told just for entertainment. Unlike Boas and Benedict, he did not emphasize that themes passed freely from one type to the other, that yesterday's folktale can be tomorrow's myth. Moreover his idea that the 'serious' uses of myths are neither emotional nor reflective, but rather are connected with the mechanical functioning of social life, became the core of the exaggerated theory known as 'functionalism' that developed into orthodoxy in the circle of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown.

According to this theory, as we saw, myths like rituals are part of the complex social mechanism, and so are developed solely in response to the structural requirements of the organic group. In his *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954, reprinted with corrections 1964) E. R. Leach, one of Malinowski's most distinguished pupils, could still assert: 'Myths for me are one way of describing certain types of human behaviour . . . ritual action and belief are alike to be understood as symbolic statements about the social order.'[5] At the same time he argued against orthodox functionalists that society is a dynamic and not a static organism. That at least concedes the point that myths can alter in their emphasis, and indeed he himself demonstrates this clearly enough in his study of Kachin myths. Yet the essential relation between the myth as a social or religious phenomenon, and the popular tale as a mode of communication about several different aspects of human

experience, was overlaid by this whole grandiose and ultimately unreal exercise in sociological theorizing.

More recently still anthropologists, especially those who have worked in Africa where the folktale tradition is exceptionally strong, have begun to value the tale as a thing in itself rather than as a cog in a social machine. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, the doyen of British social anthropologists, admitted in *The Zande Trickster* that 'generally speaking, anthropologists during the last few decades have ignored the folk-lore of the peoples they have studied . . . I have myself erred in this respect and this volume is an act of penance.' Moreover he echoed Boas when he wrote that 'no very clear distinction can be made between myth and folktale.'[6] Much the same position is taken by Ruth Finnegan in her *Limba Stories and Storytelling*; she refuses to use the term 'myth' for Limba stories about the gods and the origins of things, because 'the Limba themselves do not make any clear differentiation between these stories and others; nor is it altogether easy to force such a distinction on them from outside.'[7] Her own view of what constitutes a myth is perhaps rather simplistic (she thinks that a myth is 'systematic', 'associated with ritual' and repeated in an unchanging form), but that does not invalidate her testimony about the overlap between different kinds of traditional tale. Moreover she notes that the basic plots of stories are common to many different tribal groups, but that the Limba alter and adapt them in accordance with their 'present way of life, current interests and literary conventions'.

Perhaps the conclusion to be drawn from the Boas position, which recent anthropologists are inclining (often almost unconsciously) to revive, is that there is *no* viable distinction between myths and folktales. Yet it is still useful, I believe, even in the absence of any hard-and-fast dividing line, to identify certain kinds of motif, plot and treatment as belonging to a folktale tradition rather than to what most people mean by myths. Folktales are concerned essentially with the life,

problems and aspirations of ordinary people, the folk. They are not aristocratic in tone. Greek myths, on the other hand, when they are not about gods, are about 'heroes', aristocratic figures far removed by birth and context from the ordinary people. Indeed it was this aristocratic colouring of the content of Greek myths, especially as presented by class-conscious poets like Pindar, that caused the tales of European peasants, once they were noticed in the early nineteenth century as having an interest of their own, to be labelled as 'folktales' or 'household tales' rather than myths – by which people of those days meant the exalted deeds of Theseus, Heracles, Zeus, Athena and the rest. Folktales are not concerned with large problems like the inevitability of death or institutional matters like the justification of kingship. Their social preoccupations are restricted to the family. Difficulties with stepmothers or jealous sisters are folktale topics, worries over incest and the limits of permissible sexual encounter are not. Supernatural elements in folktales encompass giants, monsters, witches, fairy godmothers, magical equipment or spells; they do not extend to gods in any full sense, to questions of how the world or society was formed, or to matters of religion. Folktales tend to be realistic but at the same time impersonal; they are set not in the timeless past, as myths often are, but in specific but anonymous time and place, and their characters usually have generic names. These tales are designed for the people, for Everyman, and they are kept as general and universal as possible. Ingenuity and unexpected success: these are the qualities that bring amusement and excitement into ordinary lives, and they are applied to ideal people in ideal landscapes simply because nothing quite like that ever happens at home.

Finally, folktales tend to be told in special ways, to be rich in simple narrative devices for introducing surprise or climax. One of their common subjects is a test or quest; the hero has to perform some difficult and dangerous act in order to survive,

win a prize or defeat a wicked enemy. Often the quest is threefold, each stage being more challenging than the one before. That is almost a cliché of this kind of adventure, and it occurs even in Greek hero tales. Bellerophon is exiled because the queen falls in love with him and falsely accuses him of trying to seduce her; that is a universal ingenuity motif, the 'Potiphar's wife' theme that occurs in other Greek myths too, for example the stories of Phaedra and Hippolytus or Peleus and the wife of Acastus. Then Bellerophon is set three tasks, one after the other: first he has to kill the monstrous Chimaera, then he defeats the fierce tribe of the Solymi, finally he is exposed to those dangerous female warriors the Amazons. Another typical narrative motif is that of the 'single survivor'. When the Thebans send an ambush against Tydeus, father of Diomedes, he kills all of them except one, who carries back the bad news; and when the fifty daughters of Danaus are bidden to kill their persistent cousin-suitors they all do so – save one, Hypermnestra, who falls in love with her cousin Lynceus and marries him instead.

Actually Bellerophon surprisingly fails to exemplify this particular motif, because when after his threefold triumph the Lycian king sends a force to finish him off he responds by killing every last one of them: 'against him on his return the king wove another deceit,' sang Homer at *Iliad* VI, 187 ff.; 'he chose the best men from broad Lycia and sent them as an ambush; but those men returned not home again, for blameless Bellerophontes slew every one.' An oversight, perhaps; but Homer makes up for it with another typical folktale ploy whereby the king finally abandons his wrath and gives Bellerophon the princess as bride and, just as the fairy-tales say, 'half his kingdom'. As Homer puts it, 'he gave him his daughter, and half of all his kingly honour also; and the Lycians cut off for him a parcel of land better than all others, fair orchard and ploughland for him to work as his own.'

Is there a degree of inconsistency here? On the one hand I

am urging that there *is* a useful working distinction between folktales and myths; on the other hand folktale-type elements seem to turn up even in Greek tales that I persist in calling myths. But there is no real contradiction if one accepts the Boas–Benedict position about the interplay between folktales and myths, and especially if one believes that in an oral society every kind of tale tends to evolve with the passage of time and circumstance. The Bellerophon story is a complex entity, a concretion of different themes and motifs; that is so, at least, with the version we know from Homer. It has undeniable folktale elements: the tricky but familiar sexual situation, the token whose dangerous message is unknown to the bearer (for Bellerophon was dispatched to the king of Lycia with 'baneful signs' that told the king to destroy him), the threefold quest, the royal reward. But Bellerophon is more than a folktale character. His association with the winged horse Pegasus is more than a routine magical aid, and he comes to grief in a manner unknown to folktale heroes, by aspiring to ride up to heaven – in other words to cross the borderline between men and gods. That is the stuff of myths, of more complex and more deeply imaginative tales.

The truth is that these folktale elements are part of the whole business of story-telling; therefore they find their way even into tales that reflect deeper preoccupations, and do not primarily depend for their traditional status on sheer narrative and dramatic value. To put it in another way, all tales rely to some extent on well-tried narrative devices and dramatic turns of events. Folktales, in which these elements are stronger than intellectual and imaginative ones, are particularly rich in such devices (which is why one refers to 'folktale motifs' and the like); but even the subtler and more complex tales, or myths, cannot avoid them altogether. Sometimes, indeed, narrative qualities take over from the others in one part of a myth, as happens predominantly with Perseus and to some extent with Bellerophon. Even the most obviously 'serious'

Greek myths, including divine ones, reveal the occasional folktale touch. Hera, a venerable figure in many respects, is also the typical nagging wife who makes Zeus' social life a misery and forces him into ingenious transformations (a bull, a bear, a golden shower) that equally possess a certain folktale quality. Kronos is chosen by Gaia, mother Earth, to be her champion because he is the youngest and bravest of her children. That is a typical folktale idea, as is the father–son conflict itself; and Kronos' severing of Ouranos' genitals (those of the sky-god who would not desist from mating with his wife the earth) has something of the ingenious-solution quality that is also common in the traditional narratives of the people.

It should now be reasonably clear what I mean by 'folktale', 'folktale motif', and so forth, even if the nature of myths remains, as it must, still rather nebulous. The alternative to all this straining after working categories is to abandon 'myth' and 'folktale' altogether; to conclude that what we are dealing with is simply various kinds of tale, and to write merely about 'Greek traditional tales'. That would present its own difficulties and limitations, and is, I believe, needlessly severe. Yet I can see well enough what one perceptive critic had in mind when he wrote in relation to an earlier book of mine that 'his major problem is one that he shares with many recent writers, namely that "myth" does not turn out to be an analytic category of any great usefulness.'[8]

CHAPTER 3

FIVE MONOLITHIC THEORIES

ONE of the basic truths about myths, which cannot be repeated too often, is that they are traditional tales. Such tales develop manifold implications and meanings according to the character, wishes and circumstances of their tellers and audiences. Therefore they are likely to vary in their qualities and functions. The main fault in the modern study of myths is that it has consisted so largely of a series of supposedly universal and mutually exclusive theories, each of which can be easily disproved by marshalling scores of agreed instances that do not accord with it. Yet most of these theories have seemed to illuminate *some* myths at least; for example those of a particular form, or those associated with a particular kind of community or culture. After all, a theory could never begin to establish itself if there were not certain phenomena to which it seemed more or less relevant. My own conviction, nevertheless, is that there can be no single and comprehensive theory of myths – except, perhaps, the theory that all such theories are necessarily wrong. The only exception would be a theory so simple as hardly to deserve the name (like that implied by the 'traditional tale' definition); or so complicated, and containing so many qualifications and alternatives, as not to be a single theory at all.

Myths, in short, constitute an enormously complex and at the same time indefinite category, and one must be free to apply to them any of a whole set of possible forms of analysis and classification. Not all myths, in any event, are susceptible of explanation. Folktales, for example, if we include them under myths in their widest sense, are hardly 'explicable'; or rather their explanation would consist primarily in a series of

stylistic and ethnological observations, little more. In the case of the remainder, each of the established theories may have its possible value. Yet even that implies seeing individual myths as simple and uniform, whereas I argued that traditional tales in general are liable to undergo changes corresponding, among other things, to their social and historical setting. Those changes do not occur instantaneously, and even a myth that has one simple point in an earlier form (and many are liable to have more than one) can develop confusing ambiguities as that emphasis gradually merges into others. Myths, therefore, are often multifunctional, and consequently different hearers can value a myth for different reasons. Like any tale, a myth may have different emphases or levels of meaning; if these are especially abstract, then the area of ambivalence is increased still further. The consequence is that analysis of a myth should not stop when one particular theoretical explanation has been applied and found productive. Other kinds of explanation may also be valid. Just as a human action can in psychological jargon be 'overdetermined', or have more than one motive, so can a tale about human actions contain more than a single aspect and implication.

The multifunctionalism of myths was usefully emphasized by Dr Percy S. Cohen in the 1970 Malinowski Memorial Lecture.[1] In a sense his contribution is a refinement of the point made by Franz Boas and described in Chapter 2, although strictly that applied only to the interplay between 'serious' myths and folktales. In any case the idea of multifunctionalism is not intended as an all-embracing theory (since it would be untrue to say that all myths are multifunctional), but rather as a loose generalization about many myths on the one hand, a contribution to methodology on the other. Even so, there is a danger that the generalization will be abused. 'Multifunctionalism' and 'overdetermination' can be made the excuse for wilful and imprecise analysis, for pressing some special interpretation of a myth that can be more simply accounted

for. Yet different types of causation do undoubtedly co-exist; a myth might have, for instance, a specific social implication (for example that incest is socially dangerous) as well as a psychological one (for example that forbidden relationships are attractive). To identify the social concern is not necessarily to dismiss the psychological intuition. As I stated before, every kind of possible analysis should be applied to a myth before one is satisfied that it has been adequately examined and, to some degree, 'explained' – or recognized as inexplicable.

