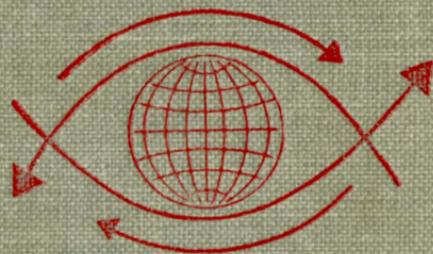


MYTH
AND REALITY



WORLD PERSPECTIVES

Pour Hannah Arendt,
en hommage et
avec l'admiration
de l'auteur
Pierce Eliade
Novembre 1983

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MYTH AND REALITY

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justice shook the Western world to its foundations after the Napoleonic wars—and so on.

Similarly, a "primitive" could say: I am what I am today because a series of events occurred before I existed. But he would at once have to add: events that took place *in mythical times* and therefore make up a *sacred history* because the actors in the drama are not men but Supernatural Beings. In addition, while a modern man, though regarding himself as the result of the course of Universal History, does not feel obliged to know the whole of it, the man of the archaic societies is not only obliged to remember mythical history but also to *re-enact* a large part of it periodically. It is here that we find the greatest difference between the man of the archaic societies and modern man: the irreversibility of events, which is the characteristic trait of History for the latter, is not a fact to the former.

Constantinople was conquered by the Turks in 1453 and the Bastille fell on July 14, 1789. Those events are irreversible. To be sure, July 14th having become the national holiday of the French Republic, the taking of the Bastille is commemorated annually, but the historical event itself is not re-enacted.¹⁵ For the man of the archaic societies, on the contrary, what happened *ab origine* can be repeated by the power of rites. For him, then, the essential thing is to know the myths. It is essential not only because the myths provide him with an explanation of the World and his own mode of being in the World, but above all because, by recollecting the myths, by re-enacting them, he is able to repeat what the Gods, the Heroes, or the Ancestors did *ab origine*. To know the myths

¹⁵ Cf. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp. 30 ff.

stitutes a "knowledge" which is esoteric, not only because it is secret and is handed on during the course of an initiation but also because the "knowledge" is accompanied by a magico-religious power. For knowing the origin of an object, an animal, a plant, and so on is equivalent to acquiring a magical power over them by which they can be controlled, multiplied, or reproduced at will. Erland Nordenskiöld has reported some particularly suggestive examples from the Cuna Indians. According to their beliefs, the lucky hunter is the one who knows the origin of the game. And if certain animals can be tamed, it is because the magicians know the secret of their creation. Similarly, you can hold red-hot iron or grasp a poisonous snake if you know the origin of fire and snakes. Nordenskiöld writes that "in one Cuna village, Tientiki, there is a fourteen-year-old boy who can step into fire unharmed simply because he knows the charm of the creation of fire. Perez often saw people grasp red-hot iron and others tame snakes."¹⁷

This is a quite widespread belief, not connected with any particular type of culture. In Timor, for example, when a rice field sprouts, someone who knows the mythical traditions concerning rice goes to the spot. "He spends the night there in the plantation hut, reciting the legends that explain how man came to possess rice [origin myth]. . . . Those who do this are not priests."¹⁸ Reciting its origin myth compels the rice to come up as fine and vigorous and thick as it was when *it appeared for the first time*. The officiant does not remind it of how it was created in order to "instruct" it, to teach it

¹⁷ E. Nordenskiöld, "Faiseurs de miracles et voyants chez les Indiens Cuna," *Revista del Instituto de Etnologia* (Tucumán), vol. II (1932), p. 464; Lévy-Bruhl, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

¹⁸ A. C. Kruyt, quoted by Lévy-Bruhl, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

how it should behave. He *magically compels it to go back to the beginning*, that is, to repeat its exemplary creation.

The *Kalevala* relates that the old Väinämöinen cut himself badly while building a boat. Then "he began to weave charms in the manner of all magic healers. He chanted the birth of the cause of his wound, but he could not remember the words that told of the beginning of iron, those very words which might heal the gap ripped open by the blue steel blade." Finally, after seeking the help of other magicians, Väinämöinen cried: "I now remember the origin of iron! and he began the tale as follows: Air is the first of mothers. Water is the eldest of brothers, fire the second and iron the youngest of the three. Ukko, the great Creator, separated earth from water and drew soil into marine lands, but iron was yet unborn. Then he rubbed his palms together upon his left knee. Thus were born three nature maidens to be the mothers of iron."¹⁹ It should be noted that, in this example, the myth of the origin of iron forms part of the cosmogonic myth and, in a sense, continues it. This is an extremely important and specific characteristic of origin myths, and we shall study it in the next chapter.

The idea that a remedy does not act unless its origin is known is extremely widespread. To quote Erland Nordenskiöld again: "Every magical chant must be preceded by an incantation telling the origin of the remedy used, otherwise it does not act. . . . For the remedy or the healing chant to have its effect, it is necessary to know the origin of the plant, the manner in which the first woman gave birth to it."²⁰

¹⁹ Aili Kolehmainen Johnson, *Kalevala. A Prose translation from the Finnish* (Hancock, Mich., 1950), pp. 53 ff.

²⁰ E. Nordenskiöld, "La conception de l'âme chez les Indiens Cuna de

knowledge, *displays* it. But this is not all. He who recites or performs the origin myth is thereby steeped in the sacred atmosphere in which these miraculous events took place. The mythical time of origins is a "strong" time because it was transfigured by the active, creative presence of the Supernatural Beings. By reciting the myths one reconstitutes that fabulous time and hence in some sort becomes "contemporary" with the events described, one is in the presence of the Gods or Heroes. As a summary formula we might say that by "living" the myths one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of a different quality, a "sacred" Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable. This function of myth, which we have emphasized in our *Myth of the Eternal Return* (especially pp. 35 ff.), will appear more clearly in the course of the following analyses.

Structure and function of myths

These few preliminary remarks are enough to indicate certain characteristic qualities of myth. In general it can be said that myth, as experienced by archaic societies, (1) constitutes the History of the acts of the Supernaturals; (2) that this History is considered to be absolutely *true* (because it is concerned with realities) and *sacred* (because it is the work of the Supernaturals); (3) that myth is always related to a "creation," it tells how something came into existence, or how a pattern of behavior, an institution, a manner of working were established; this is why myths constitute the paradigms for all significant human acts; (4) that by knowing the myth one knows the "origin" of things and hence can control and manipulate them at will; this is not an "external," "abstract"

knowledge but a knowledge that one "experiences" ritually, either by ceremonially recounting the myth or by performing the ritual for which it is the justification; (5) that in one way or another one "lives" the myth, in the sense that one is seized by the sacred, exalting power of the events recollected or re-enacted.

"Living" a myth, then, implies a genuinely "religious" experience, since it differs from the ordinary experience of everyday life. The "religiousness" of this experience is due to the fact that one re-enacts fabulous, exalting, significant events, one again witnesses the creative deeds of the Supernaturals; one ceases to exist in the everyday world and enters a transfigured, auroral world impregnated with the Supernaturals' presence. What is involved is not a commemoration of mythical events but a reiteration of them. The protagonists of the myth are made present, one becomes their contemporary. This also implies that one is no longer living in chronological time, but in the primordial Time, the Time when the event *first took place*. This is why we can use the term the "strong time" of myth; it is the prodigious, "sacred" time when something *new, strong, and significant* was manifested. To re-experience that time, to re-enact it as often as possible, to witness again the spectacle of the divine works, to meet with the Supernaturals and relearn their creative lesson is the desire that runs like a pattern through all the ritual reiterations of myths. In short, myths reveal that the World, man, and life have a supernatural origin and history, and that this history is significant, precious, and exemplary.

I cannot conclude this chapter better than by quoting the classic passages in which Bronislaw Malinowski undertook to show the nature and function of myth in primitive societies.

includes executing complex sand paintings, which symbolize the various stages of Creation and the mythical history of the gods, the ancestors, and mankind. These drawings (which strangely resemble the Indo-Tibetan *mandala*) successively re-enact the events which took place in mythical times. As he hears the cosmogonic myth and then the origin myths recited and contemplates the sand paintings, the patient is projected out of profane time into the fullness of primordial Time; he is carried "back" to the origin of the World and is thus present at the cosmogony.

The close connection between the cosmogonic myth, the myth of the origin of a sickness and its remedy, and the ritual of magical healing is admirably exemplified among the Nakh, a people belonging to the Tibetan family but who for many centuries have lived in southeastern China, especially in Yunnan province. According to their traditions, in the beginning the Universe was duly divided between the Nagas and mankind, but later they became enemies. In their anger the Nagas afflicted the world with sicknesses, sterility, and every kind of scourge. The Nagas can also steal men's souls, making them sick. If they are not ritually reconciled, the victim dies. But the priest-shaman (*dto-mba*), by the power of his magical charms, can force the Nagas to free the souls that they have stolen and imprisoned.¹¹ The shaman himself can only fight the Nagas because the First Shaman, Dto-mba, first attacked them in mythical times with the help of Garuda. Strictly speaking, the healing ritual consists in the solemn recital of this primordial event. As a text translated by Rock expressly says: "If the origin of Garuda is not related, then

¹¹ J. F. Rock, *The Na-khi Nâga Cult and related ceremonies* (Rome, 1952), vol. I, pp. 9-10.

one must not speak of him."¹² The shaman, then, recites the origin myth of Garuda. He tells how eggs were created by magic on Mount Kailasa and how from these eggs were born the Garudas, who later came down to the plain to defend men against the sicknesses caused by the Nagas. But before relating the birth of the Garudas, the ritual chant briefly rehearses the Creation of the World: "At the time when heaven came forth, the sun, moon, stars and planets, and the earth was spread out; when the mountains, valleys, trees and rocks came forth . . . at that time there came forth the Nagas and dragons, etc."¹³

Most of these medical ritual chants begin by evoking the cosmogony. Here is an example: "In the beginning, at the time when the heavens, sun, moon, stars, planets and the land had not yet appeared, when nothing had yet come forth, etc."¹⁴ Then comes the creation of the world, the birth of the demons and the appearance of sicknesses, and finally the epiphany of the Primordial Shaman, Dto-mba, who provided the necessary medicines. Another text¹⁵ begins by evoking the mythical age: "In the beginning, when everything was indistinguishable, etc." and then goes on to describe the birth of the Nagas and Garudas. Then comes the origin of the sickness (for, as we saw earlier, "if one does not relate of the origin of the medicine, to slander it is not proper"), the means by which it is propagated from generation to generation, and finally the struggle between the demons and the shaman: "The ghost gives illness to the teeth and mouth, by shooting off the arrow, the *dto-mba* pulls out the arrow, etc.; the demon

¹² *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 386 ff.

the birth of the Worm and of the sickness; (3) the primordial and paradigmatic curative act (destruction of the Worm by Ea). The therapeutic efficacy of the incantation lies in the fact that, recited ritually, it re-enacts the mythical time of "origins," not only the origin of the world but also that of toothache and its treatment.

