

M Y T H A N D A N A R C H Y



M A T T H E W S P E L L B E R G

There are few subjects more difficult to think lucidly about at the beginning of the twenty-first century than myth. The term has suffered two extreme forms of intellectual degradation, forms which, in the history of ideas, often manifest side by side: a kind of mandarin idealization on the one hand, and an equal and opposite commonsense dismissal on the other. In other words, *myth* means one of two things to most people. Either it signifies an unchanging and essentially untouchable truth from the deep past (a Jungian archetype, an ancient and enduring story such as those of Orpheus or Oedipus); or it means a pervasive falsehood, a swindle, an act of political manipulation (the myth of the American small-business owner, the stab-in-the-back-myth of the Nazis). You might say that there exists in some circles a *priestly* distortion of myth; and elsewhere, a *debunker's* distortion.

It seems me that both of these contemporary meanings are almost exactly, diametrically, *not* what a myth was in genuinely mythic cultures. They are also not what a myth is in our own. Just because we can no longer think clearly about myth does not mean we have entirely lost it. It remains all around us, a nimbus which colors every line of sight but will no longer allow itself to be an object of our perception.

Each of these distortions contributes something to our ignorance. The priestly idealization makes it seem that myth is an exalted literary genre, a kind of ancient, unchanging story. Although myth by definition (and in its etymology) expresses itself through stories, it would be more accurate to say that it is an epistemology which uses stories for its procedures of reasoning, argument, and verification. Myth is a way of knowing, and it's not nearly as rigid or as fixed as the priests would have it.

In some ways, as we will see, the debunker's definition of myth as political falsehood offers a closer approximation to its genuine formal structure. But this account also contributes to our ignorance, in that it has no understanding of myth's weight or value, or of its indispensability: the debunker's account imagines myth to be just a temporary or malicious detour on the path toward hard facts.

A society that seems to have lost interest in myth is a society in ignorance of its effect. Myth has not disappeared so much as diffused out into the ether, so that its powers and limitations can no longer be held up for examination. I have elsewhere made similar claims about a society and its relation to dreams, and I'm not the first person to believe there is a close link between dreaming and mythmaking. If myth is an epistemology, dream is the corresponding mode of cognition. But each phenomenon is so complex on its own that we would do well to decouple them in our analysis, at least at first. Myth in particular has suffered extraordinary confusions of vocabulary at the most basic levels: its constituent parts, how it is used, and what form it takes. These must be rectified before we can entertain any ideas about its meaning and significance, or its relation to phenomena such as the dream and the imagination or, indeed, to a culture, society, or body politic. We must go back to the beginning, stand on the naked shore at the margin of the sea, and shed our preconceptions. We must give up the debunker's reading of myth, but (and this is in fact the harder task) we must surrender much of the priestly account as well.

In the twentieth century, the language of myth was often draagooned into the service of tyranny. In many ways it was the priestly distortion, with its pompous solemnity, its promise of sacred power, that permitted this to happen. Though it may seem on first examination that the priestly account is esoteric, confined to

academia and certain poetic cliques (the Georgekreis, the racialized historiography of Indo-European philology, the more mystical strains of psychoanalysis), in fact its influence has percolated widely. Through schoolrooms and cinemas, priestly myth has come to shape the imperial rhetoric of belonging.

To this the debunker's account was an understandable reaction, an attempt to spoil the charisma of myth for reactionaries and fascists. The political danger of misunderstanding myth is real and, Hydralike, self-renewing. But it might be better solved by looking at what myth really was – and what it could still be – rather than by renouncing it altogether. We must rescue the word from its various mystifications, demotions, and politically sinister exaltations. We must see it as a powerful tool for thinking, a radical and ancient form of meaning-making and, therefore, of politics.

Genuine myth is no handmaiden of empire. Nor, it must be said, is it democratic in the usual sense of the word. As political theory, myth is a creature that defies our present paradigm, which posits order and anarchy as opposites. Myth is a mechanism for cohesion and therefore in some sense conservative and ordering – but it is also necessarily and almost infinitely anarchic. This conjunction is a paradox only from a point of view deep within the paradigm of literacy, and deep within a society where power is understood to rightfully belong to the state. Myth is a thought system anterior to literacy, and anterior to the state (in Mesopotamia and China, writing and the state arose in tandem). Where myth genuinely flourishes, monolithic and consolidating authority is discouraged. And though myth is not without its own potential for moral failing, it favors a fluid and intimate sense of belonging, a laying down of roots understood to be at once permanent and yet at every moment revisable, a procedure by which meaning-making is not subject to hierophantic mystification but widely disseminated and openly negotiated in the consensual flicker of firelight.

To answer the questions about myth's relation to society, we must first attempt a basic description of it as a phenomenon. And the most basic element in such a description is that myth is oral. Though myth often lives on in literate societies, it does not origi-

nate within them. Myth is (as the poet and translator Robert Bringham says) an “ecology” of stories, circulating from the mouths of many tellers, told night after night, in a place where there is no fixed canon, no sacred book against which any individual story is measured or judged. It cannot be emphasized enough how difficult this is for us to wrap our minds around – even for those of us who acknowledge it in theory. We cannot think easily about an oral epistemology because our entire tradition of analysis is based on the conceptual language of the text. When it comes to myth, there is a profound vocabulary problem: children of the book that we are, we do not have the words to describe it.

This is immediately apparent when it comes to discussing the resemblances among different myths. We usually express such resemblance in words like *version* or *variation* or *adaptation*, or even *reinterpretation* or *retelling* or *rewriting* (anthropologists sometimes try technical neologisms like *multiform*). For example: *Rilke’s poem is a version of the Orpheus myth*. Or, *The Greeks produced many variations on the hero’s journey*. Or, *The Aeneid is an adaptation of the Odyssey*. All these formulations imply an ur-form, an original story, an ideal template behind later iterations (even when the scholars who use them know better, the vocabulary betrays this kind of thinking). Such words cannot but unavoidably suggest there is a genuine Orpheus story, the real one, the original, the story against which others are measured. In that story, of course, Orpheus goes to the underworld and seeks out Eurydice, leads her toward the living, and then looks back and loses her. Our way of reading “other” stories of Orpheus is almost inevitably in comparison with this template: *In this version of Orpheus, Eurydice doesn’t want to leave the underworld*. We struggle to read Rilke’s devastating “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” as anything but a willful departure from the “original”: now we look through Eurydice’s death-heavy eyes and feel not the Orphic love of loving, but the sweet inertia of nothingness. Scholars can sometimes add some nuance to such accounts by pointing to a complex and unsettled textual history, laying variants or manuscripts or fragments up against one another. But such acrobatics, impressive and often useful as they are, do not free us from the closed room of literacy.

What does *original* even mean in a society in which there is no

written record? There may have been a first time someone told the story of Orpheus, but what authority would it subsequently have had? And how could we ever know, one hundred or three hundred years later, what that story was? Anyone who has ever played the game of Telephone knows that the human mind does not favor exact transmission: on the contrary, to transform is in the very nature of language. The research of Milman Parry and Albert Lord into the compositional strategies of South Slavic bards showed how essential improvisation is to oral traditions. Of course that improvisation was no undisciplined free-for-all. On the contrary, it required great training in a repertoire of images, patterns, themes, phrases, forms – only the end result was not fidelity to an earlier story, but virtuoso invention within a framework of story parts.