Two criticisms are likely to be levelled at the kind of methodological statement I have just made, one of them trivial, the other more serious. The first is that using the old theories of myth, and one or two new ones as well, as a kind of litmus test, with the expectation that one or more may prove positive, is eclectic and therefore despicable. Yet eclecticism surely has a good and a bad sense? In the good sense it implies no more than considering all possible approaches to a problem and then selecting those that seem most promising. These are merged with other attitudes and observations into a fresh view, one that does not utterly discount all previous insights. In the bad sense the selection of previous views is a more or less mechanical affair, and the conclusion an unwieldy concoction of discordant bits and pieces.

Obviously the various monolithic theories of myth must not be used indiscriminately, yet many of them have their legitimate applications. One of the more extreme theories, as we saw, was to the effect that all myths are about natural phenomena, the sun, moon, winds and so on. That is in itself absurd, yet it is obvious that *some* myths are concerned with such matters. Poseidon is quite undoubtedly associated with the sea, underground springs and earthquakes, and when he and Athena were competing with gifts to win possession of Athens it was a fountain of water he offered by striking the Acropolis with his trident. That is one sort of nature myth. A more obvious instance is the myth of Ouranos, sky, being forcibly

separated from Gaia, earth, so that the world might exist between them. Or again Helios, who sees everything that happens on earth, is the Sun, and his return each night in a golden bowl round the northern stream of Okeanos is a perfectly intelligible, if mythical, reflection on a fact of nature, namely that the sun sinks in the west and rises in the east. It is not, therefore, 'eclectic' in any malign sense to admit such correspondences, while rejecting the wilder excesses of the nature-myth school. Those who make this feeble rebuke are presumably still wedded to the idea that there must be a single explanation of all myths, and therefore that any complex account is automatically vicious.

The second and more serious criticism is that in describing the possibilities of various functions, and in referring to different planes of reference and so on, one might be implying that myths are always determinable given the right methods; whereas we all know that 'mythical' implies a poetic or mystical essence that is not to be analysed in logical and concrete terms. One might go some way towards meeting this criticism by regularly considering the poetical and mystical aspects, among others, in the course of the flexible approach I have been urging. Yet that would not be enough, because the point of the criticism is that such aspects are simply not identifiable by the analytical methods under discussion. How far that is really true remains to be considered; it *looks* unobjectionable to say that myths work on a level beyond reason, but it may not be quite so true as it looks. It would be rash to deny that some myths have hidden symbolic meanings, that they are in some ways akin to dreams, and that elements in them are derived from unconscious rather than conscious attitudes; yet these may be less important components than is often assumed. Certainly they do not reveal themselves as crucial elements of most Greek myths, although we have seen that there may be special reasons for that, and that Greek myths are not really typical. But in any event myths are not

all, or even predominantly, mysterious and illogical; that they are stories sees to that. Many aspects remain for which analytical approaches can be valid and productive. Indeed, even poetical truth, symbolism and unconscious meaning are susceptible to certain kinds of analysis; it is simply that the assumptions on which the analysis needs to be based are not straightforward, that allowances have to be made for connections and relations not covered by western logic. The days when E. B. Tylor and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl could write about a special kind of 'primitive mentality' in which there was no system whatever, and according to which phenomena were connected by 'mystical participation' and so on, are long past.[2] That may have been a necessary stage in the discovery and rehabilitation of the savage cultures, but it neglected the obvious truth that most natives are not at all stupid, and indeed are moderately practical in determining causes and effects in daily life.

It was the myths, above all, that seemed to defy rational analysis and to give rise to the idea that their makers were rambling around in a kind of mystical fog. Yet closer observation, and the whole tendency of anthropologists to treat tribal peoples with increasing respect, have shown that most of the apparently illogical connections in 'primitive' myths are not really so. Rather, the logical systems involved are different from those standardized in western cultures. Lévi-Strauss showed in *La Pensée sauvage*[3] that many simple societies, far from having no category structure at all, have systems of immense range and complexity. That is fact; yet one has to guard against sentimentality at this point, for it is all too easy to add (as many now do) that these alternative logical structures are 'just as good' as the ones we happen to use. After all, they say, even Aristotelian logic has had to be replaced by different kinds in certain conditions, much as the Euclidean system, which once seemed the essence of logical geometry, is now recognized as too restricted for study of the world at

large. But the truth is that for many purposes Aristotelian logic, which has established simple and consistent rules of cause and effect, is greatly superior to alternative systems depending on loose grades of symbolic association. Some aspects of myths can be appreciated more fully by these alternative systems, but there are also elements and qualities to which discursive analysis can properly be applied, at least as a preliminary stage. Such rational techniques certainly have their place in the consideration of the five monolithic theories that now follows.

The first universal theory has already been touched upon: it maintains that all myths are *nature myths*, that is, they refer to meteorological and cosmological phenomena. Originally a German obsession, it spread to England and reached its climax under Max Müller, a distinguished philologist who became professor at Oxford. Müller thought that myths were often formed through a misunderstanding of names, especially those attached to celestial objects; they were, he suggested in a phrase that became notorious, 'a disease of language'. At least that was a variant on the commoner idea according to which tales about a hero defeating a monster must always refer, by some mysterious code, to dawn overcoming the darkness of night or the heat of noonday dispelling the mists of an autumn morning. None of the scholars who propounded such remarkable ideas were able to say (or much interested in saying) just why myth-makers had gone to such enormous lengths simply to propound allegorical statements about obvious natural phenomena. There are occasions, of course, on which the personification of such events can be useful. Burning a snowman to represent the end of winter, or envisaging lightning as the weapon of a god who can be placated by sacrifices, are obvious and intelligible devices. But how do the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, Heracles' enslavement to the Lydian queen Omphale, Pasiphaë's unnatural love for the Cretan bull, Hermes' theft of the cattle of Apollo or Zeus' displacement of

his father Kronos come under this heading? Or a hundred more?

Other sets of myths point the same way. Odhinn and Thor may be nature gods in Nordic myths, but what about Balder and Freyja? Certain actions by Mesopotamian gods are concerned with the separation of primeval waters, with irrigation, and matters of that kind, but many others are related rather to social, political or theological developments. Gilgamesh, the nearest thing to a Mesopotamian mythical hero-figure, is certainly no sort of disguise for the sun, the moon, a wind or a thunderstorm. Amerindian myths, again, sometimes describe figures that descend from the sky and are married to the daughter of the sun, for instance; natural objects and cosmic events are not excluded, but the main concern is with the imaginative prehistory of local customs and the immediate environment, as well as with problems and contradictions in human circumstances. The obvious truth is that there *are* such things as nature myths, but that not all or even most myths are of this kind. No one in his right mind has thought so since Andrew Lang finally lost patience eighty years ago and exploded the whole elephantine theory.

All the same, the embodiment of aspects of nature in myths and cult is an important topic, and the excesses of the nature-myth school have meant, if anything, that it has been too little considered in any serious way. Raffaele Pettazzoni, admittedly, has demonstrated that most known myth-making cultures assign the primary position to a sky god or weather god, and that he then becomes the guardian of order and society. The Greeks accord perfectly with this idea, because Zeus, their chief god, is a derivative of the Indo-European sky god Dyaus (the genitive of Zeus in Greek is *Dios*). He is imagined as dwelling in the sky, or at least on a high mountain-top reaching into *aither*, the pure upper air, and his weapons are lightning and the thunderbolt; he is the protector of strangers and suppliants, and guardian of oaths. It is Zeus, too, who makes rain from the clouds; one of his standard epithets is

'cloud-gatherer'; his Latin equivalent is Jupiter Pluvius (Jupiter of rain), 'Ju-piter' being closely related to the Sanskrit *Dyaus-pitar* as well as to Zeus 'father of gods and men' in Homer's phrase. In Hesiod's *Theogony* the final challenges to Zeus' supreme power come from the older gods, the Titans (whom he blasts with lightning-flashes that burn up the void between earth and sky), and then from the storm-monster Typhoeus. In all this he behaves like a typical weather god. He resembles Sumerian Enlil, lord of air and winds, and Babylonian Marduk who replaced Enlil in the Akkadian 'Epic of Creation', in which the monstrous Tiamat is split by Marduk so that her upper half becomes sky and her lower half earth. The Hurrians, too, who dominated northern Syria and much of Asia Minor in the second millennium B.C., worshipped a powerful weather god, and his son Telepinu was associated with the fertility of the earth – when he ran off in a rage there was a great drought, and even the gods began to suffer.

Telepinu's disappearance exemplifies an essential connection between one category of nature deity, namely the sky, rain and weather gods, and another kind that dwells in the earth and represents the fertility of plants and indirectly of animals and human beings. Zeus himself is not a 'chthonian' god – one that operates from beneath the surface of the earth – but his brother Hades and his sister (and at one time consort) Demeter are, and so is her daughter Kore, the Maiden, also known as Persephone. Persephone was abducted by Hades, lord of the underworld, as she picked flowers one day, and the consequences were exactly like those in the Hurrian myth of the disappearance of Telepinu. There was a great famine and the corn died. The gods were alarmed, and in the end Zeus had to command Hades to release his new bride. But Persephone still goes down to him for a third of each year, because he gave her a pomegranate seed to eat and therefore bound part of her to his realm.

Zeus has links, therefore, with the underworld, although he remains explicitly the god of sky and upper air. In the division of the world that he made after establishing his supremacy, his brother Poseidon was awarded the sea, his other brother, Hades, the kingdom under the earth. The earth's surface was to be shared among all three, but in practice Zeus was supreme there too. This connection between sky, the place from which rain comes, and the earth that is fertilized by it also appears in Zeus' ancestry. The primordial pair of gods, still half-envisaged as great world-masses, were Ouranos and Gaia, sky and earth; and sky lay upon earth and made love to her without cease. The myth can be seen as a symbolic representation of the interplay between rain and soil that makes plants come to life and grow. Aeschylus wrote in his lost *Danaids* that 'the holy sky passionately desires to penetrate the earth . . . rain falls and impregnates earth, and she brings forth pasturage for flocks and Demeter's life-giving corn'; and according to an admittedly late source the initiates at the Eleusinian mysteries looked at the sky and called out 'Rain!', then looked down at the earth and called 'Conceive!'.

According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, 'First of all, *chaos* came to be.'[4] *Chaos* in archaic Greek means 'gap' rather than 'disorder', and the Hesiodic account resembles many myths from all over the world (as well as the Akkadian creation myth that was probably its particular prototype) in which sky and earth had to be forcibly prised asunder before the world of men could come into being. Specifically it is Kronos, one of Gaia's children trapped within her womb, who castrates his father Ouranos as he enters the earth in yet another fertilization act (see p. 113 ff.). Kronos can now be born, together with his brothers and sisters the Titans; he in his turn behaves abominably to his children, among whom is Zeus. Zeus' father, then, is an elusive figure; but the one thing known about his cult, as distinct from the details of this complex succession myth and his paradoxical association with the Golden Age

(see p. 132–6), is that he was some kind of fertility god, for the feast called Kronia in his honour was a festival of tilling and harvest (see p. 233). His wife and Zeus' mother, Rhea, is even more colourless in the accounts that survive, but at least it can now be seen that Zeus is son of a fertility god as well as grandson of sky and earth in a constantly fertile relation. He becomes sole master of the sky, but in his nature there lies the vitality of the earth as well.