Sometimes a solemn recitation of the cosmogonic myth is enough to cure certain sicknesses or imperfections. But, as we shall presently see, this application of the cosmogonic myth is only one among others. As the exemplary model for all "creation," the cosmogonic myth can help the patient to make a "new beginning" of his life. The *return to origins* gives the hope of a rebirth. Now, all the medical rituals we have been examining aim at a return to origins. We get the impression that for archaic societies life cannot be *repaired*, it can only be *re-created* by a return to sources. And the "source of sources" is the prodigious outpouring of energy, life, and fecundity that occurred at the Creation of the World.

All this is clearly apparent from the many ritual applications of the Polynesian cosmogonic myth. According to this myth, in the beginning there were only the Waters and Darkness. Io, the Supreme God, separated the Waters by the power of thought and of his words, and created the Sky and the Earth. He said: "Let the Waters be separated, let the Heavens be formed, let the Earth be!" These cosmogonic words of Io's, by virtue of which the World came into existence, are creative words, charged with sacred power. Hence men utter them whenever there is something to *do*, to *create*. They are repeated during the rite for making a sterile womb fecund, during the rite for curing body and mind, but also on the occasion of a death, of war, and of the recitation of

genealogies. A contemporary Polynesian, Hare Hongi, puts it this way: "The words by which Io fashioned the Universe—that is to say, by which it was implanted and caused to produce a world of light—the same words are used in the ritual for implanting a child in a barren womb. The words by which Io caused light to shine in the darkness are used in rituals for cheering a gloomy and despondent heart, the feeble aged, the decrepit; for shedding light into secret places and matters, for inspiration in song-composing and in many other affairs, affecting man to despair in times of adverse war. For all such the ritual includes the words (used by Io) to overcome and dispel darkness."²¹

This is a remarkable text. It presents direct and incontrovertible testimony concerning the function of the cosmogonic myth in a traditional society. As we have just seen, this myth serves as the model for every kind of "creation"—the procreation of a child as well as the re-establishment of a military situation in jeopardy or of a psychic equilibrium threatened by melancholy and despair. This fact that the cosmogonic myth can be applied on various planes of reference seems to us especially significant. The man of the traditional societies feels the basic unity of all kinds of "deeds," "works," or "forms," whether they are biological, psychological, or historical. An unsuccessful war can be homologized with a sickness, with a dark, discouraged heart, with a sterile woman, with a poet's lack of inspiration, as with any other critical existential situation in which man is driven to despair. And all these negative, desperate, apparently irremediable situations are reversed by recitation of the cosmogonic myth, especially by the words by which Io brought forth the Universe

²¹ E. S. C. Handy, *Polynesian Religion* (Honolulu, 1927), pp. 10-11.

and made light shine in the darkness. In other words, the cosmogony is the exemplary model for every creative situation: whatever man does is in some way a repetition of the pre-eminent "deed," the archetypal gesture of the Creator God, the Creation of the World.

As we have seen, the cosmogonic myth is also recited on the occasion of a death; for death, too, constitutes a new situation, which must be accepted and assumed without cavil if it is to be made creative. A death can be "botched" as a battle can be lost, as psychic equilibrium and joy in living can be destroyed. It is no less significant that among disastrous and negative situations Hare Hongi reckons not only impotence, sickness, and senility, but also lack of inspiration in poets, their inability to create or fitly recite poems and genealogies. It follows from this, first, that among the Polynesians poetic creation is homologized with every other important creation and, in addition—since Hare Hongi mentions reciting genealogies—that the poet's memory is itself a "work" and that the accomplishment of this "work" can be assured by solemn recitation of the cosmogonic myth.

We can understand why this myth stands so high in the estimation of the Polynesians. The cosmogony is the exemplary model for every kind of "doing": not only because the Cosmos is at once the ideal archetype of every creative situation and of every creation but also because the Cosmos is a divine work; hence it is sanctified even in its structure. By extension, whatever is perfect, "full," harmonious, fertile—in short, whatever is "cosmicized," whatever resembles a Cosmos—is sacred. To do something well, to work, construct, create, structure, give form, in-form, form—all this comes down to bringing something into existence, giving it "life," and, in the last

ritually projected into the time of "origin" when milk, water, and grains first appeared on earth.

The "return to origins"

The idea implicit in this belief is that *it is the first manifestation of a thing that is significant and valid*, not its successive epiphanies. Similarly, the child is taught not what its father and grandfather did but what was done for the first time by the Ancestors, in mythical Times. To be sure, the father and grandfather simply imitated the Ancestors; hence it might be thought that imitating the father would produce the same results. But to think this would be to disregard the essential role of the *Time of Origin*, which, as we have seen, is considered a "strong" time precisely because it was in some sort the "receptacle" for a *new creation*. The time that has passed between the *origin* and the present moment is neither "strong" nor "significant" (except, of course, for the periods during which the primordial Time has been re-enacted); and for this reason it is neglected or an attempt is made to abolish it.²³

In this example we have a ritual in which the cosmogonic myths are recited for the benefit of an individual, as in the case of healers. But the "return to the origin" that makes it possible to relive the time when things were first manifested is an experience of primary importance for the archaic societies. We shall discuss it more than once in the course of the following pages. But here we may cite an example of the solemn recitation of the cosmogonic and origin myths in the collective festivals of Sumba Island. When events of impor-

²³ Cf. *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, ch. II and *passim*.

tance to the community occur—an abundant harvest, the death of some eminent person, etc.—a ceremonial house (*marapu*) is built and on this occasion the narrators recount the history of the Creation and the Ancestors. "In all these cases the narrators respectfully refer to 'the beginnings,' i.e. the inception of the principles of the very culture which should be preserved as the most valuable treasure. A remarkable fact of this ceremony is that the recital actually takes the form of an interchange of question-and-answer by two persons constituting as it were each other's counterpart, since they are singled out from two groups with a mutual exogamous conubial relationship. So these two spokesmen in those critical moments represent the total group together with the dead, and consequently the recital of the tribal myth (which should at the same time also be conceived as cosmogonical), will benefit the group as a whole."²⁴

In other words, we here have collective rituals, performed at irregular intervals and including the construction of a cult house and the solemn recitation of origin myths of cosmogonic structure. The beneficiary is the whole community, including both the living and the dead. On the occasion of the re-presentation of the myths the entire community is renewed; it rediscovers its "sources," relives its "origins." The idea of a universal renewal brought about by the religious re-presentation of a cosmogonic myth is documented in many traditional societies. We have discussed it in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, and we shall return to it in the following chapter. For the mythico-ritual scenario of the periodic renewal of the World can show us one of the most significant functions of

²⁴ C. T. Bertling, *Notes on Myth and Ritual in Southeast Asia* (The Hague, 1958), pp. 3-4.

the throne, the Center of the World) and touching the Heavens. The aspersion is connected with the Waters that come down from the Heavens along the *axis mundi* (that is, the king) to fertilize the Earth.²

In the historical period the *rajasūya* was performed only twice—the first time to consecrate the king and the second to ensure him universal sovereignty. But in protohistorical times the *rajasūya* was probably an annual rite, performed to regenerate the Cosmos.

Such was the case in Egypt. The coronation of a new pharaoh, Frankfort writes, "can be regarded as the creation of a new epoch after a dangerous interruption of the harmony between society and nature—a situation, therefore, which partakes of the quality of the creation of the universe. This is well illustrated by a text containing a curse on the king's enemies who are compared with Apophis, the snake of darkness whom Re destroys at dawn. But there is a curious addition to the comparison: 'They will be like the serpent Apophis on New Year's morn.' The qualification 'on New Year's morn' can only be explained as an intensification: the snake is defeated at every sunrise, but the New Year celebrates creation and daily renewal as well as the opening of the new annual cycle."³

It is clear how the cosmogonic scenario of the New Year can be incorporated into the coronation ceremony of a king. The two ritual systems pursue the same end—cosmic renewal. "But the *renovatio* accomplished at the coronation of a king had important consequences in the later history of humanity.

² M. Eliade, "Dimensions religieuses du renouvellement cosmique," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* (Zurich, 1960), vol. XXVIII, pp. 269 ff.

³ H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1948), p. 150.

That
is
not
renovatio

the Australians, who live by gathering and small-game hunting, is not the same as that of the Neolithic agriculturalists; just as the World of the latter is neither that of the city dwellers of the ancient Near East nor the "World" in which the peoples of Western Europe and the United States live today. The differences are too great to require pointing out. We have mentioned them only to avoid a misunderstanding: in citing examples representing different types of culture, we have no intention of returning to a "confusionistic" comparatism in the manner of Frazer. The historical context of each example we give is implied. But we think it unnecessary, in the case of every tribe cited, to define its social and economic structure and state with what tribes it can or cannot be compared.