The Vedic tradition of India is the exception that proves this rule. There, unlike almost anywhere else in the world, exact memorization of sacred poems in a purely oral context was practiced. (Perhaps there was an earlier time when the precursors of the Rig Veda were more fluid, but those precursors have been washed away like faces in the sand.) The need to replicate the same turns of phrase over and over again across the generations gave rise to an incredible apparatus of linguistic meta-reflection, without parallel elsewhere until the nineteenth century. This included complex techniques for memorization and recitation as well as the world's first genuine linguistics, studies of phonetics and pronunciation, and a substantial hermeneutic tradition. The achievements of the ancient grammarian Pāṇini and his successors, with their comprehensive analysis of the morphology and syntax of Sanskrit, arose out of the need to overcome the tendency of language to drift and change. I suspect (and I emphasize this is only rank speculation) that something historically unusual happened at the beginning of the Vedic era. The Indo-Europeans were impressed by the writing system they encountered in the Indus Valley, but for some reason were wary of adopting it for their own sacred purposes. (We know from the Roman historians that other Indo-European priestly castes, such as the Druids, considered writing taboo.) Instead, they elected to build an abstract armature that would mimic the mnemonic power of writing within speech, an armature secure enough to hold in place the innate wanderings of spoken language.

The mere pressure of daily speech wears away at phonemes, tenses, vocabulary. So too does it wear away at images, characters, storylines. But here we might fall into another classic error about mythology: that its workings are, because collective and oral, only unconscious. The manipulations of myth are equal parts deliberate and chthonic. In a culture where people tell stories, those stories are told night after night, season after season, clan by clan, individual by individual, generation by generation. Many changes happen in subtle ways: the emphasis falls strangely on a word, and the valence of a sentence begins a shift in the direction of irony. A few generations later, the hero is now a full-on coward. But just as often the hero becomes a coward because someone *wants* him to be depicted that way – or he stays a hero for many generations because tellers deliberately work to keep him heroic. The making of meaning in myth, then, might be closer to the making of meaning in the theater than what happens, say, in a seminar room. (Melville Jacobs, a great scholar of American Indian oral traditions, insists that oral artifacts should be called “performances,” not “texts,” and the figures in them “actors,” not “characters.”) To change the way Hamlet recites a line, or to put him in a trench coat or a hoodie, constitutes an act of interpretation that expresses itself concretely and manifestly, avoiding distillation into abstract positions (though the director may speak about it abstractly while trying to get the actors to do what he or she wants, and the critic may do the same thing when writing about it afterward). Many unconscious alterations also occur; a line comes out differently one night, and the actor decides to stick with that reading from then on. But equally often Horatio might deliberately *decide* to be more physically affectionate with Hamlet, or he might be forced to back off from being so affectionate because the director doesn’t like it.

The infinite number of potential changes in such a literary form stretches the hermeneutic circle to its outer limit. Imagine attempting to create an analytical method for studying – all at once, as if they constituted a single text – eight performances of a production of *Hamlet* in which the actors have been told to be relatively extemporaneous with their delivery and behavior. Already under these limited circumstances the terrain of the artwork has expanded staggeringly beyond the parameters within which scholars of literature usually work. An enormous chart

comes to mind, with dozens of overlapping categories, Venn diagrams for timing, utterance, inflection, valence, psychology – this pause was two seconds longer, which made the next phrase seem as if it were uttered doubtfully, and Horatio’s reaction to it made him seem ignorant rather than knowing, and so on. You would probably need a specially programmed AI or neural network to develop an algorithm that could provide a read-out that comprehensively ordered and summarized all the changes, and it would be so complicated you would have to invent yet another AI to read it.

Now how much more staggering does this artifact become if suddenly the performers of *Hamlet* are, over those eight days, free not only to change their interpretation of given lines, their costumes, and their Stanislavskian backstories, but also to change the text, the names of characters, even the plot itself! I have seen the poet Jeff Dolven lecture on counterfactual *Hamlets* to illustrate how singular a work *Hamlet* really is: he shows his students what *Hamlet the Comedy* might have looked like, a story that ends with the chasing out of Claudius and the marriage of Hamlet and Ophelia. Or *Hamlet the Revenge Tragedy*, in which Hamlet sets upon the entire court after the *Mousetrap*, but Claudius escapes and a gory tit-for-tat ensues until no one is left standing. Or *Hamlet the Romance*, or *Hamlet the Epic*. But consider the furthest extrapolation: the *Hamlet* that turns into *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or *The Crucible*. The *Hamlet* that could become a new play at any line, that is nothing but a series of endlessly new plays.

The result would be the Library of Babel, every conceivable combination of signs, impossible to order but theoretically complete, containing every story and exegesis and antithesis and, between them, every conceivable interstice of nonsense, each of which is itself the most holy of holy books in some as-yet undiscovered language. Or rather, the situation turns into the Library of Babel only if everything must be written down. Borges’s story is the phantasm of the human mind estranged from its own innate procedures by literacy: *el sueño de la palabra produce monstruos*. The text is the cocoon of the spoken word, and its dream is the interpretation. What comes of it is an incomplete and uneasy metamorphosis. We read ancient texts as our own, and yet at the same time chafe at our own inability to read them as they once

were. We see the text as the time capsule and the illegible monument, a testament to its simultaneous survival and also its intransmissibility. Literacy turns time into space; the library is the labyrinth of simultaneity. Speech, on the other hand, unfolds in time and so prevents its infinitudes from ever overwhelming the auditor all at once. (It would be a Borgesian thought-experiment to imagine a language which permitted the speaker to utter all its words in one pendulous syllable. The resulting sound would be so insidious with meaning that its auditor would drop dead.)

Orality aspires to neither eternity nor infinity. It covets little and fears nothing from either. Myth, orality's epitome, takes infinity and eternity in stride, imagines that humans might be entitled to a limited and modest participation within their vastness, usually as peripheral figures peering in on a cosmic drama peopled by far wilder beings. Literacy, in contrast, makes the eternal and the infinite seem tantalizingly within reach; but the result is that it feels their unattainability far more acutely, as an open wound. This is one key lesson to be had from Shelley's "Ozymandias." The traveler sees the ruins of an ancient pharaoh's statue looking blighted in the desert, but what occasions the speaker's meditation on the gap between ambition and eternity is the fact that while the statue is in ruins, the inscription on the pedestal is still there, taunting itself with irony:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!

The irony of Shelley's famous poem belongs to the medium as much as the message. Nothing is left of Ozymandias's imperial power *except* the inscription, which has in fact achieved a provisional immortality, and precisely because of its endurance has made indelible the pharaoh's own failure to rule for more than a threadbare string of heartbeats.

Part of the problem is that our main model for myth is what we have inherited from the Greeks. But that is already myth after myth: myth which has begun to crystallize into canon. It would not even be quite right to say that our model has come from the Greeks, for although there are those who still read Hesiod and Theocritus, it is Ovid, the mythographer of the Middle Ages, who

shapes our idea of how gods and spirits might between them make the world.