Tales about gods that represent or control the sky, the earth, rain and the weather are only one category of nature myths, even apart from the complex stories about disappearing deities of fertility. There are also, for example, sun gods and moon gods. Mesopotamian myths are especially rich in such figures, and Shamash is the great sun god who observes everything that happens among men and is consequently arbiter of oaths and justice. Helios, his Greek equivalent, has similar properties, and the interesting thing is that this kind of nature god tends not to be fully anthropomorphized. Greek poets like Stesichorus and the elegist Mimnermus could write about the wife and children of Helios, to whom he returns each night when he sinks in the west, as a detail in the story of Heracles who returned from his western adventures by borrowing the sun-god's bowl; but we hear little else about these relatives, and they are not very concretely imagined.[5] In a Sumerian myth Enlil behaves rather scandalously with the lovely Ninlil, who is a minor, and is followed by her to the underworld.[6] The other gods are outraged, not least because they know that she is shortly to give birth to Nanna-Sin, one of the gods associated with the moon, and a moon god belongs in Enlil's realm of the upper air and should not be born in the 'house of dust' – which is what the Sumerians and Akkadians called the underworld, the world of the dead. But again the moon god himself remains rather abstract.

No less important than the myths of sun and moon are those about the sea. In Egypt the primeval water was Nūn, out

of which a conical bit of land thrust itself up; it became the earth – pyramids recall its shape – and the primal waters receded and became the Nile and the outer seas. For the Akkadians, Enki, lord of sweet waters and wisdom (because he is flexible and devious like water trickling through the irrigation channels?), was one of the 'younger gods' who overthrew Tiamat, the serpent-deity of primeval water who was split in two, leaking rain from the sky and sending up springs from beneath the earth. In Greek myths Poseidon rides the waves in his chariot ('and the sea-beasts rejoiced to see their lord', as Homer sang) or dwells in his underwater palace at Aegae, but his cosmological functions are less conspicuous. Thetis and Eurynome, however, are sea goddesses who have strange associations with the original creation of the world in minority versions.

Winds, too, are personified and become the subject of traditional tales. Typhoeus (in his alternative form Typhon the origin of 'typhoon') succumbed to Zeus, but in a later epoch Boreas, the north wind, snatched away Oreithyia, daughter of Erechtheus King of Athens, much as Hades had ravished Kore-Persephone. Boreas took her to his palace in Thrace, because that is the region to the north of the Aegean from which the north wind blows upon civilized Greeks, and she gave birth to Zetes and Calais who were lesser wind gods. The north wind is a potent factor in Greek life: the shrill Etesians blow in summer and make or mar the sailing season, and across in the Adriatic the 'Bora', as it is now called, is a constant menace. It was the north wind that disrupted the Persian fleet at Salamis, and the Athenians started a cult to commemorate it; not too long afterwards Socrates provided a classic instance of trivial rationalizing when, according to Plato in the *Phaedrus*, he proposed that the rape of Oreithyia by Boreas was based on an Athenian princess who happened to be blown over a cliff.[7]

Not only winds but rivers, headlands, mountains and springs all acquired their local deity, nymph or spirit – what the

Greeks called a 'daemon' – and tales grew up about them that were usually obvious in their localized aetiological intent and automatic in their use of recurrent motifs. They barely qualify as myths, and yet were the product of one of the most important assumptions behind myths in general: that the natural world is permeated by forces somehow envisaged in human terms. Animism, personification, anthropomorphism, the 'pathetic fallacy' – all these are overlapping tendencies that underlie the idea of nature gods and myths about the physical world.

It is tempting to dogmatize about such attitudes, to reduce them to formulas such as that primitive man (whoever *he* is) envisaged the world as a 'thou'; that he thought of it, and talked to it, as another person. This is an interpretation urged in respect of Egyptian myths by H. and H. A. Frankfort, editors of an important book in the Pelican series called *Before Philosophy*. Yet exactly how and why the earliest myth-makers thought about the world as they did, and what particular kind of anthropocentric and symbolic motives persuaded them to imagine gods in the form of the sky, or sky as behaving in some respects like a man, must remain unknown. One can assert that certain aspects of nature, like thunder or storms at sea, were terrifying and that men domesticated them by treating them as subject to quasi-human motives, so that they calm down in the end or are bought off by gifts and assuaged by prayer or flattery. One can also suggest that at a certain stage of development men are so self-centred that they see the whole of their outward experience as like themselves. One can argue that the reverence they feel in the face of nature is compared to the reverence they felt for their own fathers, so that the weather god in particular is treated like a superhuman parent.

All these are possibilities, and there are several others; the origins of anthropomorphism must in any event be quite complex. Yet E. E. Evans-Pritchard had emphasized in

Theories of Primitive Religion that speculation on the 'precise' origin of religion is a learned waste of time; and it is equally impossible to reach back to the origins of personification. Our sophisticated and literate intuitions on this topic are apt to be totally misleading. What is more fruitful is to distinguish carefully between different classes of anthropomorphic creation: between, for instance, the personified representations of major aspects of the natural world, like sky or sea, and more random associations of complex mythical figures with natural phenomena, such as Apollo with the sun and Heracles with hot springs; or between both these types and nature-spirits like nymphs and satyrs, which often seem to arise from a distinct kind of rustic imagination.

Two points remain to be made about Greek nature myths. The first is that 'nature' for the Greeks did not conspicuously include animals. There is no shortage, of course, of animal characters: Io turns into a cow and Zeus into a bull; Cerberus who guards the entrance to Hades is a many-headed dog; there are famous monsters like the Calydonian boar or the Nemean lion, and half-serpentine figures like Echidna and Typhoeus, or even Cecrops the first mythical king of Athens. Bellerophon rides on the winged horse Pegasus, Arion on a dolphin; Zeus' special bird is the eagle and Athena's the owl. But there is no real confusion in the Greek mythical world between men and animals as such. Yet that is a property of myths in many regions, especially the Americas and Africa. Greece has its trickster figures, but they are men like Sisyphus, Autolycus or Odysseus, or anthropomorphic gods like Hermes or Prometheus. For the Plains Indians of North America, on the other hand, the trickster is Coyote or Crow, and for numerous African tribes he is Spider. They are half men, these creatures; Coyote in the Winnebago trickster cycle has a huge penis that he has to carry in a box slung over his shoulder. Their status is truly ambivalent: usually they look like men or women but have the character of animals, but sometimes

they mix with the animals and become almost identical with them.

The common assumption behind these sets of myths is that animals once possessed the earth, and in many creation stories, for example of how the sky was first lifted up, it is a bird or animal that performs the crucial act. Then, when the earth takes on its present form, the animals gradually engender human beings, and after the intermediate stage represented in many non-Greek myths they lapse into their present forms. The ancient Egyptians worshipped gods in animal shape almost exclusively in the pre-dynastic period before about 3000 B.C., and right down to classical times their gods had animal heads or other animal characteristics, as Horus resembles a hawk or Anubis a jackal. Some people believe the Greeks once thought the same, and that the formular epithets for Athena and Hera, literally 'owl-faced' and 'cow-faced', are proof of it. Other gods have animal characteristics, too: for example Artemis is closely associated with Callisto who turned into a bear, and was served in her cult at Brauron in Attica by little girls in yellow dresses who were also known as 'bears', and Poseidon and Demeter were worshipped in horse-headed form in Arcadia.

Such theriomorphic tendencies, if they are as much as that, are the exception rather than the rule. The situation is quite different from that of so many 'savage' myths; the Greeks envisaged no period in the past when animals ruled the earth or animals and men were intermixed. Their anthropomorphism was severe. They missed something thereby, I believe, but the reason for it may be obvious: they no longer lived in a world dominated by animals, by the need to hunt and trap them and keep them at bay, in the way that many simple tribal communities did and do. Admittedly their remote ancestors, long before they came down into Greece shortly before 2000 B.C., had been prehistoric hunters; the habits and mentality of bears and bison must have been among their main pre-

occupations. The Swiss scholar Karl Meuli argued that certain hunting attitudes persisted in the historical practice of sacrifice, but at the least the animals slipped into secondary roles in their myths.[8] Already by the early Neolithic age, say 5000 B.C., the ancestors of the Greeks were abandoning the life of a hunting community; they had domesticated some animals and had little to fear from the rest. Animals became tools, not masters, and the proto-Greeks started on that long process of humanism, of placing man at the centre of the universe, that distinguished them from the Egyptians with their interminable tradition of dreary crocodile-gods and the like.

The second point about nature in Greek myths is that it came to be treated in a rather desultory way. The great early succession myth, with Sky and a supposedly flat Earth separated at the horizon by Okeanos (the surrounding fresh-water river) remained as a fixed component of the pre-scientific world picture. But in less obvious respects the mythical account of the natural world became surprisingly vague. Where and what is Olympus, home of the gods? Is it a mountain or the sky itself? At times the Greeks were clear that it was Mount Olympus in Thessaly, the highest mountain in Greece, and when Hermes descends from the gods in the *Odyssey* he crosses Pieria close to its foot. On other occasions the Olympians were envisaged as dwelling in the sky itself; whereas at *Odyssey* 6, 44 ff. Olympus is described by a compromise as 'neither shaken by winds nor drenched by rain, nor does snow fall upon it, but bright cloudless air is spread all about it'. Such indecision reflects, no doubt, the difficulty of insisting on a literal mountain-top, a bare and often hostile place, as site of the golden halls of Zeus; but it also testifies to a decreasing interest in relating the gods of myth to the world of nature. About half of the Greek pantheon (Hera, Athena, Ares, Dionysus, Aphrodite and Hermes at least) have no connection with the cosmological or meteorological side of nature, and the associations of some of the others, as of Apollo with the sun and Artemis with the moon, are relatively late. The late-Greek interest in astrology and in tales of the transformation of mortals into stars arrested and even reversed the process, but back in Hesiod's time the cosmological aspects of the birth and development of the gods were thin. In Homer, too, they were little emphasized, and Iris, goddess of the rainbow and messenger of the gods in the *Iliad*, is quietly replaced in the *Odyssey* by Hermes, who was no sort of natural phenomenon but a renowned traveller and escort.

Second among the great all-embracing theories is the one loosely covered by the term *aetiological*; it implies that all myths offer a cause or explanation of something in the real world. When Andrew Lang dismissed the nature-myth theory, he tried to put in its place the idea of myths as constituting a kind of proto-science.[9] In short, he was not merely objecting that many myths are clearly not about nature; he was arguing that even those that are, are more than just pretty allegorical conceits – that they are explanatory in some way. This, he claimed, rather than any concern with specific subjects like natural events or human society, is their central characteristic. Unfortunately the idea of myths as a kind of primitive science is not in itself particularly helpful. It suggests that myths were a kind of halting advance on the road to epistemological maturity. That is a very Aristotelian formulation; indeed the 'proto-science' view of myths is quite similar to what Aristotle felt about the early Greek physicists (the 'Presocratic philosophers' from Thales downwards) as representing a first step towards the reasoned truth disclosed by himself. Yet Aristotle and the Presocratics were at least talking about the same kind of thing, the nature of the physical world. Myths, on the other hand, are obviously not concerned just with that; they plainly encompass such things as the emotional valuation of many aspects of personal life. In the final chapter I shall be dealing with the transition in Greece from myth-making to the discursive uses of reason; meanwhile it is worth observing

that the two categories are neither polar opposites nor successive and mutually exclusive phases in the attack on a common set of problems. It was natural for Lang, living in the heyday of Victorian science, to make that kind of mistake, but we should be able to avoid it.

'Aetiology' is in any case an unsatisfactory term.[10] It is still much used, probably because it sounds important in the same way as 'mythology' does. It means, presumably, 'the study of causes'; for *aition* simply means 'cause' in Greek. In practice, however, the statement that myths are aetiological means no more than that they offer causes. That seems a fairly clear and harmless statement, except that it is plainly false in respect of many myths. Even apart from legendary and folktale types there are obvious counter-examples from the range of other traditional tales. The Golden Fleece, for example: that does not explain or offer a cause for anything, unless perhaps for the feeling that one should not become entangled with foreign enchantresses like Medea. But that is not an accurate use of 'cause', and one would have to stretch the word in a similar way to predicate 'aetiological' of Oedipus or Theseus or most of the myths associated with Heracles. Even the divine myths are often non-explanatory. Aphrodite is born from the sea fertilized by the severed member of Ouranos, and that has been thought to recall the foam-like appearance of sperm; but this would not *explain* anything, it would merely be a picturesque reference to the sphere of human activity she is known to control. Zeus, again, fights the Titans, just as Enlil, Enki and the rest fought the 'older gods' in Mesopotamia, as a stage in the evolution of more specific gods out of vaguer ones, or, in a more abstract sense, of order out of disorder. That admittedly reflects a certain view of the world and its development. Here we are approaching closer to a 'cause', an *aition*: a causation of how the world came to be as it is now. Yet even this is a loose use of the term, and it would be less misleading to say that Zeus and the Titans may represent a

particular attitude to the problems of organization and chaos.