The "World," then, is always the world that one knows and in which one lives; it differs from one type of culture to another; hence there are a considerable number of "Worlds." But what is significant for our study is the fact that, despite the differences in their socioeconomic structure and the variety of their cultural contexts, the archaic peoples believe that the World must be annually renewed and that this renewal is brought about by following a model—the cosmogony, or an origin myth that plays the role of a cosmogonic myth.

Obviously, the "Year" is variously conceived by primitives, and the dates of the "New Year" differ in accordance with climate, geographical setting, type of culture, and so on. But there is always a cycle, that is, a period of time that has a beginning and an end. Now, the end of one cycle and the beginning of the next are marked by a series of rituals whose purpose is the renewal of the World. As we said, this *renovatio* is a re-creation after the model of the cosmogony.

The simplest examples are found among the Australians. They are origin myths that are re-enacted annually. The animals and plants created *in illo tempore* by the Supernatural Beings are ritually re-created. In Kimberley the rock paintings, which are believed to have been painted by the Ancestors, are repainted in order to reactivate their creative force, as it was first manifested in mythical times, that is, at the beginning of the World.⁵

For the Australians, this re-creation of food animals and food plants is equivalent to re-creating the World. And this is so not only because, with a sufficient food supply, they hope to live through another year, but above all because the World really came to birth when the animals and plants first made their appearance in the Dream Times. Animals and plants are among the creative works accomplished by the Supernatural Beings. Feeding oneself is not merely a physiological act but is equally a "religious" act; one eats the creations of the Supernatural Beings, and one eats them as they were eaten by the mythical ancestors for the first time, at the beginning of the World.⁶

Among the Australians the cosmogony is limited to the creation of the territory with which they are familiar. This is their "World," and it must be periodically renewed or it may perish. The idea that the Cosmos is threatened with ruin if it is not annually re-created provides the inspiration for the chief festival of the Californian Karok, Hupa, and Yurok tribes. In the respective languages the ceremony is called

⁵ Helmut Petri, *Sterbende Welt in Nordwest Australien* (Braunschweig, 1954), pp. 200 ff.; A. P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines* (London, 1954), pp. 220 ff.

⁶ On the religious value of food, cf. Eliade, "Dimensions religieuses du renouvellement cosmique," p. 273.

"repair" or "fixing" of the world, and, in English, "New Year." Its purpose is to re-establish or strengthen the Earth for the following year or two years. Among some Yurok tribes the strengthening of the World is accomplished by ritually rebuilding the steam cabin, a rite that is cosmogonic in structure and of which other examples will be given later. The essential part of the ceremonial consists in long pilgrimages undertaken by the priest to all the sacred sites, that is, to the places where the Immortals performed certain acts. These ritual peregrinations continue for ten or twelve days. During all this time the priest incarnates the Immortals. As he walks, he thinks: "The ixkareya animas (i.e., one of the Immortals) walked over this in mythical times." When he comes to one of the sacred sites he begins to sweep it, saying: "Ixxkareya yakam is sweeping this time, sweeping all the sickness out of this world." Afterward he climbs a mountain. There he finds a branch, which he makes into a walking stick, saying: "This world is cracked, but when I pick up and drag the stick, all the cracks will fill up and the earth will become solid again." Going down to the river, he finds a stone, which he sets solidly in place, saying: "The earth, which has been tipped, will be straight again. People will live to be stronger." He sits down on the stone. "When I sit on the stone," he explained to Gifford, "the earth will never get up and tip again." The stone has been there since the time of the Immortals, that is, since the beginning of the World.⁷

"Taken together, the rituals we have reviewed make up a cosmogonic scenario. In mythical Times, the Immortals

⁷ A. L. Kroeber and E. W. Gifford, *World Renewal, a Cult System of Native Northwest California*, Anthropological Records, vol. XIII, No. I (University of California, Berkeley, 1949), pp. 6 ff., 14-17, 19 ff., summarized in "Dimensions religieuses du renouvellement cosmique," pp. 259 ff.

created the World in which the California Indians were to live: they traced its outlines, established its Center and its foundations, ensured an abundant supply of salmon and acorns, and exorcised sicknesses. But this World is no longer the atemporal and unchangeable Cosmos in which the Immortals dwelt. It is a living world—inhabited and used by creatures of flesh and blood, subject to the law of becoming, of old age and death. Hence it requires a periodical repairing, a renewing, a strengthening. But the only way to renew the World is to repeat what the Immortals did *in illo tempore*, is to reiterate the creation. This is why the priest reproduces the exemplary itinerary of the Immortals and repeats their acts and words. In short, the priest ends by incarnating the Immortals. In other words, at the time of the New Year the Immortals are believed to be present on earth once again. This explains why the ritual of annually renewing the World is the most important religious ceremony among these California tribes. The World is not only made more stable and regenerated, it is also sanctified by the symbolic presence of the Immortals. The priest, who incarnates them, becomes—for a certain length of time—an 'immortal person,' and, as such, he must be neither looked at nor touched. He performs the rites far from other men, in absolute solitude, for when the Immortals performed them for the first time there were yet no men on earth."⁸

Differences and similarities

The mythico-ritual scenario of periodic renewal of the World is also found among other Californian tribes—for ex-

⁸ Eliade, "Dimensions religieuses . . ." pp. 261-262.

ample, the *aki* ceremony of the Hill Maidu, the *hesi* of the Plains Maidu, the *kuksu* of the Eastern Pomo.⁹ In all these examples the renewal of the World forms part of a cult complex that includes honoring the Supreme Being, ensuring a good harvest, and the initiation of youths. This Californian scenario may be compared with the Shawnee ritual "The Cabin of New Life" (which forms part of the Sun Dance) and the "Big House" ceremonies of the Lenape. In both cases we find a cosmogonic ritual, a renewal of the World and rebirth of Life. Among the Shawnee the priest renews Creation; among the Lenape the New Year's ceremony reiterates the first creation of the World, to the end of recovering the fullness of the beginnings.¹⁰

We may add that the building or periodic repairing of the ritual cabin also has a cosmogonic meaning. The sacred cabin represents the Universe. Its roof symbolizes the vault of heaven, the floor the Earth, the four walls the four directions of cosmic space. The Dakotas say: the "Year is a circle around the World," that is, around the initiation cabin.¹¹ We may also add that the interdependence between the Cosmos and cosmic Time ("circular" Time) was so strongly felt that in several languages the term for "World" is also used to mean "Year." For example, certain California tribes say "The world is past," or "The earth is passed," to mean that "a year has passed."¹²

If we now turn to the New Year rituals that obtain among

⁹ Werner Müller, *Weltbild und Kult der Kwakiutl-Indianer* (Wiesbaden, 1955), p. 120.

¹⁰ Werner Müller, *Die Religionen der Waldlandindianer Nordamerikas* (Berlin, 1956), pp. 306, 317.

¹¹ Werner Müller, *Die blaue Hütte. Zum Sinnbild der Perle bei nordamerikanischen Indianern* (Wiesbaden, 1954), p. 133.

¹² A. L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (Washington, 1925), pp. 177, 498.

need to renew the World periodically. The renewal consisted in a cult scenario the chief rite of which symbolized the reiteration of the cosmogony. The facts and their interpretation will be found in the copious specialized literature on the subject¹⁴ and in one chapter of *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (pp. 51 ff.). However, we will repeat that in Mesopotamia the Creation of the World was ritually reiterated during the New Year festival (*akitu*.) A series of rites re-enacted the fight between Marduk and Tiamat (the Dragon symbolizing the primordial Ocean), the victory of the God, and his cosmogonic labors. The "Poem of Creation" (*Enuma elish*) was recited in the Temple. As H. Frankfort puts it, "each New Year shared something essential with the first day when the world was created and the cycle of the seasons started."¹⁵ But examining the New Year rites more closely, we realize that the Mesopotamians felt that the *beginning* was organically connected with an *end* that preceded it, that this "end" was of the same nature as the "Chaos" preceding Creation, and that hence the end was indispensable for every new beginning.

As we mentioned above, among the Egyptians too the New Year symbolized the Creation. As to the Jewish New Year scenario, Mowinckel writes that "one of the chief ideas was the enthronement of Yahweh as king of the world, the symbolic representation of His victory over His enemies, both the forces of chaos and the historical enemies of Israel. The result of this victory was the renewal of creation, election, and the covenant, ideas and rites from the old fertility festivals

¹⁴ Cf. some bibliographical references in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 57, n. 7.

¹⁵ H. Frankfort, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

which lay behind the historical festival."¹⁶ Later, in the eschatology of the prophets, the restoration of Israel by Yahweh was taken to be a New Creation that implied a sort of return to Paradise.¹⁷

Obviously, the symbolic reiterations of the cosmogony at the New Year in Mesopotamia and in Israel cannot be put on the same plane. Among the Jews the archaic scenario of the periodic renewal of the World was progressively historicized, while still preserving something of its original meaning. Wensinck had shown that the New Year ritual scenario, which signified the passage from Chaos to Cosmos, was applied to such historical events as the exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea, the conquest of Canaan, the Babylonian captivity and the return from exile, etc.¹⁸ Von Rad, for his part, proved that a single historical event, such as "the constitution of Israel at Mount Sinai through Yahweh and his servant Moses, when it becomes effective in the order of the people, does not have to remain in the sphere of remembrance through oral tradition or written narrative, but can be submitted to ritual renewal in a cult in the same manner as the cosmological order of the neighboring empires."¹⁹ Eric Voegelin rightly stresses the fact that "the symbolic forms of the cosmological empires and of Israel are not mutually exclusive. . . . The ritual renewal of order, one of the symbolic elements developed within the cosmological civilizations, for instance,

¹⁶ S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, trans. by G. W. Anderson (New York, 1956), p. 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹⁸ A. J. Wensinck, "The Semitic New Year and the Origin of Eschatology," *Acta Orientalia*, vol. I (1923), pp. 159-199.