Now, Ovid is no slouch. He is a latecomer – urban, almost imperial, full of ironies and cynicism – but still, he thinks in myth. The verdant profusion of stories that is the *Metamorphoses*, the dream logic that seems to govern them, the refusal of a single master-narrative, the articulation of taboos accompanied by a continuous, gleeful violation of them – this is myth. Ovid’s world is an anarchy of desire and impulse that only achieves balance like an emergent system in biology: not by the iron will of a founder but by the push and pull of endless transformation, sorting itself out, a self-regulating equilibrium on the model of an ecosystem or James Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis. The guiding theme of the *Metamorphoses*, announced by the title itself, is an instance of content mirroring the form of a whole tradition. These are stories about transformation in part because myths are stories in continuous transformation. That Ovid wrote them down means that they became arrested in one iteration, but they carry within them the distilled energy of preceding millennia, in which each telling had harkened to an infinite sequence of potential tellings. The back-and-forth of bards by firelight gave some inkling to all who listened that stories changed because the world did, and even when human beings found themselves helpless before the capricious universe, they could at least intervene in their own picture of the world so as to make it align more carefully with what was happening around them.

Ovid’s canonization in the West after the fall of Rome generated a real distortion. In the textual tradition, the *Metamorphoses* can no longer undergo serious metamorphosis. Compare this to what happens in oral societies, for example amid the extraordinary and interlinked myth traditions of the Pacific Northwest (and though in many communities of the Northwest the word *myth* is still associated with the cruel condescension of Europeans toward indigenous storytelling, I mean the term with the utmost respect).

In these traditions, the Library of Babel is not quite an accurate comparison: it is not the case that *anything* can happen. And yet, it is the case that, say, a man who was abandoned on a rock at sea while hunting sea lions can appear in a startling range of stories.

This man (usually called Naatsilanéi in Tlingit, and often Asdiwal among the Tsimshian) almost always comes back from the rock and whittles killer whales out of wood, bringing them to life. Usually this is to avenge himself on those (often his brothers-in-law, though sometimes a slave) who have abandoned him. But in some cases the storyteller says this man had to be abandoned because of a storm, and the killer whales, instead of wreaking vengeance, bring food to the starving village where he used to live. In many cases the man travels back to his village in an inflated sea lion stomach, in some cases one he cut out from a dead sea lion, in other cases a stomach given to him by sea lion spirits, or by a clan of killer whales. In some cases the sea lion stomach is a mere flotation device; in others it is a remarkable wish-fulfillment technology, like Dorothy's ruby slippers, which allows him to go to whatever place he thinks of. These constitute only a fraction of the transformations of this story that were recorded by ethnographers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is what I mean by *Hamlet* becoming a different play at almost every line.

In at least one telling of the story, told in Haida in 1900 by Gandll of the Kay uu 'Laanas (or Walter McGregor as he was called in English), the man abandoned at sea by his brothers-in-law comes back to the mainland in the sea lion stomach, but instead of carving killer whales right away, he takes a detour to set a snare and capture and skin an aquatic monster who lives in a lake. This signals that another common story will be interpolated, this one about a man who slays an underwater beast and dons its skin in order to trick and ultimately shame to death his nagging mother-in-law. And sure enough, after the whales he's whittled have taken revenge on his brothers-in-law, the narration turns to tricking and ultimately destroying the hero's mother-in-law. In a coda that returns to the first story, the whales that were brought to life are now sold for food, and they make the man very rich, allowing him to host a potlatch in honor of his youngest brother-in-law, who was the only one to stay loyal to the hero when the other in-laws had abandoned him on the rock. This is what I mean by a *Hamlet* that turns into *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or, stranger still, that starts out as *Hamlet*, becomes *Midsummer* in Act 3, goes back to *Hamlet* in Act 4, wraps things up neatly with the death of Claudius, and proceeds to finish in Act 5 with a

double marriage, a performance of the *Mousetrap* by the Rude Mechanicals, and the elevation of Horatio to a dukedom by the newly crowned King Hamlet.

This entire dense, radiating cluster of stories from the Northwest might be considered a discrete artifact, an artwork even. Faced with such an artwork, a Western analytical vocabulary is hobbled by its absolutist and delimiting quality. Given the corpus of stories recorded in the Northwest by ethnographers, it would *seem* that the nagging-mother-in-law-story (or the lazy-son-in-law-story, as it's often known) and the man-abandoned-on-a-sea-lion-rock-story are usually told separately and ought to be understood as distinct. But this distinction is at best provisional, part of a language game, and not an eternal principle. For as can be seen in Gandll's telling, they are easily fused, and perhaps over a thousand years might grow into one indistinguishable story, at least until someone decided to decouple them, or even perhaps remove some part of the story that includes parts of both earlier stories, and make *that* into a self-contained narrative.

Imagine that some day a papyrus is uncovered in pristine condition in the desert near Alexandria, or that a forgotten codex is found under the floorboards of a Swiss monastery library, and imagine that it tells the following story. Orpheus was a brave prince called to fight in the war at Troy. Partway through the war he began to feud with Agamemnon over a concubine named Eurydice, whom Agamemnon, in a rage, slew and sent to the underworld. Swift-footed Orpheus pursued her to the throne room of Hades, and there won her back by beating Hermes in a race, on the condition he could return to the mortal realm without once looking behind to see if Eurydice was following. But racing ahead and full of impatience, Orpheus turned and looked back, losing Eurydice forever. Filled with rage, and blaming the gods who had brought him to Troy in the first place, Orpheus went out to the battlefield and slew the Trojan hero Hector. Then Hector's widow, Andromache, maddened by grief and goaded by the god Dionysos, called together the priestesses of Troy, whipped them into a divine ecstasy, and led them out onto the battlefield, where they tore Orpheus's body to pieces.

We find it easy to say, "This is a mixing of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice with the story of the *Iliad*." But this presumes that

from time immemorial the stories were understood to be different and to possess each one an internal coherence and integrity.

The possible permutations, if not infinite, are nevertheless staggering. All evidence points to the fact that many such permutations would have been deliberate acts of composition: the work of myth-poets performing according to the laws of their medium, saying something about what the world was in the way they knew how.

Robert Bringhurst, in his extraordinary writings on Haida myth, often compares the oral story cultures of the Americas to Old Master painting. Though the myths in their guise as verbal artifacts were largely locked in place by Ovid and the Bible, free play was still permissible in the realm of visual representation. The painters of the European Renaissance were working with a finite (but vast) number of figures and themes, and working within a community of patrons who knew those figures and themes, favoring certain ones for various reasons, often having use of them for different purposes: pure pleasure, sexual arousal, political propaganda, philosophical meditation, and so forth. Within the boundaries of these narratives, a great deal of freedom and originality were possible (as, for example, in the bringing together of disparate saints for a chat with the Virgin and Child in the genre known as the *sacra conversazione*). Bringhurst writes about Velázquez's *Supper at Emmaus*, which is, unexpectedly, a portrait of a kitchen maid at work over a few bulbs of garlic: the eponymous apparition of Jesus to the two disciples takes place in a tiny corner of the canvas. This is a radically different telling of the myth than Caravaggio's chiaroscuro hierophany.