There are, nonetheless, many unambiguously explanatory myths. Yet here again there is a difficulty; for they are explanatory in such different ways and on such distinct levels that it becomes misleading to assign 'explanation', just like that, as their common function. Some tales offer trivial and concrete explanations of details in our environment or of the names of familiar objects or creatures. They are 'just so' stories, and the cause they offer is arbitrary, if neat and entertaining. Why is Hephaestus, the smith-god, a cripple? Factually, perhaps, because the smith's was a craft that lame men could pursue; mythically, because Zeus once threw him out of heaven and he fell with a crash on the island of Lemnos. Why is the Hellespont so called? Because it was named after young Helle, who fell off the ram with the golden fleece when she was fleeing on its back with her brother Phrixus. Why are only fireless sacrifices offered at the altar of Athena on the acropolis of Lindos in Rhodes? Because when the altar was inaugurated someone forgot the matches.

The Australian Aborigines have many such myths. Why are there black patches on the land near the Daly River, and why do dogs eat their food raw? Because once upon a time, in the 'Dreaming Era', Chicken Hawk, Big Hawk and Dog had some yams to eat; they tried to make fire with firesticks but could not, so Chicken Hawk stole fire from some women nearby; on the way back he dropped embers that made the black patches, and by the time he returned Dog had grown impatient and eaten his yams raw.[11] Every natural feature on the route across country and between water-holes has some simple aetiological tale attached to it: such-and-such an ancestor stopped there for a rest, or gave it its name when he passed that way in the Dreaming Era. Hundreds of myths of American Indian tribes are of the same simple kind, although, as with the Australians, there are also more complex ones that operate on a deeper level.

Often a single tale includes several separate *aitia,* some trivial and some more serious. In the Tsimshian tale of Asdiwal, collected in several versions by Boas and subjected to an elaborate structural analysis by Lévi-Strauss, Asdiwal undergoes various adventures that are closely associated with three successive wives, one of them divine, as well as with the typical annual movements of his tribe up and down the salmon rivers.[12] In the end he is turned to stone on a mountain, and (according to a variant version ostensibly about his son Waux) the pieces of fat with which his wife was stuffing herself become the conspicuous greasy-looking flints that still lie in that particular valley. Apart from the trivial aetiology of the flints, there is a reflection – rather than an explanation, since that depends on the behaviour of the fish and is obvious – of annual tribal movements, also a pointed consideration of the consequences of different kinds of marriage, which themselves depend upon tribal rules about relations with brothers-in-law. I have not mentioned the various folktale-type motifs and episodes that additionally enliven this complex myth, which it would be highly misleading to describe simply as 'aetiological'.

Sometimes the relation between apparently trivial aetiology and profound exploration of problems is quite subtle. Myths of many different peoples concern themselves with the origin of, and reason for, death; usually they seem superficial, like the Australian Maung tale about Moon and Possum, who were once men who quarrelled. Moon killed Possum, and he said as he was dying, 'After me men will die for ever'; but if Moon had spoken first men would not die, since Moon is continually reborn as the new moon.[13] It is a widely held idea that mortality is due to some such trivial accident or mistake. In the ancient Akkadian tale of Adapa, the hero is a priest who makes the mistake of cursing the god of the south wind; summoned up to the sky and offered a choice between the food of life and the food of death by the great god Enlil, he

makes the wrong choice, apparently because he has been misled, accidentally or not, by Enki the god of wisdom.[14] The particular application is not a Greek one, for the Greeks seem to have accepted that men are mortal and in this respect quite different from the gods. They hated death, but did not find it helpful to make up tales explaining it away or showing it as somehow inevitable. Yet the tale of Prometheus and the sacrifices is a variant of the Adapa motif. Prometheus, acting on behalf of men, offers the great god Zeus a choice of flesh or bones; Zeus is deceived, or pretends to be, by the outer wrapping of fat, and chooses the bones. From that time on men have kept for themselves the flesh of sacrificial animals and have burned the inedible bits for the gods (see p. 137 ff.). The roles have been reversed vis-à-vis Adapa, and the issue is the nature of sacrifice rather than of death. The common element may be in itself no more than a folktale-type ingenuity motif, but it is similarly applied in order to set up an ambivalent situation about a matter of basic human concern.

It is surely no accident, and not simply the result of a recurrent taste for a neat idea about making someone choose the worse of two alternatives, that death is often seen as due to a simple mistake or an act of human folly. There *is* something contradictory about our attitude to death; in one way death seems inevitable, yet we have a sneaking feeling that it need not always have been so. Here, then, myths are working to counteract an inconvenient and confusing biological urge. The situation over sacrifices in the Prometheus myth is not too different, because sacrifice is both a crucial part of Greek life and manners and a key to the relation between men and gods, mortals and immortals.

There is one kind of *aition* that looks trivial but may not, in the ancient world at least, have been so; once again it differs entirely in its mode of operation from much that is included under the heading 'aetiological'. I refer to the assignment of causes on the basis of the apparent meaning of a word or

name. There are frequent etymological details in the literary versions of Greek myths, since the taste for significant etymology occurred relatively early. The poets of the Homeric tradition were already intrigued by the resemblance of the name 'Odysseus' to the verb *odussomai*, 'I am angry'. By the time the *Hymn to Apollo* was composed, probably late in the seventh century B.C., the taste shows itself more crudely. Pytho, the old name for Delphi, is derived from the serpent destroyed there by Apollo and allowed to rot, *puthein*. The priests installed in his sanctuary are Cretan sailors, diverted there by the god himself who appeared to them as a dolphin – because there was an old cult of Apollo Delphinios in Crete.[15] This combines etymology with the learned interpretation of cult epithets by the construction of banal mythical precedents; the two are related but not identical. In the early classical era the interest in etymology took a new turn. Heraclitus the Presocratic philosopher found it significant that one word for a bow resembled the word for 'life' (*biós* and *bíos*), and Aeschylus related the name of Helen to the idea that she 'took the ships' (*hele-naus*), that of Apollo to *apollunai*, 'destroy', and that of Zeus to *zēn*, 'live'.[16]

We might be disposed to count these occasional Greek instances as mere *jeux d'esprit*, were it not for the much more widespread Egyptian and Mesopotamian occurrences. A text inscribed in two pyramids at Heliopolis in Egypt in the 24th century B.C. addresses the sun god Atum in these words: 'thou didst arise as the *ben*-bird of the *ben*-stone in the *Ben*-house in Heliopolis; thou didst spit out what was Shu, thou didst sputter out what was Tefnut.'[17] This refers to the creation of the world and depends on several different etymologies. The meaning of *ben* is uncertain (although the bird, at least, later came to be identified with the mythical phoenix), but there is a significant pun on the word 'arise' (*weben*) just before. Shu is the air god, and he is spat out because his name vaguely resembles the word for 'spit' (*ishesh*), whereas Tefnut, the goddess of moisture, resembles *tef* meaning 'sputter'. Air and moisture force the sky apart from the earth, and in this particular cosmogony they are envisaged as blown out by the sun god because their names suggest a primordial sneeze. (At the lower level of folk-magic, the Egyptians wrote the names of their enemies on bowls which they then ritually smashed.) Not dissimilarly in the important Sumerian myth of Enki and Ninhursag, Enki the god of fresh water becomes sick and is placed in the vulva of Ninhursag, goddess of the primeval stone-heap. He is diseased in eight of his organs, and the earth-goddess gives birth to eight deities whose names somehow resemble the names of those organs.[18]

Primarily, this last myth seems to be about the extension of irrigation into the desert and its relation to human sexual rules, but the miscellaneous group of lesser deities is connected with the central situation between Enki and Ninhursag solely by an exercise in etymology. Learned Sumerian priests have undoubtedly put their fingers in this particular mythical pie, but the result is something more than trivial word-play, for it was evidently believed that names revealed part of the true essence of the things or persons to which they were attached. Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* was still concerned with this possibility some thirteen hundred years after the Enki myth was inscribed on a tablet at Nippur – and much of the myth itself is older.

Malinowski objected to the theory that myths are explanatory almost as strongly as Lang had objected to the theory that they are allegories of nature. He proposed instead (and this is our third monolithic theory) that they should be considered as *charters* for customs, institutions or beliefs.[19] By that he meant something close to 'explanations' in a loose sense, but devoid of theoretical quality. His study of the Trobriand islanders of the western Pacific had convinced him that their myths always had strongly practical ends, that they bore no resemblance to science and were not created in response to

any demand for knowledge. These emphases seem rather banal nowadays, but were justified by the extravagant terms in which Lang and others had written of myths as predominantly speculative. Similarly Malinowski's insistence that the only person qualified to pronounce on myths was not the classical scholar (he was thinking especially of Sir James Frazer) or the armchair philosopher, but the practical anthropologist 'who has the myth-maker at his elbow', made more sense then than now.[20] Today, rather, one might feel tempted to implore the anthropologist to desist from theorizing and do a little more observing. Even so, I concede that Malinowski was right in stressing the need for observing myths in action; certainly his own observations made an important difference to the study of myths, even apart from the rightness or otherwise of his 'charter' theory. And the truth must be that the proper study of myths requires the careful attention of a whole group of disciplines, comparative religion as well as psychology and anthropology. Classical scholars intrude themselves here almost by courtesy – at least, once it is conceded that surviving Greek myths are atypical.

What the charter theory implies is that in a traditional society every custom and institution tends to be validated or confirmed by a myth, which states a precedent for it but does not seek to explain it in any logical or philosophical sense. Why does the king always belong to that particular clan? Because the first king, whose name was such and such, did so. That instance could be historical as much as mythical, but others are not. Why does that clan possess lands in the richest part of the island? What is the justification for it? Because the clan-ancestors emerged from beneath the earth in that particular region. Even such accounts as this are pseudo-historical. They purport to offer a historical event as the reason for a present state of affairs, although the event is often imaginary, or at least of a different order from events in our direct experience. Now it is plain that such validations are 'aetiological' in one sense; the tale told to account for the practice of fireless sacrifices at Lindos was exactly of this kind. Almost any *aition* will do, provided it shows how the debatable custom or practice might once have happened for the first time. Plausibility in historical or realistic terms is unimportant. Indeed, the validation is a myth, a tale, and it must be striking and entertaining apart from anything else. Plausible or common-sense validations (like 'one family settled in the region and then its descendants gradually spread and took over more of the land') are too banal to be memorable, and therefore are not often accepted as charters in traditional and non-literate societies, or at least have to take their place beside the more exotic and memorable accounts that become myths.