¹⁹ Von Rad, summarized in Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, I: Israel and Revelation* (Louisiana State University Press, 1956), p. 294.

portant role in the history of humanity principally because, by ensuring renewal of the Cosmos, it also offered the hope that the bliss of the "beginnings" could be recovered. The image of the "Year-Circle" became charged with an ambivalent cosmico-vital symbolism, at once "optimistic" and "pessimistic." For the flux of Time implies an ever greater distance from the "beginnings," and hence loss of the original perfection. Whatever endures wastes away, degenerates, and finally perishes. Obviously, we here have a "vitalistic" expression of Reality; but it must not be forgotten that, for the primitive, being reveals itself—and expresses itself—in terms of life. Fullness and force are at the beginning; this is what we might call the "pessimism" inherent in the conception. But we must immediately add: fullness, though very quickly lost, is periodically recoverable. The Year has an end, that is to say, it is automatically followed by a new beginning.

The idea that perfection was at the beginning appears to be quite old. In any case, it is extremely widespread. Then too, it is an idea capable of being indefinitely reinterpreted and incorporated into an endless variety of religious conceptions. We shall have occasion to discuss some of these valuations. We may say at once that the idea of the perfection of the beginnings played an important role in the systematic elaboration of ever more embracing cosmic cycles. The ordinary "Year" was vastly extended by producing a "great Year" or cosmic cycle of incalculable duration. In proportion as the cosmic cycle became longer, the idea of the perfection of the beginnings tended to imply a complementary idea: that, *for something genuinely new to begin, the vestiges and ruins of the old cycle must be completely destroyed*. In other words, to obtain an *absolute* beginning, the end of a World

must be total. Eschatology is only the prefiguration of a cosmogony to come. But every eschatology insists on this fact: the New Creation cannot take place before this world is abolished once and for all. There is no question of regenerating what has degenerated; nothing will serve but to destroy the old world so that it can be re-created *in toto*. The obsession with the bliss of the beginnings demands the destruction of all that has existed—and hence has degenerated—since the beginning of the World; there is no other way to restore the initial perfection.

To be sure, all these nostalgias and beliefs are already present in the mythico-ritual scenarios of the annual renewal of the World. But from the protoagricultural stage of culture on, there was a growing acceptance of the idea that there are also *real* (not merely ritual) destructions and re-creations of the World, that there is a "return to the origin" in the literal sense, that is, a relapse of the Cosmos to the amorphous, chaotic state, followed by a new cosmogony.

This conception is best illustrated by the myths of the End of the World. We shall study them in the next chapter—not only for their intrinsic interest, but also because they can cast light on the function of myths in general. Until now we have dealt only with cosmogonic and origin myths, with myths telling *what has already taken place*. It is now time to see how the idea of the "perfection of the beginnings" was also projected into a timeless future. The myths of the End of the World have certainly played an important role in the history of mankind. They have shown that the "origin" is "movable." For, after a certain moment, the "origin" is no longer found only in a mythical past but also in a fabulous future. This, of course, is the conclusion that the Stoics and Neo-Pythag-

oreans reached by systematically elaborating the idea of "eternal return." But the notion of the "origin" is primarily bound up with the idea of perfection and bliss. So it is in conceptions of eschatology understood as a cosmogony of the future that we find the sources of all beliefs that proclaim the Age of Gold to be not merely (or no longer) in the past but also (or only) in the future.

IV.

Eschatology and Cosmogony

The End of the World—in the past and the future

IN SUMMARY form, it could be said that, for primitives, the End of the World has already occurred, although it is to be repeated in a more or less distant future. Myths of cosmic cataclysms are extremely widespread. They tell how the World was destroyed and mankind annihilated except for a single couple or a few survivors. The myths of the Flood are the most numerous and are known nearly everywhere (although extremely infrequent in Africa).¹ In addition to Flood myths, others recount the destruction of mankind by cataclysms of cosmic proportions—earthquakes, conflagrations, falling mountains, epidemics, and so forth. Clearly, this End of the World was not final; rather, it was the end of one human race, followed by the appearance of another. But the total submergence of the Earth under the Waters or its destruction by fire, followed by the emergence of a virgin Earth, symbolize return to Chaos followed by cosmogony.

In many myths the Flood is connected with a ritual fault

¹ Cf. Sir James George Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* (London, 1919), vol. I, pp. 329–332; Clyde Kluckhohn, "Recurrent Themes in Myths and Mythmaking," *Daedalus* Spring 1959 p. 271. The essential bibliography on legends of the Flood is to be found in Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (new ed., Bloomington, Ind., 1955), vol. I, p. 184 (A 1010).

ask this particular question in their investigations. It is sometimes difficult to determine whether the myth concerns a past catastrophe or one to come. According to E. H. Man, the Andamanese believe that after the End of the World a new humanity, enjoying a paradisaical condition, will appear; there will be no more sickness or old age or death. After the catastrophe the dead will rise again. But according to A. Radcliffe Brown, Man seems to have combined a number of versions collected from different informants. Actually, Brown goes on, the myth does relate the End and the re-creation of the World; but it applies to the past, not to the future. But since, as Lehmann observes, the Andamanese language has no future tense,⁴ it is not easy to be sure whether an event is in the past or in the future.

The scarcest among primitive myths of the End are those which say nothing definite about a possible re-creation of the World. Thus the Kai of New Guinea believe that the Creator, Mälengfung, after creating the Cosmos and man, withdrew to the farthest reaches of the World, at the horizon, and there fell asleep. Whenever he turns over in his sleep the Earth shakes. But one day he will rise from his bed and destroy the sky, which will fall in ruins on the Earth and put an end to all life.⁵ In one of the Caroline Islands, Namolut, the belief has been recorded that the Creator will one day destroy mankind for its sins. But the Gods will continue to exist—which implies the possibility of a new creation.⁶ In another of the Carolines, Aurepik, it is the Creator's son who is responsible for the catastrophe. When he sees that the chief

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵ Richard Thurnwald, *Die Eingeborenen Australiens und der Südseeinseln* (Tübingen, 1927), pp. 26–27, after C. Keysser, *Aus dem Leben der Kaileute* (in Neuhauss, *Deutsch-Neu-Guinea* [1911], pp. 154 ff.).

⁶ F. R. Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

of an island no longer feels any concern for his subjects he will submerge the island by a cyclone.⁷ Here again it is not clear if the End is final; the idea of a punishment of "sins" usually implies the subsequent creation of a new humanity.

More difficult to interpret are the beliefs of the Negritos of the Malaya Peninsula. They know that one day Karei will put an end to the World because men no longer follow his precepts. So when there is a storm the Negritos try to forestall the catastrophe by expiatory offerings of blood.⁸ The catastrophe will be universal, making no distinction between sinners and nonsinners, and apparently will not usher in a New Creation. This is why the Negritos call Karei "evil," and the Ple-Sakai see him as the enemy who "stole Paradise" from them.⁹

A particularly striking example is that of the Guarani of the Matto Grosso. Knowing that the Earth would be destroyed by fire and water, they set out in search of the "Land without Sin," a kind of Earthly Paradise lying beyond the Ocean. These long journeys, prompted by the shamans and made under their guidance, began in the nineteenth century and continued down to 1912. Some tribes believed that the catastrophe would be followed by a renewal of the World and the return of the dead. Other tribes not only expected but actually hoped for the final End of the World.¹⁰ Nimuendaju wrote in 1912: "Not only the Guarani but all the Nature is old and weary of life. How often the medicine-men, when they went to meet, in dream, Nanderuvuvu, have heard the Earth im-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁸ Cf. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York, 1958), pp. 46 ff.

⁹ F. R. Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁰ Cf. E. Schader, "Der Paradiesmythos im Leben der Guarani-Indianer," *Staden-Jahrbuch* (São Paulo, 1955), vol. III, pp. 151 ff.; Wilhelm

ploring him: 'I have already devoured too many corpses, I am filled from it, and I am exhausted. Do make an end of it, my Father!' The water also beseeches the Creator to let it rest, disturbed no longer, and so the trees . . . and so all the rest of Nature."¹¹

It would be hard to find a more moving expression of cosmic weariness, of the desire for absolute rest and death. But what really lies behind it is the inevitable disenchantment that follows a long and fruitless messianic exaltation. For a century the Guarani looked for the Earthly Paradise, singing and dancing. They had re-evaluated the myth of the End of the World and incorporated it into a millennialist mythology.¹²

Most American myths of the End imply either a cyclic theory (as among the Aztecs), or the belief that the catastrophe will be followed by a new Creation, or, finally (in some parts of North America), the belief in a universal regeneration accomplished without a cataclysm. (In this process of regeneration, only sinners will perish.) According to Aztec tradition, there have already been three or four destructions of the World, and the fourth (or the fifth) is expected in the future. Each of these Worlds is ruled by a "Sun," whose fall or disappearance marks the End.¹³

Koppers, "Prophetismus und Messianismus als völkerkundliches und universalgeschichtliches Problem," *Saeculum*, vol. X (1959), pp. 42 ff.; Robert H. Lowie, "Primitive Messianism and an Ethnological Problem," *Diogenes*, No. 19 (Fall 1957), pp. 70 ff.

¹¹ Curt Nimuendaju, "Die Sagen von der Erschaffung und Vernichtung der Welt als Grundlagen der Religion der Apapocuva-Guarani," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, vol. XLVI (1914), p. 335.

¹² Cf. R. H. Lowie, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

¹³ Cf. H. B. Alexander, *Latin-American Mythology (Mythology of All Races* [Boston, 1920], vol. XI), pp. 91 ff.