We must try to wean ourselves off the idea that these painters were mere adapters or depictees of a fixed textual tradition: though Ovid and the Bible determined the borders of the country they inhabited, the painters beat many paths through the landscape. Malcolm Bull's brilliant *Mirror of the Gods* shows just how this extratextual myth-world came to be. A modified Olympian pantheon circulated between the Italian city-states and the royal courts of the North. It was mainly manifest in the decorative arts, on picnic dishes and in erotic pictures, and it gave rise to a peculiar system of mythical meanings, quite different from the Olympian hierarchies of the classical era. Certain deities and heroes were

avored and placed together in dialogue; they spawned stories and tableaux that articulated courtly attitudes toward leisure and work, kingship and licentiousness, desire and responsibility.

But Bull also argues that this mythography of the Renaissance underwent a profound epistemological shift from its predecessors. In the Middle Ages, classical myth was demoted for being pagan, but it had not been entirely rejected. Commentators undertook various allegorical interpretations of the stories, making them out to contain Christian truths in disguised, pagan forms. In the Renaissance, however, the Greco-Roman myths came to be considered, quite simply, fake. They offered a cosmic vision which was of no consequence, required no belief or justification, and gave rise to no wars or inquisitions. (What a relief that must have been in the sixteenth century!) If Bull is to be believed, the trivial and sybaritic gods of Florentine workshops paved the way for that strangely modern idea, fiction – that is, stories that are first and foremost understood to be *not true*.

The by-now deep-seated language of fiction interposes yet another confusion in our attempts at understanding myth. For we are accustomed to thinking that stories can be true in the sense that they empirically happened, or not true in the sense that they didn't. We then go on to distinguish among untrue stories certain kinds of secondary truth: fictional stories might nevertheless be figuratively true, allegorically true, true to the human condition if not to actual fact. But it does not seem to me that in genuinely mythic societies such distinctions hold. Certainly the most fundamental distinction we make – that between *literal* and *figurative* – cannot obtain. (As the etymology of *literal* indicates, this is once again the vocabulary of the book.) Myhtelling generates meaning primarily in a *non-hermeneutic fashion*: interpretation inheres within the stories, making the distinction between a pure event and a symbolic charge irrelevant. Where in a seminar classroom communal meaning is achieved by the negotiation of different readings of a story, by the mythtellers' fire such meaning is negotiated by the continuous telling and retelling of stories, their modification being the revision and adjudication of their significance.

At the same time, myth is neither empirical nor historiographical in our usual sense of these words. Scientists who believe that myths contain within them frozen accounts of the deep past are,

like biblical fundamentalists, essentially participating in a Euhemerist understanding of myth, imagining that myths encode events that verifiably happened. But myths are not geological strata; they are closer to living, and therefore changing, organisms. Until we can understand the epistemology of myth, we will not be able to hear the great deal it has to tell us about the deep past.

Myth upsets our paradigms of the true and yet does not renounce truth. So what does the self-understanding of myth look like if it cannot be described by our standard notions of either figuration or empiricism? So far I have written mainly about the praxis of myth. What worldview arises within that praxis? Northrop Frye writes that myth depicts a world of “total metaphor, in which everything is potentially identical with everything else, as though it were all inside a single infinite body.” The brilliance of this statement lies in the way it attempts to transcend its own vocabulary. For a world of total metaphor is also a world which is no longer metaphor: if everything is a vehicle, then in some sense nothing is a tenor, or is only a tenor momentarily, touching down on earth for a moment before leaping to a cloud within the empyrean of analogy. The statement might be paired with two others from Frye. Myth is “the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire.” And perhaps most profoundly: in mythical societies, “literature imitates the total dream of man, and so imitates the thought of a human mind which is at the circumference and not at the center of its reality.” Another related claim is made by Robert Bringhurst: “Myth is a theorem about the nature of reality, expressed not in algebraic symbols or inanimate abstractions but in animate, narrative form.”

Myth is thought at the circumference of reality. It results from the imagination in its maximal dilation, and in particular the imagination in its guise as a generator of animate presences moving over the surfaces of the world. By so moving these animate beings trace out the world’s parameters, its qualities and causalities. As I’ve already suggested, myth is so big as to also be its own commentary, its own hermeneutics. In the preceding pages I might have given the impression that myth can be about anything. This is not entirely true: rather, myth must in some way be about *everything*. It must be able to move over the canvas of the universe,

to invoke that it is a part of that canvas – even if a given story only treats fragments of the world-picture at any given time.

This quality begs a long-standing and especially difficult question: What are the discrete units of a myth? The inquiry goes back at least to Vladimir Propp and the Russian formalists, if not farther. Is it abstracted plot-devices, such as the giving of a ring, or the taking of a bride, or the encountering of a challenger, or the surmounting of three obstacles in ascending order of difficulty? Is it association with a certain religious practice, ritual, or cult, as Gregory Nagy has claimed for Greek epic? Is it connection to certain landmarks in the physical world, as Keith Basso understands to be the case among the Western Apache? Does it have to do with the class or caste of the teller? Or is it perhaps quite simply about character? Are the fundamental units Orpheus, Achilles, Hamlet, Don Quixote? And if so, must certain characteristics attach to them? Must Achilles always be brave? Must Orpheus always be a poet and singer? Can Hamlet appear in a new story and act un-Hamlet-like? Must there be some core notion of what it means to be Hamlet that goes along with the name – even in a situation in which the expectation is upset? (We might imagine Hamlet appearing on *Saturday Night Live* in a way that is precisely out of character – say, as a Type A banker snorting cocaine – but the humor would lie in the audience’s knowing what Hamlet is *supposed* to be.)

In the twentieth century the most ambitious attempt to negotiate these questions came from structuralism. Claude Lévi-Strauss was able to use the linguistic models of Ferdinand de Saussure in order to focus the analysis of myth on relations. Myth was a portrait of the cosmos insofar as it established ordering oppositions, conjunctions, architectures. This allowed for a powerful translation of mythical paradigms into the abstracted vocabulary of modern European intellectual inquiry. Though it has fallen rather out of fashion, we should not be dismissive of structuralism’s achievements in the study of myth. Structuralism insisted that myth was not naive or fantastical. It showed that on the contrary myth was investigative, cosmological, theoretical, highly disciplined.

But if myths constantly establish oppositions, they also love to knock them down. The extraordinary story corpus of the Pacific

Northwest has been the key archive for the anthropological theorization of myth. It was there that Franz Boas, John R. Swanton, and Edward Sapir did some of their most important work, and it was on those myths that Lévi-Strauss built many of his theories a generation later. It may even be said that these cultures did much to teach Western anthropology about myth (and a great deal else). It is certainly true that in those stories oppositions are everywhere: between sea and land, sea and sky, raven and eagle, wolf and whale. But if the stories may be said to impose a cosmology of schematized oppositions, they do so with an eye toward interrogating, mixing, and modifying them. For example, liminal animals that live at the border between land and water – the land otter, the frog, the sea lion – play especially important roles. Likewise many a story involves a hero traveling inland, away from the sea, to a freshwater lake or stream, only to discover a secret underwater passage between the lake and the sea along which monsters and whales regularly travel.