The charter idea is undoubtedly right for some myths; it is undoubtedly wrong for many others. Moreover Malinowski allowed his feeling that myths have nothing to do with philosophy to run away with him. Even the myths he recorded in the Trobriand group sometimes have speculative implications that escaped him. Many of them are practical, and some are concerned with simple magic to ensure the fertility of the gardens or the seaworthiness of the boats. Others, however, are more complex. Those that deal with the origins of the *kula* system (an extraordinary convention whereby ceremonial bracelets are traded round the ring of islands in one direction, ceremonial necklaces in the other) often have important implications; they reflect basic preoccupations with respect to subjects like youth and age (since good looks are a factor in favourable *kula*-bargains) or the relation of garden-fertility to social status.[21]

The consideration of other sets of myths makes the matter still clearer. Lévi-Strauss has proved that many of the myths of the American Indians are in a way concerned with problems. They set up artificial (mythical) situations that are unconsciously framed to establish some kind of mediation of these problems, which often present themselves as simple

antitheses. Mesopotamian myths are likewise sometimes speculative; the curious inverted relationship between Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu in the Akkadian Gilgamesh-epic is a case in point. Even Greek myths, in which the speculative element has been eroded in the course of a long literate or quasi-literate tradition, contain important examples. The Prometheus tale does not merely state a precedent for the division of sacrificial meats. By the trickery involved, and by Zeus' immediate retaliation in withdrawing fire from men's use, the whole transaction is transformed into a debatable moral issue or something like one. The myth that immediately follows in Hesiod concerns the first woman, or Pandora, and it continues the same tendency. She is created as a fresh punishment for mortals when Prometheus has stolen back fire; but once again an implied contradiction at the heart of the situation gives the simple folktale motif of the extravagant or inquisitive wife a speculative reference, for women are revealed as both alluring and wasteful, as tricky but necessary.

A similar conflict of attitudes shows itself in the range of developed goddesses. Artemis and Aphrodite stand at opposite poles, most clearly so in Euripides' *Hippolytus* where the pure devotee of Artemis who rejects sex is literally torn apart for his obsession. It is true that in her earlier, Asiatic form Artemis is also a mother-figure, and her cult-statue in the temple of Ephesus ('great is Diana of the Ephesians') was multimammary, covered with breasts. The Greeks did some simplification here, but it resulted in the intriguing polarity between her and Aphrodite. Among heroic myths one has to look harder for theoretical overtones, but Cheiron the good Centaur provides them, and so does Bellerophon with his presumptuous trip heavenward on Pegasus, Heracles in his dealings with the underworld or with women (Queen Omphale whom he served as a slave, sometimes in female dress, or his wife Megara whose children he murdered in a fit of madness), Peleus in his ultimately unsatisfactory marriage with the sea-goddess Thetis, and Oedipus in his dilemma of ignorance. These instances are by themselves sufficient to dispose of the theory that all myths are non-theoretical charters. By admitting that there can be charters for 'beliefs' Malinowski himself indicated the internal contradictions of his theory, for myths concerned with abstractions like the limits of mortality or just behaviour are not mere arbitrary fairy-tales to put a stop to anxiety or dispute. They are part of an (often unconscious) argument. Even on concrete matters like the validation of social institutions the charter theory is too complacent, implying as it does that society is a static machine. Malinowski's pupil E. R. Leach was surely right when he emphasized that 'myth and ritual is a language of signs in terms of which claims to rights and status are expressed, *but it is a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony*' (my italics).[22]

In one way Australian myths can be interpreted as providing strong support for the charter theory; as the Berndts put it: 'Myths, then, may be used to explain or account for certain rites, or to show why various actions are performed: why a certain tribe practises circumcision, or why it does not while its neighbours do. The answer may be that some mythical character gave the order for this, or set the fashion for it.'[23] Seen in a slightly different light, however, Australian myths lend support to a somewhat different theory, the fourth in our selection, which is really a subtle development of Malinowski's charter idea.

Mircea Eliade has written numerous books to show that the purpose of all myths is to evoke, or actually to re-establish in some sense, the *creative era*.[24] The intention, he thinks, is not simply nostalgic, although there is an element of Golden-Age wistfulness in it. It is also practical, even magical in a sense, since by reconstituting that era one can also revive some of its unique creative power. Telling how Demeter found her daughter Persephone, with the result that the corn sprouted once more, is effective in increasing the power of the crops as

they thrust their way out of the soil each year. Any tale that restores for a time the mythical past is helping the world to maintain the order it formerly achieved, and helping humans to share in the power of the divine actions *in illo tempore* (as Eliade puts it in a catch-phrase). Australian myths are especially relevant here, since it is a common Aboriginal idea that the beings that existed at the beginnings of the world still exist. They live on in a disembodied form in what is called by some tribes the 'Dreaming Era' or 'Eternal Dreamtime' – the implication being that they appear to us as in dreams, that they actually 'happen' just as dreams do. They are not identical with the ancestors who also appear in myths, but it is they who gave rise – as Rainbow Snake, or the Two Men, or the Djanggawul brother and sisters, or the trickster known in north-east Arnhem Land as Namaranganin, or many others – to human capacities like childbirth and to actual human ancestors. As a result of this conception myths and rituals, which in Australia are rather closely linked, can be said to actualize these beings and to bring the Dreamtime into the present with potent and fruitful results.

Eliade generalizes this conception without subjecting it to the stringent test of applying it to the majority of myths in many different cultures. He simply reiterates. For example: 'Periodically, the most important events were re-enacted, and so re-lived; thus, one recited the cosmogony, repeated the exemplary gestures of the gods, the deeds that founded civilization. There was a nostalgia for the *origins*; in some cases one could even speak of a nostalgia for the primordial Paradise.'[25] But the truth seems to be that many myths of many societies are not of this kind and do not respond to any such interpretation. The idea of the Dreamtime is a unique conception; other myths cannot necessarily be seen in this light. Amerindian myths, for example, are not evocative or nostalgic in tone, but tend to be detailed and severely practical. Many are about animals who acted as inventors or 'culture heroes' in

a mythical epoch that was, admittedly, the time when things were put in order. But since then the animals have turned into men, and the distinction between men and animals has become a firm one. That in itself reduces the effectiveness of myth-telling as a reconstitution of primordial power. Moreover many Amerindian myths manifestly have other and quite different functions; I am thinking particularly of the Amazonian myths considered in detail by Lévi-Strauss and of the North-west coast myths collected by Boas, which contain foundation and charter acts, folktale motifs, trivial aetiologies, serious structural implications of the kind outlined by Lévi-Strauss for the myth of Asdiwal, reflections of religion, and so on.

Greek myths, too, utterly fail to support Eliade's universal theory. The whole range of Greek heroic myths lies outside any true 'creative' era. Heracles and Cadmus found cities, and Heracles great festivals like the Olympic games; the earth is cleared, to some extent, of monsters (which are purely local menaces), but re-telling this kind of myth does not evoke a strongly creative past. The Golden Age is gone forever – a nostalgic dream, perhaps, but not a practical one. Perhaps the divine myths provide better support? On the whole, no. Zeus triumphs over his enemies, divides the world among the gods and establishes Dikē, Justice or the proper order of things, over mortals, but that does not constitute a creative era of the kind Eliade had in mind. Indeed, Greek myths are silent about the invention of many human functions and social institutions. Childbearing, for example, is no longer the object of mythical curiosity as it was for so many other people. Pandora just appears, and even before her men seem to have been born. Greek myths, as we shall see in Chapter 11, were vague and ambivalent about the creation of mankind. Basic social institutions like marriage, inheritance or kingship are simply taken for granted; that raises other problems, but it provides poor support for the idea that all myths have this function of reviving a specifically creative era. The study of other sets of

myths would lead to the same result: that Eliade's idea is a valuable perception about certain myths, not a guide to the proper understanding of all of them.

The fifth universal theory is also one of the most long-lived and important. It proclaims that all myths are closely associated with *rituals*. In its extreme form it asserts that myths are actually derived from rituals, which in the course of time seem pointless and obscure and therefore give rise to aetiological tales that purport to explain them in some sense. That was the remarkable intuition of a famous late-Victorian Old Testament scholar, W. Robertson Smith. His *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1894) might easily have passed into obsolescence within a generation or so, but the idea expressed there that myths are derived from rituals achieved near-immortality when it was adopted by his friend and admirer J. G. Frazer and became the basic presupposition of *The Golden Bough*. The 'Cambridge School' of Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray, A. B. Cook and F. M. Cornford delighted in the thought that the apparently refined Greek culture might actually depend on primitive rituals, a thought that seemed to give life to the otherwise rather literary phenomenon of Greek religion. Biblical scholars, too, drew support from the apparent applicability of Robertson Smith's theory to certain Greek myths, and in their turn encouraged classical scholars by providing favourable Oriental instances. Even apart from the Bible itself, the ancient Near East appeared rich in supporting evidence. Akkadian rituals, in particular, were well-documented, and it was undeniable that ritual had played an important part in the life of the Mesopotamian peoples from at least 2500 B.C. onwards.

The study of the Australian aborigines initiated by Spencer and Gillen at the end of the last century added further confirmation that myths and rituals could be closely associated in the lives of some peoples. Out of this perception, among others, there now arose the anthropological theory of functionalism,

developed in an extreme form by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (who began as a student of Australian anthropology) and his pupils in the Malinowski tradition.[26] Functionalists saw society as a tight and complex mechanism, every aspect of which was related to basic social ends (marriage, property, the rules of kinship). Rituals were a prominent aspect of savage societies among others; myths therefore must be fitted into the same pattern, and since they were often apparently subordinate to rituals the Robertson Smith–J. G. Frazer theory was accepted with only minor adaptation. E. R. Leach, as we saw earlier, corrected the emphasis on society as a static structure, but even he could assert that 'myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, they are one and the same.'[27]

That is just one specific form of what is surely an exaggerated and one-sided theory. It is simply not true that myths are always associated with rituals, let alone identical with them in some curious way. Societies differ enormously in the amount of ritual in their life, and they differ too, even in highly traditional groups, in the range and importance of their myths. Even where both rituals and myths are prominent, as among the Australian Aborigines, many myths are independent of rituals. That is not always easy to discern from anthropological accounts, for they have been dominated by the idea that over the whole range of story-telling only those tales that are overtly connected with rituals can bear the full title of myths. Yet that is obviously not so by any reasonable standard for defining what we mean by a myth. It takes some ingenuity on the part of the Berndts, for example, to deny the title of 'myth' to tales like that cited on p. 56 about the origin of death; or to a Pitjandjara tale of how the Two Men were once travelling near the south coast: one of them had the water-bag and refused to give it to the other, who pierced it so that the water came out and drowned them, becoming the sea; or to another tale of the same tribe about how Tulina, an old spirit-man, caught and cooked a Mamu (evil spirit) child.[28] His wife

recognized a hand in the stew and disappeared: Tulina grew breasts and suckled the other children, then went in search of a second Mamu child that had, although lamed, escaped him. The Mamu then attacked Tulina, milked him, cut off his parts and gave them to the lame child who was made whole.

This tale has no ritual connection, although it is obviously a myth. It also has no stated social reference, although one probably lies concealed. Lévi-Strauss has demonstrated the reflection of social and other preoccupations in many Amazonian myths of apparently similar inconsequentiality. These are not just casual tales thought up by some transient character and then forgotten; they are traditional, and they are important. So too in ancient Mesopotamia many of the most striking myths to have survived contain no known ritual reference whatever: Inanna's Descent to the Underworld, for example, or Enki and Ninhursag, or most of the Gilgamesh-epic. Norse myths, another major group, likewise bear only slight and tangential reference to ritual practices.

Greek myths will be considered more closely from this point of view in Chapter 10; meanwhile the following observations may be of interest. The great theogonical succession myth has no known ritual implications; the ancient Greeks did not carry out actions designed to imitate or reproduce the separation of sky and earth, Kronos castrating his father or Zeus swallowing Kronos. These crucial ideas belonged to myths and not ritual. The cult of the gods sometimes included allusions to the myths of their birth, but through the recital of the tale itself rather than the performance of an associated ritual. As for the major heroic myths, one finds virtually nothing in the way of ritual corresponding to the deeds of Perseus, Heracles, Jason, Oedipus, Bellerophon, Orpheus, Peleus, and a mass of others. In general, Greek myths as they survive seem singularly devoid of ritual connections. Certain counter-instances will be discussed later, but in the meantime it looks as though this were one more universal theory that is better discarded.