We cannot here enumerate all the other important North and South American myths concerning the End of the World. Some of them tell of a couple who will repeople the new World.¹⁴ Thus the Choctaw believe that the World will be destroyed by fire, but men's spirits will return, their bones will be re clothed with flesh, and the risen will again inhabit their ancient lands.¹⁵ A similar myth is found among the Eskimos: men will be reborn from their bones (a belief peculiar to hunting cultures).¹⁶ The belief that the catastrophe is the inevitable consequence of the "old age" or decrepitude of the World appears to be comparatively common. According to the Cherokee, "when the world grows old and worn out, the people will die and the cords will break and let the earth sink down into the Ocean." (The Earth is imagined as a great island suspended from the sky by four cords.)¹⁷ In a Maidu myth Earth-Maker assures the couple he had created: "When this world becomes bad, I will make it over again; and after I make it, ye shall be born."¹⁸ One of the chief cosmogonic myths among the Kato, an Athapascan tribe, begins with the creation of a new sky to replace the old one, which seems

¹⁴ Algonkin myth in Daniel G. Brinton, *The Myths of the New World* (2nd ed. rev., New York, 1876), pp. 235-236. Wintu myth in H. B. Alexander, *North American Mythology (Mythology of All Races* [Boston, 1916], vol. X), pp. 223 ff.

¹⁵ Adam Hodgson, *Travels in North America*, p. 280; Brinton, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-280.

¹⁶ Brinton, *op. cit.*, p. 280: He above shall breathe once upon the bones of men, twice upon the bones of women, and they shall come back to life. Another version of the myth was published by Franz Boas, *The Central Eskimo* (GRBEW, 1888), pp. 588 ff. Cf. M. Eliade, *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* (Paris, 1951), pp. 153 ff.

¹⁷ H. B. Alexander, *North American Mythology*, p. 60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 219; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 299-300, bibliography on the North American myth of the Flood.

about to fall.¹⁹ As Alexander remarks in connection with the cosmogonic myths of the Pacific coast, "many of the creation-stories seem to be, in fact, traditions of the re-forming of the earth after the great annihilation, although in some myths both the creation and the re-creation are described."²⁰

All in all, these myths of the End of the World implying, as they do in clearer or darker fashion, the re-creation of a new Universe, express the same archaic and extremely widespread idea of the progressive "degradation" of a Cosmos, necessitating its periodical destruction and re-creation. These myths of a final catastrophe that will at the same time be the sign announcing the imminent re-creation of the World have been the seed bed for the prophetic and millennialist movements that have developed among primitive peoples in our day. We shall return to these primitive millennialisms, for, together with Marxist chiliasm, they represent the only positive modern re-evaluations of the End of the World myth. But we must first briefly describe the place which that myth has held in more complex religions.

The End of the World in Oriental religions

In all probability the doctrine of the destruction of the World (*pralaya*) was already known in Vedic times (cf. *Atharva Veda*, X, 8, 39-40). The universal conflagration (*ragnarök*), followed by a new Creation, is an element in

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 225. On the South American myths concerning the End of the World by fire or by water, cf. P. Ehrenreich, *Die Mythen und Legenden der Südamerikanischen Urvölker* (Berlin, 1905), pp. 30-31. On the South American traditions concerning the renewal of the World after the catastrophe, cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, vol. CXLIII, no. 3, pp. 347 (Bakairi), 369 (Namicura).

Germanic mythology. These facts seem to show that the Indo-Europeans were not unacquainted with the End of the World myth. Stig Wikander has recently demonstrated the existence of a Germanic myth of the eschatological battle, which has the closest similarities to the parallel Indian and Iranian accounts. But beginning with the Brāhmanas,²¹ and especially in the Purānas, the Indians sedulously developed the doctrine of the four *yugas*, the four Ages of the World. The essence of this theory is the cyclical creation and destruction of the World and the belief in the "perfection of the beginnings." As the Buddhists and the Jainas hold the same views, we may conclude that the doctrine of the eternal creation and destruction of the Universe is a pan-Indian idea.

Since we have already discussed the problem in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, we will not enter into it here. We will only mention some important details. "The complete cycle is terminated by a dissolution, a *pralaya*, which is repeated more intensely (*mahapralaya*, great dissolution) at the end of the thousandth cycle."²² According to the Mahābharata and the Purānas,²³ the horizon will burst into flame, seven or twelve suns will appear in the heavens and will dry up the seas and burn the Earth. The Samvartaka (the Fire of the Cosmic Conflagration) will destroy the entire Universe. Then rain will fall in floods for twelve years, and the Earth will be submerged and mankind destroyed (Visnu Purāna 24, 25). Sitting on the cosmic snake Śesa on the surface of the Ocean,

²¹ The names of the four *yugas* first appear in the *Aitareya Brāhmana*, VII, 14.

²² *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 114. Cf. also *Images and Symbols* (New York, 1961), pp. 62 ff.

²³ Cf. Emil Abegg, *Der Messiasglaube in Indien und Iran* (Berlin, 1928), p. 34, n. 2.

Visnu is sunk in yogic sleep (Visnu Purāna, VI, 4, 1-11). And then everything will begin over again—*ad infinitum*.

As to the myth of the "perfection of the beginnings," it is easily recognized in the purity, intelligence, bliss, and longevity of human life during the *krta yuga*, the First Age. In the course of the following *yugas* there is a progressive deterioration in man's intelligence and morality as well as in his bodily stature and longevity. Jainism expresses the perfection of the beginnings and the subsequent degeneration in extravagant terms. According to Hemacandra, in the beginning man's stature was six miles and his life "lasted a krore of *purvas* (a *purva* = 8,400,000 years)." But at the end of the cycle his stature barely reaches seven cubits and his life does not last more than a hundred years (Jacobi, in ERE, I, 202). The Buddhists too dwell on the immense shortening of human life—80,000 years and even more ("immeasurable length," according to some traditions) at the beginning of the cycle and only ten years at the end of it.

The Indian doctrine of the Ages of the World, that is, the eternal creation, deterioration, destruction, and re-creation of the Universe, is to some extent similar to the primitive conception of the annual renewal of the World, but there are important differences. In the Indian theory man plays no part whatever in the periodic re-creation of the World; basically, man does not want this eternal re-creation, his goal is escape from the cosmic cycle.²⁴ Then, too, the Gods themselves seem not to be actual Creators; they are more the instruments through which the cosmic process is accomplished. So we see

²⁴ We have in mind, obviously, the religious and philosophical elite in search of a "deliverance" from illusion and suffering. But popular Indian religious feeling accepts and values human existence in the World.

that for India there is no final End of the World properly speaking; there are only periods of varying lengths between the annihilation of one Universe and the appearance of another. The "End" has no meaning except for the human condition; man can halt the process of transmigration in which he is blindly carried along.

The myth of the perfection of the beginnings is clearly documented among the Mesopotamians, the Jews, and the Greeks. According to Babylonian traditions, the eight or ten antediluvian kings reigned between 10,800 and 72,000 years; in contrast the kings of the first postdiluvian dynasties reigned no more than 1,200 years.²⁵ The Babylonians also knew the myth of a primordial Paradise and had preserved the memory of a series (probably totaling seven) of successive destructions and re-creations of the human race.²⁶ The Jews held similar ideas—the loss of the original Paradise, the progressive shortening of the span of human life, the Flood that annihilated humanity except for a few privileged individuals. In Egypt the myth of the "perfection of the beginnings" is not attested, but we find the legendary tradition of the fabulous longevity of the kings before Menes.²⁷

In Greece there are two different but connected traditions: (1) the theory of the Ages of the World, including the myth of the perfection of the beginnings, (2) the cyclic doctrine. Hesiod is the first to describe the progressive degeneration of humanity during the five ages (*Works*, 109-201). The first, the Age of Gold under the reign of Kronos, was a sort of Para-

²⁵ W. F. Albright, "Primitivism in Ancient Western Asia," in Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore, 1935), p. 422.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 424, 426.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

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dise: men lived for a long time, never grew old, and their life was like that of the gods. The cyclic theory makes its appearance with Heraclitus (fr. 66 [22 Bywater]), who will later greatly influence the Stoic doctrine of the Eternal Return. We find the two mythical themes—the Ages of the World and the continuous cycle of creations and destructions—already associated in Empedocles. There is no need to discuss the different forms these theories assumed in Greece, especially as the result of Oriental influences. Suffice it to say that the Stoics took over from Heraclitus the idea of the End of the World by fire (*ekpyrosis*) and that Plato (*Tim.* 22, C) already knew, as an alternative, the End by flood. These two cataclysms in a measure determined the rhythm of the Great Year (*magnus annus*). According to a lost work of Aristotle (*Protrepticus*), the two catastrophes occurred at the two solstices—the *conflagratio* at the summer solstice, the *diluvium* at the winter.²⁸

Judaeo-Christian apocalypses

Some of these apocalyptic images of the End of the World recur in the Judaeo-Christian eschatological visions. But Judaeo-Christianity makes an innovation of the first importance. The End of the World will occur only once, just as the cosmogony occurred only once. The Cosmos that will reappear after the catastrophe will be the same Cosmos that God created at the beginning of Time, but purified, regen-

²⁸ The Indian ideas concerning the End of the World by fire and by water are discernible in these cosmic catastrophes. Cf. also B. L. van der Waerden, "Das Grosse Jahr und die ewige Wiederkehr," *Hermes*, vol. 80 (1950), pp. 129 ff.