A classic trope in the myths of the Northwest is a moment of life-determining and numinous disorientation. When the hero has his first encounter with a spirit-being, it is often first said to be just *something*. *Something called to him*. *Something appeared out of the water and dove back in*. The flash of aliveness, the sense of a something about to turn into a someone: this is the ground zero of the myth. From there a system begins to build. We discover the being's name – perhaps a grebe, or petrel, or killer whale chief – and soon, by following the being to its home, we discover parts of the architecture of the world: houses under the sea reached by double-headed strands of kelp, or slippery poles up to the sky, or the Mother of Salmon sitting at the head of a creek, calling her children from the sea to spawn. The myths describe a spark of sudden contact, life touching life, beings thrown against beings. These flashes in the dark are the origin of systems, and also their destruction. They demand revisions, new explanations, edifices of epistemology to give intellectual shape to the primordial feeling of being alive, a feeling which is always expressed as an attention to and search for the epiphany of other beings, who may be prey, predator, friend, foe, spirit, monster – in short, who determine all the possible parameters of existence.

Of course, certain concrete themes tend to predominate in the

classical myth traditions of the world. Narratives of sacrificial victims or scapegoats are frequent. Violations and articulations of taboo, particularly incest, occur. Twins play essential and ambivalent, even dangerous, roles. Many stories tell how the world came to be the way it is, often either by the deliberate intervention of a hieratic divinity or by the chaotic bungling and selfishness of a trickster. No myth tradition is without ubiquitous violence, although many also abound in earth-shaking laughter. More precise taxonomies are possible, though they are beyond the scope of this essay: there are similarities among hunter-gatherer mythologies from around the world, and similarities among many agrarian ones; there are genetic and geographic links, as, say, among the Indo-European traditions or in the Middle East. But what I wish to emphasize here is that in every place where myths are still being told, they *change*, constantly, in response to any and all phenomena. Not only their content changes, but also their emotional atmosphere, their generic structure. The stories Swanton and Boas heard on the Northwest Coast at the beginning of the twentieth century were at once ten millennia in the making and as new to the place as they were, for the stories were no doubt told that night in a way that they had never been told before. Perhaps they were radically different, perhaps only a single word or emphasis was changed. Perhaps they were told specifically with Swanton or Boas as the auditor in mind, or perhaps they were told to address someone else who happened to be in the room. The stories must have contained within them responses, oblique or overt, to the then and there: to the great epidemics of the nineteenth century, to contact with whites, to the crisis and flowering of potlatch, to its banning by the Canadian government – not to mention episodes large and small in the life of a community that have no doubt eluded the Western history books.

In an oral culture stories expand to fit the whole world, and in an oral culture those stories can be modified with ease – and along with them, the picture of the world that they trace. Each telling of a story can be a revision; an audience's responses can serve to police the boundaries of those revisions or to encourage them. Structuralism came up against its limits in the ability to describe this plasticity. As its name attests, structuralism is a late and self-conscious manifestation of the modern Western notion that all

around us lies an enormous framework of ideas and images that, if not static, is nevertheless governed by its own internal logic and impervious to any one person's intervention. We speak of ideology and superstructure, of paradigm shifts and revolutions. The model for the penumbra of ideas and beliefs is Hobbes's Leviathan, the figure that is all around us and made up of us, but which none of us on our own can ever change or touch. Since 1789, many Western thinkers have resigned themselves to the conclusion that the structure of ideas, like the structure of power, has become so rigid and impregnable that the only way to revise it is to burn it to the ground. (The other option, another form of resignation, is to become the Frankfurt School, all hermeneutic critique, no intervention.) An earlier generation of anthropologists believed that oral peoples were even more unchanging in their beliefs and practices than we were: this fixity was the definition of the primitive. The mistake, as many have by now pointed out, was profound. In fact, those cultures were able to change their world picture all the time, and with relative ease. The culture of modernity is the one that finds change so traumatic, and so makes a great and self-conscious production out of it.

One important procedure for achieving change to the world-picture in oral cultures was to integrate dreams and visions into a mythology. Often individuals were sent out into the wilderness to have a dream. Then they returned to the community, shared what they had experienced, and built a story from it. No doubt the experience itself was shaped by the stories and procedures that had been told to the person in advance of leaving. But dreams rarely reenact with stereotyped precision past experiences and ideas: rather they combine them in novel and unexpected ways, juxtaposing, heightening, synthesizing. So it is that a society's myths might affect an individual's dreams, and then an individual's dreams might, in turn, affect the myths and ceremonies that would one day shape further dreams. In this way the inside of the mind and the outside of culture might continuously shape, revise, and counter one another. Northrop Frye's intuition of this was once again profound. Myth "unites the ritual and the dream," he writes. Proust too, understood this procedure: "Sometimes, as Eve was created from a rib of Adam, a woman would be born during my sleep from some strain in the position of my thighs." The

generation of an animate being out of the nothing of sleep is a sensuous, sweet, intensified, erotic process. In order to make it sharable, Proust affixes a mythological allusion: Eve coming from the rib of Adam, beings brought to life by story so as to explore the nature of the cosmos. In dream, the mind is a whole reality. It expresses itself as a world, a place with a floor or ground and a ceiling or sky above, a landscape in three dimensions over which dream-characters move. In myth, the products of this world-mind are translated outward to the borders of the shared world, to what we are accustomed to call (fervently, with a measure of desperation not shared by myth cultures) reality.

In the early twentieth century, a Tsimshian shaman named Isaac Tens told the Tsimshian ethnographer William Beynon the story of how he had come to his vocation:

One day I went up into the hills to gather wood, and it was very cold. There were many other people gathering wood as it was now winter, and it was in the hills above the village where they were. When I got to the hills, I heard strange noises at the top of the tree which I was cutting. I looked up and behold there was a large white owl sitting on the top of the big tree. Then the owl flew down and grasped my head, and flew up with me into the sky. Well it was then that I lost my senses, and it was then I started to dream and this is what I dreamed. I dreamed that I was now flying way up into the Sky, and here I saw a great many strange things. And I knew that it was the owl which was flying me up by grasping my head. Then I suddenly awoke (came to my senses), and behold! I was lying on the snow, and with my face downward. And my face had sunk into the snow. I had been away now all day. When I returned to the house of my father, I told him what had happened to me. So he said to me, "The reason this has happened to you, is that you will be a great Shaman *Halait*."

The story, while not a myth, is overtly mythical in its content. A living being – the owl – takes Isaac Tens up to the limits of the cosmos. There is a great tree like an axis mundi, and then Isaac is carried up into the sky, where many strange things are to be seen. This is an account spanning the full breadth of reality and ex-

pressed in animate, narrative form. But it is not just a myth, it is also an *actual experience* that happened to the man relating it. A dream dreamt in the wilderness, a vision, a calling that is then interpreted by the father once the young man returns to the village and can begin the training to become a shaman and acquire *Halait*, an extraordinary power. The world picture of myths can inhere in lived life, and lived life can aspire to myth. They are – to use a mythical image which, like so many, reflects the formal structure of myth itself – an ouroboros. That myths are often said to take place in the deep past is a contradiction only if you have an absolutely rigid notion of linear time built into your model of the cosmos. The myth-time can be the heroic time, the time of creation, and yet it can also be shot through with everyday time.

And what about myth in modernity? It would be only a slight simplification to define modernity as precisely what happens when a culture publicly renounces myth. The giving up of myth was an essential part of the self-definition of the modern West. But if, as I've suggested, myth is a mode of thought more than a particular corpus, a mode characterized by story, aliveness, and a continuous circulation of narrative possibility, it may not be possible to ever get rid of it entirely.