CHAPTER 4

MYTHS AS PRODUCTS OF THE PSYCHE

THE theories considered in the last chapter proposed that myths refer primarily to the world of nature or to men as involved in society or worshipping gods. Their inner reference, that is, is supposed to be to the objective environment or to the human view of the outside world. It is now time to review a group of interpretations that claims to find the ultimate reality of myths in the individual psyche itself. If myths have a purpose and a reference outside their surface meaning as narratives – and according to these interpretations they have – then they are held to be primarily concerned not with society or the outside world, but with the feelings of the individual. They may become traditional through communal performance and be supported by the customs and attitudes of the group, but their essential appeal is to each separate person in his endeavour to come to terms with himself rather than with community or environment as such. The distinction between individual interests and those of individuals grouped in a society is often a fine one, especially with traditional or totalitarian communities in which collective interest is ostensibly paramount. Yet clearly there is a difference between one's enjoyment of a tale that justifies a certain custom, or fits a piece of the natural environment into place, and the satisfaction gained by identifying oneself with the hero of fantastic and ultimately successful adventures. Most of the theories to be considered would hold that even the objective functions of charter and the rest are really secondary to the psychological needs of the individual.

The psychological uses of myths can themselves be divided

into different categories representing distinct functions; for example a myth might be important because it expresses something that otherwise lies repressed or dormant in the individual, or alternatively because it seems to fulfil some wish or create a desirable emotional condition. The first function would be analogous to Aristotle's idea that watching tragic drama brings about a *catharsis*, a kind of purgation, of pity and fear. The myth of the monster at the heart of the Labyrinth, on his interpretation, would express and so relieve the fear of unknown horrors; and if it is true that we have a hidden terror of killing our own fathers, then the story of Oedipus and Laius at least brings it into the open. The effect is quite different from that of the second category, in which a myth provides a kind of emotional consummation. 'Wish-fulfilment fantasy' was the Freudian formulation of the tendency to imagine ourselves winning fame, wealth or beautiful companions. Day-dreams of that kind are often consoling, and the kind of myth or folktale in which the hero overcomes terrible dangers to perform the quest and win the prize can be seen as a generalized fantasy in which the hero represents the individual listener, who imagines his own problems and frustrations as running parallel to the larger and more concrete ventures of the tale.

That some myths have this sort of effect, and depend on it for their power to attract audiences, is beyond dispute. One of the reasons for enjoying the tale of Theseus and the Minotaur is that Theseus escapes from danger by killing the beast and escaping from the Labyrinth – with the aid, of course, of a beautiful princess. After horror, fulfilment: the two kinds of psychological effect are not mutually exclusive, in fact they often complement one another. Further discrimination needs to be made within each category, and I have obviously only presented the crudest outline. Psychologists and others can take the matter further, and no doubt have done so *en passant*. Yet for the most part they remain wrapped up in great psychological theories that are both more complex and less plausible than these simple discriminations.

The 'great' psychological theories of myth are those connected with Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, to which must be added the elaborate and less widely-known ideas of Ernst Cassirer, much of whose voluminous *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is about myths as one of the primary forces of cultural expression. I have also held over to this chapter the structural theory of myths advanced quite recently by Claude Lévi-Strauss. This is not in all essentials a psychological theory; it makes use of elaborate analyses of anthropological materials and concedes that myths are primarily concerned with problems and contradictions in society rather than directly with the individual psyche. Yet its ultimate foundation is the assumption that the human mind (what Lévi-Strauss calls the *esprit*) always works in roughly the same way – and that myths and society are the products of mind and reflect, with almost scientific accuracy, its common structure. The theory is much concerned, therefore, with the psychological and mental origins of myths, although its brilliant author prefers to say little about the processes themselves but rather to map the indirect evidence for their operations. Finally I shall consider in more general terms the fantasy-producing dislocations of ordinary consequence and logic that are characteristic of many myths and are implicit in Freud's theory of dreams.

Not many of Freud's special theories are widely accepted today. His fame depends on the general concept of the unconscious mind, and his emphasis on infantile sexuality, in particular, is seen to be exaggerated. Yet *The Interpretation of Dreams*, first published in 1900, is still regarded by many admirers as his masterpiece. In it Freud recognized that myths and dreams often work in the same way; a general connection had already been asserted by E. B. Tylor, but Freud went far beyond him in relating the symbols of myths to those of dreams. There is, indeed, an obvious connection, and we do

not need mechanistic theories about unconscious dream processes to convince us of that. It is a commonplace among several tribal societies, especially among Australian Aborigines with their 'Dreaming Era', that myths and dreams evince a similar insight into reality. Many of the Indian tribes of the American South-west agree in spite of other cultural differences that myths are dreamed, and are created in that way. They are of great importance, being closely connected with the complex rituals on which the life of the Pueblo Indians, in particular, is centred.

Freud, then, carried further this kind of view of the relation of myths and dreams, and emphasized the part that both may play in the life of the unconscious mind. His particular intuitions about the 'dream-work' (in which the mind rearranges experiences and emotions so as to repress potential anxiety and so protect sleep), and his reduction of this work of the unconscious to the three functions of *condensing* the material of daytime experience, *displacing* its elements, and *representing* it in symbols and images, are deeply suggestive, even if they are too formal and mechanical to be convincing in detail. Something like these processes may have taken place in the evolution of myths; that is Freud's implication, and it could be correct for certain types. It is probable, for instance, that many myths are *symbolic* in that they represent a hidden attitude or preoccupation indirectly, by means of concrete actions in an overtly different sphere; and we shall see that their fantastic quality often depends on their *dislocation* of everyday connections, a process close to what Freud called 'displacement'.

Quite apart from the correctness or otherwise of Freud's ideas about dreams, I feel that there certainly are important connections between the two phenomena. It would admittedly be wrong to regard a myth simply as a product of some kind of unconscious mentality, and its quality of traditional tale shows that to be an over-simplification. Yet the manipulation of emotions and experiences, at a less than fully conscious

level, does seem to be implied in those myths that plainly bear on social and personal preoccupations. At present it is hard to say more than that. Continuing studies of the nature of dreaming should ultimately be helpful; unfortunately it is much harder to examine the processes of myth-making, since the last traditional societies, those that remain untouched by literature and the values of western society, are being rapidly and almost systematically exterminated.

One particular Freudian theory in this field has been less helpful: the idea that myths are in some sense 'the dream-thinking of the people', that they preserve the unconscious preoccupations of the infancy of the race. Freud's followers Karl Abraham and Otto Rank had a hand in formulating this misleading conception in its extreme version. The former wrote in his *Dreams and Myths* (1909, translated into English in 1913) that a myth is 'a fragment preserved from the infantile psychic life of the race, and dreams are the myths of the individual' (p. 72). Freud himself had asserted at about the same time that 'myths . . . are the distorted vestiges of the wish-phantasies of whole nations – the age-long dreams of young humanity.'[1] Freud's statement includes the additional idea that myths are 'wish-fulfilment fantasies', which is clearly right for some myths but not for all. Now the idea that myths are the dream-relics of society in its infancy appealed to Freud and his followers because it seemed to fit so neatly with the idea that man is determined by infantile emotions, that his adult psyche is conditioned by the relics of infantile wishes, repressions and experiences. Yet it is, of course, nonsensical, if only because a race, or human society in general, is quite different from an individual who grows from infancy to adulthood. To conceive it as such is to be guilty of an absurd kind of genetic fallacy. Our general thinking is deeply infected by this anthropomorphic metaphor, but there is no need to import it into subjects like the study of myths.

In so far as they are truly traditional, myths derive from an

oral stage of culture; most of them retain elements from a period many generations earlier than their first recording in writing. Yet that hardly places them in an inchoate stage of human development that might correspond with the 'infancy' of the race, even if we accepted the metaphor, so the idea is misleading there too. Many of the problems on which myths concentrate are perennial ones like those of nature and culture or life and death, and the palliations they suggest are by no means 'infantile', not even necessarily innocent. They are remarkably similar to those that are still offered, under slightly different guises, by religion or popular morality. Finally the concept of myths as an emanation of a kind of racial unconscious distorts the degree of collective authorship that can reasonably be assigned even to traditional tales.

A similar difficulty arises with the theories of Jung and, to a certain extent, Lévi-Strauss, but it was the philosopher-sociologist Émile Durkheim who, with his idea of religion as an amalgam of 'collective representations' (by which he meant collective *ideas*), came closest to the Freudian fallacy. Yet Durkheim at least conceded that ideas shared by a group come in the first instance from individual minds; and with myths, too, individual imagination combined with the contemporary interests and preconceptions of the social unit. Behind this assumption of a collective mind that reveals itself in the formation of myths and religious ideas there lies that other conception, both romantic and condescending, of the 'primitive mentality' of the savage – the conception developed by E. B. Tylor and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl whereby pre-literate man moves not in a world of reason or individual decision but as a prey to strange emotions and mystical associations. 'Collective' mind is the only sort these unfortunate and truly mythical creatures could really lay claim to. We now know that this is not how even the most primitive of men behave; they have minds, and reasons, of their own.

Even less persuasive than the 'infancy of the race' idea is

Freud's view that certain unconscious tendencies descend from prehistoric father–son competition in the 'primal horde'. That instincts for survival develop in line with the cultural evolution of mankind is plausible enough, but Freud used an inadequate study of animal behaviour to support an adventurous intuition about humans. His 'Oedipus complex' has not, in the end, won many converts, and its interest from the point of view of specifically Greek myths is surprisingly slight. That is, Freud hit upon the Oedipus myth to provide a title for a complex condition that he thought he detected in his Viennese patients. It was an obvious choice in one way, since Oedipus in the mythical accounts killed his father and married his mother. But he did so by accident (or in accordance with divine decree), and there is no suggestion, not even in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (980–82), that he was responding to some unconscious desire or exemplifying a universal propensity.

The significance of the unconscious mind, its working in myths as in dreams, the special effects of repressed emotions, the need to fulfil certain desires if only in imagination – these, from our point of view, are Freud's great discoveries. His followers have made further refinements, and many of the myth-interpretations offered so blithely by modern writers are vaguely Freudian in feeling. One influential example has been a paper by the distinguished American anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, called 'Myth and Ritual: a General Theory'.[2] It starts from the assumption that myths and rituals are essentially connected. Myths do not depend on rituals, rather they are an alternative form of expression of a single psychological state. Both represent 'adjustive responses' to anxiety-producing situations and provide gratification by 'anxiety reduction'; in other words they distract our attention from unpleasant things in life, and meet specific worries by supposedly effective forms of ritual behaviour or consolatory tale. Another of their functions, according to Kluckhohn, is to achieve a 'sublimation

of anti-social tendencies', the 'discharge of emotion of individuals in socially accepted channels'. Myths about murder or incest, that is, purge us of an unhealthy preoccupation with these things, whereas ritual bloodshed directs our sadistic desires into a socially acceptable, even a useful, form.

In this kind of interpretation, more clearly than with Freud himself, we see the familiar tendency to impose a universal motive on all myths. The fallacy is obvious. Many myths are patently concerned with other things than the reduction of anxiety or the sublimation of our baser instincts: charter-type myths, myths of creation, and so on. Similarly many kinds of ritual have other purposes: for example, those that maintain the cult of a god, perhaps by a formalized cleansing of the divine apparatus as in the Athenian festival of the Plynteria, in which Athena's robe was annually carried down to the sea in procession and washed. A taste for ceremony is a different kind of ritual motive, just as the love of neat tales provides a distinct motive for myths. The two phenomena are not, in any case, anything like co-extensive (as I shall show in Chapter 10), and many of their forms presuppose quite separate intentions, psychological or otherwise. We can thank Kluckhohn for reminding us that some myths tend to reconcile us to the human condition, although we knew that already. The sublimation of anti-social tendencies is a more specific idea, already canvassed by A. M. Hocart and others, but its ultimate ancestry is Aristotle's purgation of fear and pity. That may be an essential aspect of some tales, although the idea needs further consideration. In any case there are other psychological functions of myths that are totally excluded by Kluckhohn's one-sided theory, and some of them emerge from the different interpretations now to be considered.