erated, restored to its original glory. This Earthly Paradise will not be destroyed again, will have no end. Time is no longer the circular Time of the Eternal Return; it has become a linear and irreversible Time. Nor is this all: the eschatology also represents the triumph of a Sacred History. For the End of the World will reveal the religious value of human acts, and men will be judged by their acts. Here there is no longer any cosmic regeneration implying the accompanying regeneration of a collectivity (or of the whole human race). There is a Judgment, a selection: only the chosen will live in eternal bliss. The chosen, the good, will be saved by their loyalty to a Sacred History; faced by the powers and the temptations of this world, they remained true to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Further in distinction from the cosmic religions, for Judaeo-Christianity the End of the World is part of the Messianic mystery. For the Jews the coming of the Messiah will announce the End of the World and the restoration of Paradise. For the Christians the End of the World will precede the second coming of Christ and the Last Judgment. But for both alike the triumph of Sacred History—manifested by the End of the World—in some measure implies the restoration of Paradise. The prophets proclaim that the Cosmos will be renewed—there will be a new Heaven and a new Earth. There will be an abundance of all things, as in the Garden of Eden.²⁹ Wild beasts will live in peace together and "a little child shall lead them" (Isa. 11:6). Sicknesses and infirmities will vanish forever; the lame will walk, the deaf hear, the dumb speak, the blind see, and there will be no more weeping

²⁹ Amos 9:13 ff.; Isa. 30:23 ff.; 35:1, 2, 7; 65:17; 66:22; Hos. 1:10; 2:18 ff.; Zech. 8:12; Ezek. 34:14, 27; 36:9 ff., 30, 35.

in the form of a dragon or a demon,³³ and this is reminiscent of the old myth of the fight between God and the Dragon; the fight took place in the beginning, before the Creation of the World, and it will take place again at the End. On the other hand, when Antichrist comes to be regarded as the false Messiah his reign will represent the total overthrow of social, moral, and religious values—in other words, the return to chaos. In the course of the centuries Antichrist was identified with various historical figures, from Nero to the Pope (by Luther). The important fact is that certain particularly tragic historical periods were held to be dominated by Antichrist—but at the same time there was always the hope that his reign announced the imminent coming of Christ. Cosmic catastrophes, scourges, historical terror, the seeming triumph of Evil made up the apocalyptic syndrome³⁴ which was to precede Christ's return and the millennium.

Christian millennialisms

After becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christianity condemned millennialism as heretical, although illustrious Fathers had professed it in the past. But the Church had accepted History, and the *eschaton* was no longer the imminent event that it had been during the persecutions. The World—this world below, with all its sins, injustices, and cruelties—continued. God alone knew the hour of the End of the World, and one thing seemed certain: the End was

³³ Cf. W. Bousset, *The Antichrist Legend*, pp. 145 ff. Cf. also R. Mayer, *Die biblische Vorstellung vom Weltenbrand* (Bonn, 1957).

³⁴ See also A. A. Vasiliev, "Medieval Ideas of the End of the World: West and East," *Byzantion* (Boston, 1944), vol. XVI, Fasc. 2, 1942-43, pp. 462-502.

not near. With the triumph of the Church, the Kingdom of Heaven was already present on earth, and in a certain sense the old world had already been destroyed. In this official anti-millennialism of the Church we recognize the first manifestation of the doctrine of progress. The Church had accepted the World as it was, though it sought to make human life a little less wretched than it had been during the great historical crises. The Church had taken this position against the prophets and apocalyptic visionaries of every dye.

Some centuries later, after Islam burst ^{for the Greeks} into the Mediterranean, but especially after the eleventh century, millennialist and eschatological movements reappeared—this time aimed against the Church or its hierarchy. These movements have a number of common features. Their inspirers expect and announce the restoration of the Earthly Paradise after a period of terrible trials and cataclysms. Luther, too, expected the imminent End of the World. For centuries the same religious idea recurs again and again: this world—the World of History—is unjust, abominable, demonic; fortunately, it is already decaying, the catastrophes have begun, this old world is cracking everywhere; very soon it will be annihilated, the powers of darkness will be conquered once and for all, the “good” will triumph, Paradise will be regained. All the millennialist and eschatological movements display optimism. They react against the terror of History with an energy that only the extremity of despair can arouse. But for centuries the great Christian orthodoxies had no longer felt the eschatological tension. Expectation of the End of the World and the imminence of the Last Judgment are characteristic of none of the great Christian churches. Millennialism barely survives in some recent Christian sects.

Eschatological and millennialist mythology recently reappeared in Europe in two totalitarian political movements. Although radically secularized in appearance, Nazism and Communism are loaded with eschatological elements: they announce the end of this world and the beginning of an age of plenty and bliss. Norman Cohn, the author of the most recent book on millennialism, writes of National Socialism and Marxism-Leninism: “Beneath the pseudo-scientific terminology one can in each case recognize a phantasy of which almost every element is to be found in phantasies which were already current in medieval Europe. The final, decisive battle of the Elect (be they the ‘Aryan race’ or the ‘proletariat’) against the hosts of evil (be they the Jews or the ‘bourgeoisie’); a dispensation on which the Elect are to be most amply compensated for all their sufferings by the joys of total domination or of total community or of both together; a world purified of all evil and in which history is to find its consummation—these ancient imaginings are with us still.”³⁵

Millennialism among “primitives”

But it is more especially outside of the Western orbit that the End of the World myth is flourishing with considerable vigor today. We refer to the countless nativist and millennialist movements, of which the best known are the Melanesian “cargo cults” but which are also found in other parts of Oceania as well as in the former European colonies of Africa. In all probability most of these movements arose after more or less prolonged contacts with Christianity. Although nearly

³⁵ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York, 1957), p. 308.

all of them are antiwhite and antichristian, the majority of these native millennialisms include Christian eschatological elements. In some cases the natives revolt against the missionaries precisely because the latter do not behave like true Christians and, for example, do not believe in the imminent coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. In Melanesia the cargo cults have assimilated the myths and rituals of the New Year. As we saw earlier, the New Year festivals imply the symbolic re-creation of the World. The disciples of the cargo cults likewise believe that the Cosmos will be destroyed and re-created and that the tribe will regain a kind of Paradise—the dead will rise again and there will be neither death nor sickness. But as in the Indo-Iranian and Judaeo-Christian eschatologies, this new creation—or recovery of Paradise—will be preceded by a series of cosmic catastrophes. The earth will shake, there will be rains of fire, the mountains will crumble and fill the valleys, the whites and the natives who have not joined the cult will be annihilated, and so on.

The morphology of primitive millennialisms is extremely rich and complex. For our purpose the important aspects are these: (1) the millennialist movements may be considered a development of the mythico-ritual scenario of the periodic renewal of the World; (2) the influence, direct or indirect, of Christian eschatology almost always seems beyond question; (3) though attracted by Western values and wishing to acquire the religion and education of the whites no less than their wealth and weapons, the adherents of the millennialist movements are always anti-Western; (4) these movements are always begun by strong religious personalities of the prophetic type, and are organized or expanded by politicians

for political ends; (5) for all of them the millennium is imminent, but it will not come without cosmic cataclysms or historical catastrophes.³⁶

There is no need to dwell on the political, social, and economic character of these movements—it is sufficiently obvious. But their strength, their influence, and their creativity do not reside solely in these socio-economic factors. They are religious movements. Their disciples expect and announce the End of the World in order to achieve a better economic and social condition—but above all because they hope for a re-creation of the World and a restoration of human happiness. They hunger and thirst after worldly goods—but also for the immortality, the freedom, and the bliss of Paradise. For them the End of the World is the condition for establishing a form of human life that will be blissful, perfect, and eternal.

We should add that even where there is no question of a catastrophic end, the idea of regeneration, of a re-creation of the World, is the essential element of the movement. The prophet or founder of the cult proclaims the imminent “return to the origins,” and hence the recovery of the first, “paradisaal,” state. To be sure, in many cases this “original” paradisaal state represents the idealized image of the cultural and economic situation before the coming of the whites. This is not the only example of the “original state,” a people’s “ancient history,” being mythicized as an Age of Gold. But what is to our purpose is not the “historical” reality that can sometimes be abstracted and isolated from this exuberant flowering of images, but the fact that the End of a World—the world of colonization—and the expectation of a New

³⁶ Cf. M. Eliade, “Dimensions religieuses du renouvellement cosmique,” *Eranos-Jahrbuch* (Zurich, 1960), vol. XXVIII.

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World imply a return to origins. The messianic figure is identified with the Culture Hero or the mythical Ancestor whose return was awaited. Their coming is equivalent to a reinstallation of the mythical Times of the origin, hence to a recreation of the World. The political independence and the cultural freedom proclaimed by the millennialist movements among the colonial peoples are conceived as the recovery of an original state of bliss. In short, even without a *visible* apocalyptic destruction, this world, the old world, is symbolically abolished and the paradisaical World of the origin is established in its place.

The "End of the World" in modern art

Western societies have nothing comparable to the optimism shown by Communist eschatology and the primitive millennialisms. On the contrary, today there is an ever more intense fear of a catastrophic End of the World brought about by thermonuclear weapons. In the thought of the West this End will be total and final; it will not be followed by a new Creation of the World. We cannot here undertake a systematic analysis of the many and various expressions of atomic fear in the modern world. But other Western cultural phenomena seem to us significant for our investigation. Since the beginning of the century the plastic arts, as well as literature and music, have undergone such radical transformations that it has been possible to speak of a "destruction of the language of art." Beginning in painting, this destruction of language has spread to poetry, to the novel, and just recently, with Ionesco, to the theater. In some cases there is a real annihilation of the established artistic Universe. Looking at some

recent canvases, we get the impression that the artist wished to make *tabula rasa* of the entire history of painting. There is more than a destruction, there is a reversion to Chaos, to a sort of *primordial massa confusa*. Yet at the same time, contemplating such works, we sense that the artist is searching for something that he has not yet expressed. He had to make a clean sweep of the ruins and trash accumulated by the preceding plastic revolutions; he had to reach a germinal mode of matter, so that he could begin the history of art over again from zero. Among many modern artists we sense that the "destruction of the plastic language" is only the first phase of a more complex process and that the re-creation of a new Universe must necessarily follow.