We have already seen the claim advanced by Malcolm Bull and Robert Bringhurst that something of myth's praxis diffused away from language and into painting during the Renaissance. Lévi-Strauss, for his part, thought that the myhtelling impulse in Western culture had withdrawn into music. By this he meant, above all, that it was in music where formal principles continued to govern the making of art. He admired the twelve-tone system of European diatonic music, and often used it as a metaphor for the way mythemes could be combined into story modes. The claim that Western music contains a mythical stratum may also be true in at least two other senses. The first is that music remained an improvisatory art form in Europe well into the nineteenth century (and became so again with the advent of jazz); its complex formal structure expressed itself through continuous reinvention. And the second is that music retained cosmic ambitions even when the verbal arts became concerned with more exclusively

human spheres like the family, the home, the city, or the individual psyche. Music remained the central art form for the renewal and re-expression of prayer (the *language* of prayer had become largely standardized in the liturgies). Music continued to be associated with the spiritual, the universal, the cosmic – often even more so than poetry. Its cosmic and mythmaking potential was grandiloquently expressed in the rhetoric of Romanticism, which saw music as the complete fusion of form and content: “All art aspires to the condition of music,” wrote Walter Pater. “I am the vessel through which *Le Sacre* passed,” said Igor Stravinsky.

But there is another place in which something like myth might be present within the confines of modernity. And that is in parody. Myth is the narrative impulse at its most dilated and most protean; parody is the genre that swallows everything and makes it over (and over and over) in its own freak-show image. Myth treats the most sacred matters, but in doing so it can be vulgar, obscene, filled with laughter. The Greek myths have often come down to us bowdlerized, and even the sexy lewdness of Ovid is nothing compared to what exists in many oral cultures. Coyote or Raven myths from North America abound with spectacular scenes of shitting, ball-sack tea-bagging, ass-fucking, piss-play, overeating followed by projectile vomiting, apocalyptic flatulence, and every other kind of gross and bodily excrescence. Myth traditions around the world move as naturally through this kind of material as through elevated scenes of lamentation and sacrifice.

Perhaps when, in Europe, stricter limitations narrowed the scope of the other genres, parody remained a lone rebel on the mythical frontiers of the cosmos. Mikhail Bakhtin thought something like this had come to pass in Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. The parodic madness of this novel, argued Bakhtin, was the last reinfusion into European high culture of its own ancient mythical substratum. “Of all aspects of the ancient complex,” he writes, “only laughter never underwent sublimation of any sort – neither religious, mystical, nor philosophical. It never took on an official character, and even in literature the comic genres were the most free, the least regimented.” In Rabelais, laughter was the last mythic force, the last agent which could travel to the far frontiers of the world, represent any system and also strip it away, dismantle it, build a new one on top. Bakhtin’s

image of this mythical substratum may be somewhat essentialist and idealizing, but it's nevertheless worth citing at length:

The extraordinary force of laughter in Rabelais, its radicalism, is explained predominantly by its deep-rooted folkloric base, by its link with the elements of the ancient complex – with death, the birth of new life, fertility and growth. This is real world-embracing laughter, one that can play with all the things of this world – from the most insignificant to the greatest, from distant things to those close at hand. This connection on the one hand with the fundamental realities of life, and on the other with the most radical destruction of all false verbal and ideological shells that had distorted and kept separate these realities, is what so sharply distinguishes Rabelaisian laughter from the laughter of other practitioners of the grotesque, humor, satire, and irony.

The closest thing to a purveyor of such mythical laughter now might be *The Simpsons*. This show envelops and reflects in narrative form the whole reach of the culture, and mixes it with nearly every possible bodily excess (it is more prudish than Rabelais, to be sure, but Homer can go toe-to-toe with the Gallic Giants when it comes to gluttony or slapstick). *The Simpsons* provides a comprehensive map of the American universe by tracing countless paths across it. If an idea or a cliché or a celebrity appears on *The Simpsons*, the effect is almost tautology: it means it has reached the highest echelon of the American cultural imaginary, which is to say, being on *The Simpsons* is what says you've really made it.

As seems appropriate, *The Simpsons* universe is mostly human, for our society is largely uninterested in the workings of the wider cosmos. But insofar as we ask questions beyond the human realm, *The Simpsons* asks those questions, too, if only in parodic form. When Bart and Homer flirt with converting to Catholicism, Marge has a vision of how they'll be separated in the afterlife. She daydreams of going to Protestant heaven, where WASPs play badminton (“Poppy, have you seen Dutch?” says a guy in a cardigan). Over on another cloud, Bart and Homer are in Catholic heaven, which is an orgy of fighting Irish and drunk Italians (Jesus is there too, and, at a signal, all the Catholics break into Riverdance).

The Simpsons can teach us a great deal about the deep function

of storytelling. The show is full of allusions to every level of culture – Thomas Pynchon or David Foster Wallace, a Super Bowl commercial or local politics, Greek mythology or Shakespeare or sci-fi, new products or corporate CEOs. (There is an episode of *South Park* in which Butters tries to come up with schemes that haven't already appeared on *The Simpsons*. He can't.) Stanley Kubrick's *2001* is a particularly favored touchstone, and mob violence by the citizens of Springfield is a recurring concern. But the true brilliance of the show lies in the way it's not only allusive, but instructive. It teaches a form of cultural knowledge – maybe not a thorough one, maybe just a little distillation of this or that, but yet always surprisingly accurate. (Watch an episode that references something recondite, like opera or quantum computing: the treatment may be superficial, but whatever details the writers do include are usually exactly right.)

The characters of the show, like many figures in myth, are immortal. They are always the same age and always living on Evergreen Terrace. Adonis-like, they die many deaths across the seasons – or at least they get into situations that seem unresolvable and even catastrophic. But the next week they're back on the couch, watching the opening credits, ready to start again. They are the eternal return. They suggest that the idea of immortality may have arisen in part for formal reasons having to do with the infinitude of storytelling. If you are telling new stories about Coyote or Raven every night, Coyote and Raven had better live forever – or at least be always reborn – for otherwise when would they be able to have so many adventures?

It is sometimes suggested that modern myths arise out of the fantasy and science-fiction genres, that our mythologies are *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Trek*, the Marvel superhero universe. But these are all inheritors of the Renaissance attitude toward the pagan gods. In the end they constitute separate worlds, fake worlds – and they are of course proprietary worlds, owned and exploited by corporations for financial gain. Insofar as they have a relationship to this world we share in common, it is essentially allegorical: Middle Earth may be a metaphor for Europe during World War II, but its reality is not continuous with our own. Fantasy superfans must actively remake their lives in the image of these artworks – wearing costumes, using the lingo – in order to

bring them into alignment with their material existence. The rather astonishing thing about a show like *The Simpsons* is that it succeeds in representing American culture while only rarely resorting to allegory. For the most part, people and things appear on the show as themselves, often literally: even the reclusive Thomas Pynchon went into the studio to record the soundtrack to his guest appearance, though he was drawn by the animators with a bag over his head. The figures and narratives of the culture are mixed up and mashed together, and it is that mixing and mashing that produces meaning, not the presentation of metaphors to be decoded. Such a process is the exception rather than the rule in our art forms; it is more or less limited to parody. But the procedure seems to me close to what must exist among genuine mythtellers, though their emotional range is much wider.