Carl Jung became a member of the Freudian circle bu' broke away from it. In some respects his ideas show Freudian ancestry, in others he drastically amended the presuppositions of the master. Like him, he saw that myths and dreams can

each reveal certain configurations of the unconscious mind; but instead of vestiges of wishes and concerns from the 'infancy of the race' he saw them as revelations of what he called the 'collective unconscious', an inherited and continuing involvement of mankind with certain key symbols.[3] The importance for the practising psychologist of the 'archetypes' (a confusing Jungian term that refers either to these universal symbols themselves or to a disposition to form them) is that their particular deployment by the individual, as in dreams, is the index of an unconscious psychic drama that produces mental health or illness. Myths, on the other hand, reveal the normative psychic tendencies of society – tendencies that include a preoccupation with contradictions and problems, both social and personal. Nothing in myths is 'infantile'; on the contrary they reveal the unconscious urges and phobias of modern as well as ancient societies, and their expression eases the complexities even of present-day living. One of Jung's strongest intuitions is that men depend on these ancient and traditional forms of expression, ritual and religion as well as myths, no less now than before; consigning them to the sphere of historical curiosities has merely increased the neurotic malady of modern man. With that general idea that myths are a crucial element in the psychic, let alone the social, balance of the group we may well agree. Unfortunately many of Jung's more specific intuitions are less acceptable.

Most dubious of all is the very idea of 'archetypes': the earth-mother, the divine child, the wise old man, the sun, god, the self, the animus and anima (the female idea of man, man's idea of woman), even certain shapes like the mandala and the cross, and also the number four. Jung asserts that these images recur time and time again in myths, dreams and other manifestations of the popular consciousness. But is that really so? Is it true in any form specific enough to be significant? Jung's disciples have been content to accept his repeated assertion that this *is* the case, and to fall back on the instances from a

few myths, and from the history of art and medieval mysticism, that most impressed Jung himself and are used and reused in his prolific writings. What is needed is obviously a statistical survey of mythical motifs (of recurrent figures rather than typical events), and that is something that his surviving followers seem to find both unnecessary and spiritually repugnant.

I have suggested in an earlier book that wise old man, earth-mother, divine child and so on are not, in fact, recurrent figures of many sets of myths: not, specifically, of Greek myths.[4] The 'old man of the sea', Phorcys or Nereus, is a typical prophet figure, and the wisdom of age is incarnated in Nestor, who lived for three generations of men and whose advice is constantly sought by Agamemnon according to Homer's *Iliad*. Demeter undoubtedly symbolizes the fruitfulness of the earth, and the loss of her daughter Persephone is one of the most ancient and poignant of Greek myths. The divine child might conceivably be represented in tales about the youth of Dionysus, Hermes or even Heracles. But these themes are not universal or even particularly common in Greek myths, and the concepts they embody cannot truthfully be said to predominate over many others. But, in any case, are Jung's collective symbols more than basic human ideas necessarily involved in human physiology and social circumstance? An infallible male parent is a factor in the psychic development of most of us who have known our fathers; the sun is important, that goes without saying; the idea of god crops up in one form or another in every human society; 'earth-mothers' are a common conception, and the Greeks were obsessed by the Asiatic Cybele and prototypes of Artemis as well as by Demeter. Naturally some of these common ideas reveal themselves in myths; it would be strange if they did not. But does that tell us anything beyond the fact that myths sometimes refer to common human ideas and generalizations? Do we have to posit a 'collective unconscious' that goes beyond the universal interests of humanity to account for them? Do we have to use confusing terms like 'archetype'? Do we have to believe, as Jung and his follower Karl Kerényi did, that there can be an actual *science* of mythology, by which certain symbols can be accorded specific values and their uses assigned a place on a chart of psychic normality?

A more intriguing idea of Jung's is that certain concepts can be inherited no less than biological behaviour patterns. That remains to be proved or disproved; its attraction for the study of myths is that it might account for the occurrence of quite detailed mythical themes in apparently independent cultures. The battle between 'evolutionists' and 'diffusionists' has rather died down at present; it used to be a great source of scholarly contention whether an apparently similar idea had evolved independently (because of common elements in human circumstance) or was the result of cultural contact. It is useful to point out, through 'Kon Tiki' experiments and the like, that diffusion may be wider than at first appears; but certain mythical ideas, notably that one of the first creative acts was the separation of the sky from the earth, or the 'earth-diver' motif whereby a creator figure dives to the bottom of the primordial ocean and brings up a speck of earth that turns into the dry land, occur in such distant and unlikely places that the operation of imagination after an instinctual pattern has its aetiological attraction. Against this whole possibility of inherited ideas is the view of mental functions associated with Jean Piaget, whose studies of child development suggest that apparently *a priori* concepts like number, space and causation are developed experimentally in the first few years of life.

One of the weak points in the whole discussion of myths as a form of expression has been an ambiguity in the meaning of the term 'symbol'. It is a difficulty that arises in Ernst Cassirer's view of the nature of myths. Cassirer undertook the enormous task of composing a philosophy of culture; the result is

Kantian, eclectic, ultimately unconvincing, but admirable for its occasional flashes of insight. Myth is seen as one of the main 'symbolic forms' of expression, language itself and science being the others.[5] A myth, he asserts, cannot be evaluated intellectually, because it is not allegorical but tautegorical – a form of expression in its own right, in which the spirit opposes an image world of its own to the factual world of experience: pure expression as opposed to derivative impression. In so far as this requires us to treat myths as the products of emotion rather than reason, it is a salutary corrective of intellectualizing theories of myths of the 'proto-science' kind. But beyond that, what does it all mean? In the end it transpires that the 'mythical consciousness', which comes into operation when the external world 'overcomes a man in sheer immediacy' so that 'the subjective excitement becomes objectified and confronts the mind as a god or a demon', is little more than the capacity for religious awe.[6]

For Cassirer, myth and religion are continuous – but that should not make us forget that many myths are quite unlike religion, that *their* genesis at least must be quite distinct from that of feelings about gods or cult. Moreover Cassirer is vague about what precisely is 'expressed' by this emotional contact with the outside world; at times it is a 'god or demon', at others a symbol. But a symbol of what? Once again we confront the difficulty that a symbol, even if it is not allegorical, an item in a rational code, must have emotional content at least. For Cassirer it seems at times that this content is simple, a kind of feeling of divine presence. (But is that really what most myths are about?) At other times, however, he writes about 'basic mythical configurations' that possess 'factual unity' because of an 'underlying *structural* form'.[7] These symbols, at least, are complex, more detailed than mere feelings of godhead and the like, and in fact their 'basic configurations' resemble the Jungian archetypes, just as their common structure prefigures the ideas of Lévi-Strauss. Certainly Cassirer was not unsympathetic to Jung, if only because Jung abandoned the Freudian concentration on sexual motivation that seemed to Cassirer a degradation of human culture. But like Jung he remained indecisive about the nature and operation of mythical symbols; and one suspects that both alike are conditioned by the essentially Freudian idea of fixed correlations between certain symbols and certain kinds of feeling or preoccupation, notably between phallic or womb-like objects and sexual obsession or repression.

On the whole Cassirer has little to add to the simple thought that lies beneath the metaphysical theorizing of Jung: that there are certain basic human concerns whose expression in myths enhances the integration of the individual with his social and physical situation. That thought is important for Lévi-Strauss, too, but his theory of myths is more interesting, not least because it offers detailed analyses of how myths mirror the inner tendencies of man.[8] The theory depends, as I wrote earlier, on the basic assumption that the human *esprit* is structurally similar at every period and in every kind of society. It also accepts most of the 'functionalist' position that society is a machine, every part of which is involved in the operation of the whole. For Lévi-Strauss the structural unity of the social machine is effected by the consistent structure of the minds that ultimately determine its forms. Myths, like rituals, are part of the machine and fulfil specific roles in making it work; therefore they, too, are ultimately determined by the structure of the mind. Lévi-Strauss can even tell us one of the main characteristics of this structure: a tendency to polarize experience, to divide it for the purposes of understanding into sets of opposites, much as a binary computer does.

It is true that many kinds of society are known in which the classificatory system is binary in character. Simple societies are often arranged in moieties, that is, in two groups each of which selects marriage-partners from the other, although

Lévi-Strauss himself has shown that such apparent systems are often in reality more complex than that. In other societies, too, one can frequently detect a disposition to make binary (as opposed to ternary and so on) divisions of the objects of experience; we shall see that the Greeks showed such a tendency. There are, of course, objective factors that encourage this way of looking at things. There are two sexes to impose the division on some of the most important facets of social life, those concerned with mating and the continuance of the tribe. Moreover the contrast between subjective and objective, oneself and the world outside, reinforces a tendency to see things in terms of contraries: desirable and undesirable, his and mine, black and white, friend and enemy. Human individuality as well as human physiology encourages us to divide our world into pairs, and that tendency is undeniably reflected in some aspects of social organization. Yet it would surely be truer to say that inevitable binary aspects of human and social organization impose themselves on the mind, than that a purely mental structure determines every product of human behaviour. Nothing yet known about the brain suggests that it must function like a binary computer, yet structuralism unmistakably implies that it does so.

Turning to myths, we observe that their quasi-binary quality for Lévi-Strauss is their function (as he sees it) of *mediating contradictions*. That is, men are faced with all sorts of problems in their lives, some of them general ones that do not depend on individual circumstances: problems like how to reconcile one's own interests and ambitions with those of the group, how to endure the thought of death when all our instincts are for life, how to temper natural greed and lust with discretion. Most of these general problems present themselves in the form of contradictions: between desire and reality, the attainable and unattainable, the individual and society. The function of myths, then, is to make such contradictions bearable, not so much by embodying wish-fulfilment fantasies or

releasing inhibitions as by setting up pseudo-logical models by which the contradictions are resolved, or rather palliated.

One of the clearest instances of what Lévi-Strauss has in mind is his analysis of the Pueblo Indian myth of creation, in which hunting is interposed as a means of subsistence between agriculture on the one hand, warfare on the other.[9] In another part of the same myth-cycle the polar categorizing of animals into *grazing* and *predatory* is amended by the observation that *carrion-eating* animals intervene between the two other types, for they eat dead food but do not kill to get it. The contradiction mediated by this myth is precisely that between life and death, and is achieved by pointing out that, in specific spheres of food-production and the instinctual behaviour of animals, there is no simple opposition between living and dead but that there are intervening stages between the two. That raises a doubt, but no more, about the finality of our own death. Myths do not set out to give philosophical proofs, but rather to effect an altered emotional response to an aspect of our experience.

Lévi-Strauss's main body of evidence comprises the myths of related tribes of Indians in Brazil and Paraguay, and is particularly valuable because these myths have been recorded over hundreds of years by missionaries of a comparatively sophisticated kind. Their records of mythical variants have enabled Lévi-Strauss to show that what tend to change in a myth, as time passes, are the specific personnel or individual events; what remains constant is the relationship between one character or event and another, in short, the whole structure of the tale. It makes little difference whether a myth is overtly about a young girl disobeying her mother or a grandmother poisoning her grandson – the structure remains unchanged and is related to a conflict between generations, ultimately to its mythical resolution.

There are difficulties about the theory in the extreme form in which its author presents it. In maintaining that what myths

are really concerned with is a sort of algebra, an abstract structural affinity between mind and environment that transcends specific social problems and preoccupations, he is certainly pressing the structural intuition too far. But the idea that myths are especially concerned with mediating contradictions, and that they do so by showing how 'empirical categories . . . can serve as conceptual tools for disengaging abstract notions', is a productive one.[10] It does not, as it happens, work with such dramatic success with Greek myths (and other western ones) as with those of the Bororo Indians and their neighbours, but that is probably for two reasons: that the former have been distorted by a literary tradition, and that in any case their structural emphases, in the absence of a reasonable number of variants, lie concealed. Structuralists, however, find any dilution of the theory repellent. The idea that a mythical structure can be altered in the course of transmission is in itself objectionable to them, because in their view the human mind, which always asserts its structure in the same way, should ensure continuity; and since all myths are the product of mind and society, they should all be equally susceptible to structural analysis. At this point I can only disagree, and point to the influence on any narrative tradition of accident, human weakness, changing social background and arbitrary personal choice.[11] The whole Lévi-Strauss concept, like so many other anthropological theories, has become absurd in its stringency. Society is *not* a machine, although it has its machine-like aspects; the human mind is *not* utterly rigid in its analytical functions; myths are *not* all alike in their structure and purpose, even at the most abstract level.