In modern art the nihilism and pessimism of the first revolutionaries and demolishers represent attitudes that are already outmoded. Today no great artist believes in the degeneration and imminent disappearance of his art. From this point of view the modern artists' attitude is like that of the "primitives"; they have contributed to the destruction of the World—that is, to the destruction of *their* World, their artistic Universe—in order to create another. But this cultural phenomenon is of the utmost importance, for it is primarily the artists who represent the genuine creative forces of a civilization or a society. Through their creation the artists anticipate what is to come—sometimes one or two generations later—in other sectors of social and cultural life.

It is significant that the destruction of artistic languages has coincided with the rise of psychoanalysis. Depth psychology has given currency to the interest in origins, an interest that is so typical of the man of the archaic societies. It would be intensely interesting to study the process of re-evaluation un-

of the *End*, but the certainty of a *new beginning*. Now, this rebeginning is, properly speaking, the counterpart to the absolute beginning, the cosmogony. It could be said that here, too, we have found the mental attitude typical of archaic man: the exceptional value he attributes to *knowledge of origins*. For the man of the archaic societies, that is, knowledge of the origin of each thing (animal, plant, cosmic object, etc.) confers a kind of magical mastery over it; he knows where to find it and how to make it reappear in the future. The same formula could be applied to the eschatological myths: knowledge of what took place *ab origine*, of the cosmogony, gives knowledge of what will come to pass in the future. The "movability" of the origin of the World expresses man's hope that his World *will always be there*, even if it is periodically destroyed in the strict sense of the word. Is this a desperate solution? No—because the idea of the destruction of the World is not, basically, pessimistic. Through its own duration the World degenerates and wears out; this is why it must be symbolically re-created every year. But it was possible to accept the idea of the apocalyptic destruction of the World because the cosmogony—that is, the "secret" of the origin of the World—was known.

Freud and knowledge of the "origin"

There is no need to dwell further on the "existential" value of knowledge of the origin in the traditional societies. This type of behavior is not exclusively archaic. The desire to know the origin of things is also characteristic of Western culture. The eighteenth century, and especially the nineteenth, saw a multiplication of disciplines investigating not only the

origin of the Universe, of life, of the species, or of man, but also the origin of society, language, religion, and all human institutions. The goal was to discover the origin and history of everything that surrounds us—the origin of the solar system and, no less, the origin of an institution such as marriage or of a children's game such as hopscotch.

In the twentieth century the scientific study of beginnings took a different direction. For psychoanalysis, for example, the truly primordial is the "human primordial," earliest childhood. The child lives in a mythical, paradisaical time.¹ Psychoanalysis developed techniques capable of showing us the "beginnings" of our personal history, and especially of identifying the particular event that put an end to the bliss of childhood and determined the future orientation of our life. "Restating this in terms of archaic thinking, one might say that there was once a 'paradise' (which for psychoanalysis is the prenatal period, or the time before weaning), ending with a 'break' or 'catastrophe' (the infantile trauma), and that whatever the adult's attitude may be toward these primordial circumstances, they are none the less constitutive of his being."²

It is of interest to note that, of all the vital sciences, only psychoanalysis arrives at the idea that the "beginnings" of every human being are blissful and constitute a sort of Para-

¹ This is why the unconscious displays the structure of a private mythology. We can go even further and say not only that the unconscious is "mythological" but also that some of its contents carry cosmic values; in other words, that they reflect the modalities, processes, and destiny of life and living matter. It can even be said that modern man's only real contact with cosmic sacrality is effected by the unconscious, whether in his dreams and his imaginative life or in the creations that arise out of the unconscious (poetry, games, spectacles, etc.).

² M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, p. 54.

disse, whereas the other vital sciences stress especially the precariousness and imperfection of the beginnings. For them, it is process, becoming, evolution that gradually corrects the difficulty and poverty of the "beginnings."

Two of Freud's ideas are relevant to our subject: (1) the bliss of the "origin" and "beginnings" of the human being, and (2) the idea that through memory, or by a "going back," one can relive certain traumatic incidents of early childhood. The bliss of the "origin" is, we have seen, a quite frequent theme in the archaic religions; it is attested in India, Iran, Greece, and in Judaeo-Christianity. The fact that Freud postulates bliss at the beginning of human existence does not mean that psychoanalysis has a mythological structure or that it borrows an archaic mythical theme or accepts the Judaeo-Christian myth of Paradise and Fall. The only connection that can be made between psychoanalysis and the archaic conception of the bliss and perfection of the origin is based on the fact that Freud discovered the decisive role of the "primordial and paradisaic time" of earliest childhood, the bliss before the break (= weaning), that is, before time becomes, for each individual, a "living time."

As for the second Freudian idea relevant to our investigation—that is, the "going back" by which one hopes to reconstitute certain decisive events of earliest childhood—it too supports a comparison with archaic behavior. We have cited a number of examples for the belief that one can reconstitute, and hence relive, the primordial events narrated in the myths. But with a few exceptions (among others, magical cures) these examples illustrate a *collective* "going back." It was the entire community, or a large part of the community, that rituals caused to relive the events reported in the myths. Psy-

choanalytic technique makes possible an *individual* return to the Time of the origin. Now, this existential going back is also known to archaic societies and plays an important part in certain psycho-physiological techniques of the East. It is to this problem that we shall now turn.

Traditional techniques for "going back"

We have no intention of comparing psychoanalysis with "primitive" or Eastern beliefs and techniques. The point of the comparison we shall make is to show that "going back," of which Freud saw the importance in understanding man and, especially, in healing him, was already practiced in non-European cultures. After all that we have said concerning the hope of renewing the World by repeating the cosmogony, it is not difficult to grasp the basis for these practices: the individual's return to the origin is conceived as an opportunity for renewing and regenerating the existence of him who undertakes it. But as we shall soon see, the "return to the origin" can be effected for a wide variety of purposes and can have many different meanings.

First and foremost, there is the well-known symbolism of initiation rituals implying a *regressus ad uterum*. Since we have studied this complex at length in our *Birth and Rebirth*, we will limit ourselves here to some brief indications. From the archaic stages of culture the initiation of adolescents includes a series of rites whose symbolism is crystal clear: through them, the novice is first transformed into an embryo and then is reborn. Initiation is equivalent to a second birth. It is through the agency of initiation that the adolescent becomes both a socially responsible and culturally awakened

being. The return to the womb is signified either by the neophyte's seclusion in a hut, or by his being symbolically swallowed by a monster, or by his entering a sacred spot identified with the uterus of Mother Earth.³

What concerns us here is that, together with these puberty rites typical of "primitive" societies, initiation rituals involving a *regressus ad uterum* also exist in more complex cultures. To confine ourselves, for the present, to India, the motif is discernible in three different types of initiation ceremonies. First there is the *upanayama* ceremony, that is, the boy's introduction to his teacher. The motif of gestation and rebirth is clearly expressed in it: the teacher is said to transform the boy into an embryo and to keep him in his belly for three nights.⁴ Whoever has gone through an *upanayama* is "twice born" (*dvi-ja*). Next there is the *diksa* ceremony, obligatory for one preparing to offer the *soma* sacrifice and which, strictly speaking, consists in return to the foetal stage.⁵ Finally, the *regressus ad uterum* is similarly central to the *hiranya-garbha* ceremony (literally, "golden foetus"). The person undergoing the ceremony is put in a golden vessel in the shape of a cow, and on emerging from it he is regarded as a newborn infant.⁶

In all these cases the *regressus ad uterum* is accomplished in order that the beneficiary shall be born into a new mode of being or be regenerated. From the structural point of view, the return to the womb corresponds to the reversion of the Universe to the "chaotic" or embryonic state. The prenatal

³ Cf., for example, the Australian Kunapipi ritual described, after R. M. Berndt, in *Birth and Rebirth*, pp. 49 ff.

⁴ Cf. *Birth and Rebirth*, pp. 53 ff.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 54 ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 56 ff.

darkness corresponds to the Night before Creation and to the darkness of the initiation hut.

Whether "primitive" or Indian, all these initiation rituals involving a return to the womb have, of course, a mythical model.⁷ But even more interesting than the myths relating to initiation rites of *regressus ad uterum* are those that narrate the adventures of Heroes or of shamans and magicians who accomplished the *regressus* in their flesh-and-blood bodies, not symbolically. A large number of myths feature (1) a hero being swallowed by a sea monster and emerging victorious after breaking through the monster's belly; (2) initiatory passage through a *vagina dentata*, or the dangerous descent into a cave or crevice assimilated to the mouth or the uterus of Mother Earth. All these adventures are in fact initiatory ordeals, after accomplishing which the victorious hero acquires a new mode of being.⁸

The initiation myths and rites of *regressus ad uterum* reveal the following fact: the "return to the origin" prepares a new birth, but the new birth is not a repetition of the first, physical birth. There is properly speaking a mystical rebirth, spiritual in nature—in other words, access to a new mode of existence (involving sexual maturity, participation in the sacred and in culture; in short, becoming "open" to Spirit). The basic idea is that, to attain to a higher mode of existence, gestation and birth must be repeated; but they are repeated ritually, symbolically. In other words, we here have acts oriented toward the values of Spirit, not behavior from the realm of psycho-physiological activity.

⁷ On the mythical model for Indian initiation rituals, cf. *Birth and Rebirth*, p. 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 64 ff.

We have found it necessary to dwell on this point to avoid leaving the impression that all myths and rites of "return to the origin" are on the same plane. To be sure, the symbolism is the same; but the contexts differ, and it is the intention shown by the context that gives us the true meaning in each case. As we saw, from the point of view of structure it is possible to homologize the prenatal darkness of the initiation hut with the Night before Creation. And, true enough, the Night from which the Sun is born every morning symbolizes the primordial Chaos, and the rising of the sun is a counterpart to the cosmogony. But obviously this cosmogonic symbolism is enriched with new values in the case of the birth of the mythical Ancestor, the birth of each individual, and initiatory rebirth.