That *The Simpsons* is somehow almost a mythology – or at least could easily form the basis of one – is the intuition that underlies Anne Washburn's extraordinary *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*. Act 1 of this 2012 play takes place in the near future, just on the other side of an apocalypse, which has been either triggered or made worse by the meltdown of all the nation's nuclear reactors. A few survivors are sitting around a campfire trying to remember lines from a *Simpsons* episode based on the movie *Cape Feare*, in which Sideshow Bob stalks Bart to a houseboat and tries (as he always does) to kill him, but is foiled when Bart asks him, as a last request, to sing the whole of *HMS Pinafore*. The poncey and arrogant Bob obliges – somehow, by the end, he's in full costume and framed by a Union Jack – while the boat drifts downriver until it reaches Springfield, at which point Chief Wiggum and his police sidekicks come to Bart's rescue.

Washburn wrote the play by asking a company of actors to do just what happens: remember together the lines of the *Cape Feare* episode. Much of the play is a direct transcript of their efforts. We see how a story recomposes itself, how certain lines are remembered, discarded, rearranged. The episode itself is a palimpsest, full of references to various thrillers and, of course, to Gilbert and Sullivan. (If you know the episode, you may also remember the ludic gag in which Sideshow Bob steps on the teeth of a rake, sending its shaft flying up into his face. Then it happens again; then again; then the camera pans out to show he's standing in a

whole field of rakes, and stepping on each one in turn.) Out of this palimpsest the survivors make a labile and communal artwork. Everyone gets involved, even the quiet ones. It becomes their social glue, a kind of spiritual work. An outsider is brought into the fold because he's a Gilbert and Sullivan freak – he sang in an amateur society before the meltdown – and while the stage directions tell us the others would have found this weird in their previous lives, now they are grateful to him for filling in the words to “Three Little Maids” from *The Mikado*.

Act 2 of the play flashes forward seven years, and now these survivors are a little theater troupe, going around the ruins of the United States performing *Simpsons* episodes. They wear improvised costumes and wigs – Marge's tall bush of blue hair, Lisa's spiky crown. They are especially renowned for performing the commercials, and the act opens with them trying to rehearse a particularly tricky costume change from the last ad back into the show. We learn there are many such companies, specializing in *The Simpsons* or other serials, and there is a kind of black market for remembered lines, as fidelity to the text and completeness are valued.

Act 3 takes place another seventy-five years later. We are again in a theater, and now a full-on performance of *The Simpsons* is underway. The power is still out; the lights are powered by one of the actors backstage on a jerry-rigged bicycle. Now the characters of the show – not only the Simpsons, but all the residents of Springfield – have broken entirely free of the textual (and televisual) past. They are performers in an extravagant quasi-medieval Mystery play which has nothing to do with the show that once existed and everything to do with the world they find themselves in:

The call came on the radio
and then the siren blared
and one by one all over Springfield
lights in windows flared

Sideshow Bob has become a clown-demon in Mr. Burns's suit with a hint of Heath Ledger's Joker to his face paint. Itchy and Scratchy are devils, and Bart on his unmoored houseboat delivers the lamentations of a post-electric age:

The sky's a churning muddy green
 The river now is black
 The world is filled with lightning
 Oh we're never going back
 I know.

Washburn is investigating a sober set of questions. How long does it take for a textual tradition to disappear and an oral one to reassert itself? What happens when the figures in the stories are free to respond to the facts of life itself, to draw directly from its well? How does a community reclaim ownership over its own stories? As I have suggested, in our present culture stories can only draw this freely and this cosmically if they are comic. Only laughter, as Bakhtin so keenly sensed, has this kind of permission, and this only because laughter neutralizes that which evokes it. Laughter says that any destruction and deconstruction it accompanies will not matter; laughter means it's Carnival, Twelfth Night, the festal time; everything will be back to normal the next day. The system will not permit any more permanent critique, and even after the system ostensibly collapses, it lingers in the mind. For how long? asks Anne Washburn. How long until a story feels itself so liberated as to ask anything and say anything, to give itself up to any and all authors for modification, to maintain that it is continuous with the full reach of the world rather than separated from it by the many counterfactual qualifications that circumscribe even the most politically agitated literature of modernity? Anne Washburn answers: once the power goes off, less than a century.

The story of why modernity self-consciously renounced myth is beyond the scope of this essay. But despite this renunciation, contact with mythical cultures has continued to shape our artistic and political consciousness. The artistic story is well known, but the political one deserves more attention than it's gotten. The founding thought-experiment of modern political philosophy – the state of nature – would not have been possible without reports coming back to England and France of the Native American peoples, no doubt of their lifeworld, but also of their own stories about origins. The state of nature as it is explored, narrated, revised and

rewritten in the works of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau might be said to be, in the deep and genuine sense of the word, a myth. It was perhaps one of the last *deliberately* employed myths of Western culture: a myth used to think at the circumference of reality, to meditate in story about the nature of the cosmos. Its many iterations – projected into the deep past by paleontology, and into the future by post-apocalyptic fiction – continue to haunt our culture. The state of nature asks in mythical form the question “Where did we come from?” Which is to say, it asks the question in the form of a story that pulls together everything and yet does not foreclose the possibility of being retold in a different form the next night. Insofar as myth might be considered history it is, to borrow from Foucault, a history of the present, not a history of the past.

The influence of Haudenosaunee (that is, Iroquois) political practice on the U.S. Constitution is by now well studied. The Six Nations Confederacy offered a key model of federal government, in which states came together to provide for their common defense and make decisions in deliberative and consensual ways while retaining a measure of independence and diversity. I do not doubt that mythical thinking made such a political system possible. It allowed for many accounts of the world and many forms of action to be explored to their fullest and to be fully embraced, and yet not to cancel one another out. Myth allows for complete conviction to coexist with tolerance of other such globalizing convictions. World-pictures can cover the whole world without excluding one another.

The importance of this to the development of American notions of ideological and spiritual coexistence is most apparent in Benjamin Franklin’s “Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America,” written in 1783, in the crucible hour of the new nation. Though the title grates on contemporary ears, the essay is a celebration of Native culture and an attack on white hypocrisy. It is above all a disquisition on the social consequences of myhtelling, though Franklin is not quite able to call it that. Again and again he marvels at the order and dignity of Native councils: the way in which each individual is invited to speak at great length, and even accorded a few minutes’ silence at the end of his speech, in case he should remember something more. Women at the back of the council house are enjoined to remember everything, and can recollect in great detail matters going back a hundred years.

Franklin then gives a concrete example of the difference between Natives and whites. He recounts the story of a Swedish minister who goes to preach among the Susquehannock, telling them about the apple and the fall of Adam and Eve, and the redemption of man in Christ. They listen with rapt attention, vigorously nodding assent, and the minister is certain they have been converted. “When he had finished,” writes Franklin, “an Indian Orator stood up to thank him. What you have told us, says he, is all very good. It is indeed a bad Thing to eat Apples. It is better to make them all into Cyder. We are much oblig’d by your Kindness in coming so far to tell us these Things which you have heard from your Mothers; in return I will tell you some of those we have heard from ours.” Franklin then proceeds to transcribe a beautiful myth about the ancient transition from hunting to agriculture. The Susquehannock ancestors give a roasted deer tongue to a spirit woman who has descended from the sky, and in exchange she gives them maize, beans, and tobacco so that they will no longer be dependent only on the animals they kill. The missionary is outraged by this story: “What I delivered to you were sacred Truths, but what you tell me is mere Fable, Fiction and Falsehood.” (Notice how the rhetoric invented in Florence to allow for pornographic depictions of the Greek gods is now weaponized in the mouth of a Protestant firebrand.) Franklin gives the Susquehannock the last word: “The Indian, offended, reply’d, My Brother, it seems your Friends have not done you Justice in your Education, they have not well instructed you in the Rules of common Civility. You saw that we who understand and practise those Rules, believ’d all your Stories: Why do you refuse to believe ours?”