Those perceptions, that admission of the less-than-total rigidity of mental acts and social arrangements, enable us to make use of the possibility that a myth is suggesting some kind of mediation, along with other possibilities such as those already considered – that it may be a charter, offer an explanation, have a primarily dramatic value, and so on. That some

myths are concerned with problems, especially with major causes of anxiety like the nature of death, is in any case obvious. What a modified structural interpretation can offer is the special insight that underlying relationships rather than overt subjects (even when interpreted symbolically) may be the significant factor, together with the idea that problems tend to take the form of contradictions, and that contradictions may be eased by revealing a *tertium quid*, even sometimes a fictitious one.

One of the basic oppositions discovered by Lévi-Strauss in the life and myths of his South American Indians is between Nature and Culture, often symbolized in their myths by the difference between the raw and the cooked. Greek myths, too, seem preoccupied with the contradiction between natural and human law, between force and restraint, barbarism and civilization; and Lévi-Strauss's work may help us to realize the paramount position of this general contradiction, which I shall explore further in Chapter 8 in relation to Heracles. But there are other signs, too, that the 'polar' way of looking at things is endemic in Greek thought from an early stage. Artificial constructions like the Centaurs (half man, half horse) and Cyclopes (one-eyed giants) are developed in ways that seem unconsciously to emphasize the interlocking virtues and vices of Nature and Culture. The Centaurs are powerful and often savage, as when they get drunk and break loose at the wedding of Hippodameia, the Lapith princess who is their neighbour in the lands bordering Mount Pelion. They try to rape her and the other girls, and for that they are driven away by King Peirithous and pursued by Heracles himself. But chief of all the Centaurs is Cheiron, who remains aloof from these disgraceful events and leads a supremely civilized and exemplary life, the paradigm of Culture, in his paradoxical mountain cavern. That kind of duality is less clearly seen in the Cyclopes. If we remember only Polyphemus in the *Odyssey* we retain a terrifying picture of bestiality and cannibalism, but the truth

is that the Cyclopes as a whole are related to the gods, that they live peacefully enough, and that Polyphemus is something of an outsider. The rest of them, indeed, were envisaged as having built the giant walls of Tiryns and Mycenae after manufacturing for Zeus the thunderbolts with which he established his supremacy and the rule of law.

Again, in their conception of the three great world-masses of fire, earth and sea (or water) the Greeks included contradictory strands that the myths help to bind together. Fire is both sacred and profane, beneficial and destructive. It comes in the form of lightning from the *aither*, the bright sky or pure upper air that is the natural place of the gods; it purifies all evil, burns it away like chaff; it is the gift of the gods to men, and the means whereby men not only cook their food but also burn sacrifices and so maintain their link with the divine; it is the essential medium of pottery and metalwork, the crafts presided over by deities like Athena and Hephaestus. In its contrary aspect, however, it is the means of divine punishment and fiery destruction: Zeus' thunderbolt and lightning-flash. Water, too, is both life-giving and, in the form of disastrous floods like that from which Deucalion and Pyrrha were sole survivors, associated with death. Earth is clearest of all, since it is both the birth-place of the corn, partner to the fertilizing rain that falls from the sky, and receptacle of corpses, the place where the stricken souls of the dead descend to the realm of Hades. In other respects, too, the Greeks tended to stress the contradictions at the heart of things. Women are seen as a glory and an evil, love as daemonic and divine, old age as bringing both wisdom and foolishness. Sometimes the myths suggest a mediation (Prometheus in the case of fire, Persephone of earth), but often they do not, and in general it is important to concede that many elements of the Greek world-view, for instance in the list of divine functions themselves, are not polar in kind.

That is getting some distance from myths as a psychological

phenomenon; the digression arose out of the supposed link between the polar structure of myths and the structure of the mind. The Lévi-Straussian theory is clearly founded on a particular view of the *esprit*, which presumably includes the psyche; but it turns out that what is valuable in the theory does not really depend on its presuppositions about mind. Mediation implies a polarizing tendency that is in a sense mental in origin, but even so this structural evaluation belongs to the intellectual interpretation of myths rather than the psychological.

It must be admitted that the total harvest on the psychological side (to return to that) is rather thin, especially in view of the confidence with which psychologists have propounded their views and the respect with which they have been received. Myths, of course, are only one aspect of the products of the unconscious mind; but Rank, Abraham and Jung, as well as Cassirer, devoted special attention to them. There are, moreover, specific details of psychological studies that throw light on certain mythical themes, independently of the universal theories. Modern investigations have shown that dreams about flying are surprisingly common; their implication is arguable, but they help to show why the myths of Icarus flying towards the sun or Bellerophon on Pegasus are especially haunting. That is, their main theme coincides with one that is both common and mysterious in dreams. I am more doubtful about the Freudian explanation of floating-on-water myths as an unconscious reference to the embryo surrounded by its fluids, and the association of paradise myths with unconscious reminiscences of the happiness of childhood is surely arbitrary, since there are many other possible explanations. Other motifs will be referred to appropriate psychic possibilities as they arise, but in general no reason has yet been revealed why myths are psychologically satisfying *as such*, why they should constitute a unique form of expression (as opposed to other forms of narrative) that elicits a special kind of imaginative

response. Their traditional quality reveals more about their special kinds of subject and imagination than any determinable relation to the human psyche, and it is in their particular themes rather than their aetiology as an expressive mode that they lay claim to more than casual psychological interest.

And yet one should not give up so easily. There *is* some imaginative quality about many myths, at least, that elicits a very particular kind of response, an empathy at an almost visceral level akin to the impact of great music or poetry. Such feelings are not confined to a few especially evocative themes (although it may be there, I suggested, that specific psychological theories make their contribution). Perhaps the quality that elicits them should be associated not with a special mode of mythical expression but with the overall subject-matter of myths, or even the special circumstances in which they are told. The first possibility takes us back to Mircea Eliade's theory that myths reconstitute the aura of a creative epoch in the past, an epoch of mysterious power. We noted that this may be true of some myths, but that there are many to which it does not apply. A survey of Greek myths does little to support Eliade's intuition. The cosmogonical ones (for example the succession of Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus) have a certain imaginative brutality, but creativity that can be turned to human use is hardly yet in question. Prometheus' activities on behalf of men are more pointed, but their effect is intellectual rather than emotional. The birth of the various gods and their acquisition of functions, not unlike the deeds of the heroes (even when they entail journeys above or below the earth), are too pragmatic in tone to accord with the theory. Despite the rationalizing organization to which they were subjected, Greek myths as a whole still possess a certain imaginative power, but it is not of the kind posited by Eliade. Mesopotamian myths are in many ways more striking than Greek, but again they lack forceful nostalgia directed to paradigmatic events '*in illo tempore*'.

A different suggestion is made by the anthropologist V. W. Turner, that myths are 'liminal' – which means that they are told in 'threshold' or transitional situations.[12] The idea is an extension of the famous identification by A. van Gennep of a kind of ritual known as *rites de passage*, whose function is to effect the passage from one vital or social status to another: at birth, at puberty and initiation, at marriage, old age and death. Such rituals tend to be performed at unusual times and places (at night, in the bush or desert, naked or in strange clothing) so as to remove the participants from normal space and time. They interpose a sacred interval in the flux of profane experience in order to facilitate the sharp transition from one condition to a totally different one. According to Turner, myths too 'are frequently told at a time or in a site that is "betwixt and between" '. The trouble is that this is probably not true of more than a small minority of myths. It is obviously not true of Greek myths in any phase that we can reconstruct, and even in tribal societies myths are very often told in informal and prosaic circumstances. Certain kinds of myths are recited ceremonially, yes – but there is no justification for thinking of these as typical of the *genre*, with the rest nowhere. Nor is it the case that ceremonial myths (which tend to be charters) are more imaginative than the rest. If, as he suggests, myths give some kind of 'total perspective', it must often be for different reasons. At this point, indeed, Turner seems to fall back on a position close to Eliade's; myths 'are felt to be high and deep mysteries which put the initiand temporarily into rapport with the primary or primordial generative power of the cosmos'.[13]

Nevertheless part of the special imaginative power of many myths is that they do in fact provide something resembling Turner's 'total perspective', at least a wider perspective than that of ordinary life. I have already mentioned the fantastic side of myths. Part of it depends, not on striking narrative motifs, but on the use of supernatural elements, whether

monsters, gods or magic. The effect is not religious in kind, as implied by those who emphasize the 'sacred' as the essential mythical property. Rather it points to the coexistence in human experience of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the sacred and the profane. That is one mode of mythical fantasy. Another, related but distinct, depends on the *dislocation* of normal sequences and expectations; something that leads beyond paradoxicality to a kind of dream-like, sometimes nightmarish, other-worldliness. Freud stressed the 'displacement' of waking experience as one function of the 'dream-work'. If myths resemble dreams in their dislocation of events, as indeed they seem to do, it is not, presumably, for exactly the kinds of psychological reason (protection of sleep, repression of anti-social desires) envisaged by Freud. Rather I suggest that the dislocation of everyday life is in itself life-enhancing and liberating. It is not, according to this view, the 'liminality' of myths that gives them a 'total perspective'; rather it is their capacity to reveal fresh and otherwise unimagined possibilities of experience. That cannot be a completely unfamiliar concept to a society that enjoys surrealist art and requires a 'Theatre of the Absurd', and it seems plausible that the unconscious appeal of dislocation-fantasy might be no slighter, if different in quality, in the stratified and culture-bound circumstances of a traditional pre-literate society.

Greek myths are not strong in dislocation, and the fantasy they periodically display is more dependent on their supernatural components. The same is so for Nordic myths, and indeed for most that have been at some stage subjected to literate or quasi-literate transmission. Mesopotamian myths unexpectedly retain some of the qualities of apparent dislocation despite a long tradition of writing. Examples are Gilgamesh's dropping of precious objects through a hole into the underworld, Enkidu's fatal rush to retrieve them, or the earth-goddess Ninhursag curing Enki's eight diseases by placing him in her vagina.[14] Mechanical juxtaposition of themes and the

determination of events by etymology are special factors leading to unpredictable sequences. Even so there is a genuinely fantastic residue, although it is not nearly so striking as the fantasy that permeates the myths of tribal societies among the Amerindians or Australians. According to a Pitjandjara myth from central Australia, two Spider sisters were taking food to a circumcision novice in the bush; one tried to get him to copulate with her and laid him in a pit, but he still refused; eventually she took him up to the sky.[15] Here we detect another motive for apparent paradoxicality, for many of the details of the tale are connected with ritual practices – the pit and the sexual abstention in particular. There is, then, an allegorical level that complicates the fantasy, but the point is that it does not abolish it or render the myth less mysterious in relation to ordinary profane experience.

Classical scholars, on the whole, have found the comparative absence from Greek myths of 'horrible features' (as H. J. Rose called them) and major illogicalities to be admirable, a sign of the clear thinking for which Greeks of the classical period are rightly admired. It is true that the myths, by the time of Homer and Hesiod, had been given an organized form in which the supernatural had been assigned a definite place and from which other forms of fantasy, especially ritual crudities and other disruptions of everyday experience, had been largely extruded. That had, without doubt, its beneficial effects; perhaps it even helped the development of a rational view of the world, a matter to be discussed in the final chapter. But I suggest in all seriousness that Greek myths were not always like that; they were not always so bland, so devoid of real unexpectedness. They cannot always have lacked that crude power and ecstatic dislocation of ordinary life that may be an essential element in the formation of a truly creative culture.