Franklin’s story is perhaps a little too pat, and yet it touches the heart of myth-thinking. *We believe your stories; it is no contradiction for you to believe ours.* Myth-thinking offers many overlapping and comprehensive accounts of why and how we got to where we are, and believes and accepts all (or at least many) of them. It is far from our notion of objectivity, but far too from, say, religious fundamentalism.

Put another way, myth is a mode of thought that allows for meaning to be acknowledged as *created* without being deemed illegitimate as a consequence – or that remembering, inventing, and experiencing can be seen as harmoniously aligned procedures.

Despite (or maybe because of) the influence of postmodernism, the idea that meaning is constructed is equated in our culture with nihilism. To say something does not exist independently of the people who think it is to say, essentially, that it is not real. In contrast, myth allows for stories to be told; for people to know that they are telling stories; for people to know that many other stories are possible; and yet not to fall into doubt or crisis. The major distortions of myth I described at the beginning of this essay each accept one side of this equation, and refuse the other. The debunker's distortion of myth says, *Myth is a made-up story, and therefore false*. The priestly distortion says, *Myth is an eternal and unchanging story, and therefore true*. Myth itself says something like, *I am a made-up story, I am rebuilt all the time, and therefore I am true and eternal*.

It stands to reason that Ovid, the mythographer and ceremonialist, and not Virgil, the epic poet, was the one to be banished from Rome. For ceremony and myth have an uneasy coexistence with the state, if for no other reason than a state requires the illusion of a certain ideological fixity, a single lineage, a solid superstructure. Epic is what myth and ceremony become when they are pulled into the service of empire. The Homeric poems, balanced on the cusp between myth and epic, are still able to register real ambivalence about the birth of an imperial way of thinking about the world. In Virgil the ambivalence is more disputed, and has required considerable excavation by ingenious interpreters: certainly his reception for two thousand years indicates he was easily swallowed as a defender of empire.

The epic misprision of myth became catastrophically pernicious in the twentieth century. This misprision holds that myth is a unifying story providing a single source at the headwaters of history. It is the fascist misprision of myth, the borrowing of its cosmic expansiveness without its commensurate cosmic fluidity. Myth without its anarchic and protean qualities is simply absolutist language – all-embracing, providing its own commentary, suppressing dissent, presenting a full picture of the universe which refuses to change with the universe itself or in response to other possible pictures. We must fight against this illegitimate picture of myth with all our intellectual tools.

Let me once again be clear that myth is nevertheless no instru-

ment of pure libertarian freedom. It has powers that can be used to restrain the individual; always it serves as a powerful instrument of social cohesion and even coercion. (It can be for instance quite moralizing: in 1904, Kaadashaan of the Kaasx'agweidí Tlingit told the ethnographer John Swanton, about a certain Raven story, that "in our days when a person is making a living dishonestly by lying and stealing he is not told so directly, but this story is brought up to him and everyone knows what it means.") But the power myth does have tends to favor the maintenance of small communities, in which decisions can genuinely be made collectively and individuals can bring a dream or vision to the table and help in that way to set the larger agenda. When I say it is *anarchic* I mean the word in a sense close to that used by Pyotr Kropotkin and other idealists of the nineteenth century, or more recently in the work of the political scientist James C. Scott: that is, self-governing on a small and communitarian scale. Once myth enters larger-scale communities where communal decision-making is no longer possible, it ossifies into singular, didactic narratives, handed down from on high. The more fluid stories are pushed away from the real world, into the realm of fiction. Whether highbrow (literature) or lowbrow (parody and pop culture), they are kept away from reality by the barrier of their demarcated counter-factuality, and they become the province of a specialized class of professionals, a priesthood. This is incidentally as true of the makers of pop culture as it is of the makers of high culture.

Can Americans, in our huge and fractured country, learn something from myth? If Benjamin Franklin could, then surely we can once more. The Haudenosaunee teach us that a larger political body based on myth-thinking can exist so long as it is made up of smaller communities. This was a founding idea of the United States, and one in desperate need of renewal. We have largely come to dismiss local government and even local community as trivial. We tend to privilege only movements that can mobilize millions of people (usually via the internet) around the world. But perhaps there may one day be a chance to build small communities which create, among themselves, an account of the world that, while satisfying and rooting, is not absolutist, and always remains subject to change from within and to fair-handed comparison to other stories from without.

Traces of mythmaking are still everywhere around us, shining like distant stars in the intellectual firmament, waiting to paint a picture in the sky and point the way for us. The indigenous cultures of the American continent are one such lodestar. We should be reverent students of their achievements in the creation of knowledge and the practice of politics.

Even within the traditional canon of Western culture, many portals open onto the myth-world, waiting to be rediscovered. The Platonic dialogues, for example, showcase one of the last expressions of a genuine Greek mythos. Socrates tells myths constantly, and he does so not to advance a dogma but to modify, change, interrogate, rebuild, and study the world. Almost exactly as he predicts in the *Phaedrus* (by way of a myth said to come from Egypt), writing both preserves his way of thinking and deforms it. By inscribing Socrates onto the page, Plato gave fugitive speech two millennia of life. But in doing so, he set in motion a process by which labile and living myths came to be treated as fixed ideas, a doctrine of Platonism – and this despite the fact that Plato himself takes pains to show that there is nothing Socrates more disavows than unmoving dogma.

Another example might be found in the Gospels. I am thinking particularly of the passage in Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew that has been the source of two thousand years of frustration. The disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables, and he replies with a quotation from Isaiah: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. . . . But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” My admittedly eccentric interpretation of this passage is that it is a call to return to a religion based on communal mythmaking. As is everywhere made clear in the Gospels, Jesus has grown tired of the official and priestly forms of religious practice. He rejects the idea that a hieratic class should have a monopoly on meaning because its members are schooled in the interpretation of fixed texts. Instead he seems to invite the disciples to form a small community, no doubt inspired by the Essenes, which would find its way to God by telling concrete stories. The Gospels report only the stories that Jesus told, but it seems not a stretch to suggest

that in fact Jesus encouraged the telling and revising of parables by all of the disciples, such that all interpretation happened within the realm of the sensuous imagination, not in abstract analysis. The stories were meant to be *seen* and *heard*, and so translate into perceptual experience. They were meant to be told and retold until they might be made to resonate with life itself. By moving in their minds the farmer, the servant, the Samaritan, and the prodigal son from place to place, situation to situation, they might think about the moral and the divine vividly, fluidly, and in the flesh, rather than mediated by some easily misapplied abstraction. Myth is always thinking as incarnation, thought as being. In Christianity this had to be explicitly thematized precisely because it was from the outset so deeply obscured. But in many myth traditions it is taken for granted.