All this will appear more clearly from the examples now to be discussed. We shall see that "return to the origin" has served as the model for physiological and psycho-mental techniques whose aim may be regeneration and longevity as it may be healing and final liberation. We have already had occasion to observe that the cosmogonic myth lends itself to various applications, among them healing, poetic creation, introducing the child into the society and culture, and so on. We have also seen that the *regressus ad uterum* can be homologized with a regression to the state of Chaos before the Creation. This being so, we understand why certain archaic therapies employ the ritual return to the womb instead of ceremonial recitation of the cosmogonic myth. In India, for example, even in our day traditional medicine effects rejuvenation of the aged and regeneration of dying patients by burying them in a grave shaped like a womb. The symbolism of "new birth" is obvious. The custom, moreover, is also documented

outside of India: the sick are buried so that they may be born from the womb of Mother Earth.⁹

The "return to the origin" is also highly esteemed as therapy in China. Taoism lays considerable stress on "embryonic breathing," *t'ai-si*. It consists in a closed-circuit respiration like that of a foetus; the adept tries to imitate the circulation of blood and breath between mother and child and vice versa. The preface to the *T'ai-si k'eou kiue* ("Oral formulas for embryonic breathing") expressly states: "By going back to the base, by returning to the origin, one drives away old age, one returns to the state of a foetus."¹⁰ A text from modern syncretistic Taoism runs: "That is why the (Buddha) Ju-lai (= Tathāgata), in his great mercy, revealed the method for the (alchemical) work by Fire and taught man to *re-enter the womb* in order to reconstitute his (true) nature and (the fullness of) his portion of life."¹¹

Here, then, we have two different but related mystical techniques, both seeking to obtain the "return to the origin": "embryonic breathing" and the alchemical process. These two techniques are, of course, among the numerous methods employed by the Taoist to acquire youth and extreme longevity ("immortality"). Alchemical experimentation must be accompanied by an appropriate mystical meditation. During the fusion of metals the Taoist alchemist tries to bring about in his own body the union of the two cosmological principles, Heaven and Earth, in order to reproduce the primordial chaotic situa-

⁹ *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 250 ff.

¹⁰ H. Maspéro, "Les procédés de 'Nourrir le Principe Vital' dans la religion taoïste ancienne," *Journal Asiatique*, April-June, 1937, p. 198.

¹¹ *Houei-ming-king* by Lieou Houayang, cited by Rolf Stein, "Jardins en miniature d'Extrême Orient," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient* (Hanoi, 1943), vol. XLII, p. 97.

tion that existed before the Creation. This primordial situation (which, moreover, is called precisely the "chaotic" [*houen*] situation) corresponds both to the egg or the embryo and to the paradisaal and innocent state of the uncreated World.¹² The Taoist endeavors to obtain this primordial state either by the meditation that accompanies alchemical experiment or by "embryonic breathing." But in the last analysis "embryonic breathing" amounts to what the texts call "unification of the breaths," a quite complex technique, which we cannot examine here. Suffice it to say that "unification of the breaths" has a cosmological model. For according to Taoist traditions, in the beginning the "breaths" were mingled and formed an egg, the Great-One, from which came Heaven and Earth.¹³

The ideal of the Taoists—that is, obtaining the bliss of youth and longevity ("immortality")—had, then, a cosmological model: the state of primordial unity. Here we no longer have a re-enactment of the cosmological myth, as in the healing rituals cited earlier. The aim is no longer to reiterate the *cosmic creation*; it is to recover the state that *preceded the cosmogony*, the state of "chaos." But the line of thought is the same: health and youth are obtained by a "return to the origin," be it "return to the womb" or return to the cosmic Great-One. So we may note the important fact that, in China too, sickness and old age are believed to be cured by "return to the origin," the only method that archaic thought considered able to annul the work of Time. For, in the end, it is always a matter of abolishing past Time, of "going back" and beginning life over again with all its virtualities intact.

¹² Cf. R. Stein, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹³ H. Maspéro, *op. cit.*, p. 207, n. 1.

Curing oneself of the work of Time

India is especially interesting in this respect. There Yoga and Buddhism, developing certain psycho-physiological methods of "going back," elaborated them to a degree unknown elsewhere. Obviously the ritual no longer has a therapeutic purpose. *Regressus ad uterum* is no longer practiced to obtain a cure or a rejuvenescence or even symbolic repetition of the cosmogony intended to heal the patient by reimmersing him in the primordial fullness. *Yoga and Buddhism* are on a different plane from that of the primitive therapies. Their final goal is not health or rejuvenation but spiritual mastery and liberation. Yoga and Buddhism are soteriologies, mystical techniques, philosophies—and, naturally, pursue ends other than magical cures.

Nevertheless, it is impossible not to see that these Indian mystical techniques show structural analogies with the archaic therapies. The philosophies, the ascetic and contemplative techniques of India all pursue the same end—curing man of the pain of existence in Time.¹⁴ For Indian thought, suffering is originated and indefinitely prolonged in the world by *karma*, by temporality; it is the law of *karma* that imposes the countless series of transmigrations, the eternal return to existence and hence to suffering. Liberation from the karmic law is equivalent to "cure." The Buddha is the "king of physicians," his message is proclaimed as a "new medicine." It is by "burning up" the very last germ of a future life that the individual definitively ends the karmic cycle and is delivered from Time. Now, one of the ways of "burning up" the karmic residues

¹⁴ Cf. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp. 49 ff.

“regressive” (*ulta*) technique, in order to obtain the “inversion” of all the psycho-physiological processes. In the man who accomplishes it this “return” or “regression” finds expression in the annihilation of the Cosmos and hence brings about “emergence from Time,” entrance into “immortality.” Now, in the Tantric view immortality can be obtained only by *halting manifestation* and hence the process of disintegration; one must proceed “against the current” (*ujāna sādhana*) and recover the primordial Unity that existed *in illo tempore*, before the Creation.¹⁶ What is necessary, then, is to enact in one’s own being the process of cosmic resorption, and so return to the “origin.” The *Shivasamhitā* (I, 69 f.) sets forth a significant spiritual exercise. After describing the creation of the Universe by Shiva, the text describes the inverse process of cosmic resorption, as it is to be *lived, experienced* by the yogi. The latter *sees* the element Earth become “subtle” and dissolve in the element Water, Water dissolve in Fire, Fire in Air, Air in Ether, and so on, until all is reabsorbed into the Great Brahman.¹⁷ The yogi witnesses the *inverse of the process of Creation*, he “goes back” until he reaches the “origin.” This yogic exercise may be compared with the Taoist technique for “returning to the egg” and the primordial Great-One.

To repeat: we have no intention of putting Indo-Chinese mystical techniques and primitive therapies on the same plane. They are different cultural phenomena. But it is interesting to observe a certain continuity of human behavior in respect to Time, both down the ages and in various cultures. This

¹⁶ M. Eliade, *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom* (New York, 1958), pp. 270 ff.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

behavior may be defined as follows: *To cure the work of Time it is necessary to "go back" and find the "beginning of the World."* We have just seen that this "return to the origin" has been variously evaluated. In the archaic and paleo-Oriental cultures the reiteration of the cosmic myth had as its purpose abolishing past Time and beginning a new life with all vital forces intact. For the Chinese and Hindu "mystics" the goal ceased to be beginning a new life again here below, on earth, and became "going back" and reconstituting the primordial Great-One. But in these examples, as in all the others we have given, the characteristic and decisive element was always "returning to the origin."

Recovering the past

We have cited these few examples in order to compare two categories of techniques: (1) psychoanalysis and (2) archaic and Oriental methods involving different methods of "returning to the origin" (for a variety of ends). Our purpose was not to discuss these procedures at length, but to show that existential return to the origin, although typical of the archaic mentality, is not a form of behavior confined solely to that mentality. Freud elaborated an analogous technique to enable a modern individual to recover the content of certain "original" experiences. We have seen that there are several ways of "going back," but the most important are: (1) rapid and direct re-establishment of the first situation (whether Chaos or the precosmogonic state or the moment of Creation) and (2) progressive return to the "origin" by proceeding backward through Time from the present moment to the "absolute beginning." In the first case there is a vertiginously swift or

even instantaneous abolition of the Cosmos (or of the human being as the result of a certain temporal duration) and restoration of the original situation ("Chaos" or—on the anthropological plane—the "seed," the "embryo"). There is an obvious resemblance between the structure of this method and that of the mythico-ritual scenarios of immediate regression to "Chaos" and reiteration of the cosmogony.

In the second case—that of gradual return to the origin—we have a meticulous and exhaustive recollecting of personal and historical events. To be sure, in these cases too the final goal is to "burn up" these memories, to abolish them as it were by reliving them and freeing oneself from them. But there is no longer an effort to blot them out instantaneously in order to return to the original moment as quickly as possible. On the contrary, the important thing is to recollect even the most insignificant details of one's life (present or past), for it is only by virtue of this recollection that one can "burn up" one's past, master it, keep it from affecting the present.

The difference from the first method, whose model is instantaneously abolishing the World and re-creating it, is obvious. Here *memory* plays the leading role. One frees oneself from the work of Time by recollection, by *anamnesis*. The essential thing is to remember all the events one has witnessed in Time. This technique, then, is related to the archaic conception that we discussed at length—the importance of knowing the origin and history of a thing in order to obtain mastery over it. To be sure, moving backward through Time implies an experience dependent on personal memory, whereas knowing the origin comes down to understanding a primordial exemplary history, a myth. But the structures are homologiz-

able; it is always a matter of remembering, in clear and precise detail, *what happened in the beginning* and from then on.

Here we touch upon a problem of primary importance not only for the understanding of myth but especially for the later development of mythical thinking. Knowledge of the origin and exemplary history of things confers a sort of magical mastery over them. But this knowledge at the same time opens the way to systematic speculations on the origin and structures of the World. We shall return to this problem. But at this point we must note that memory is regarded as the pre-eminent form of knowledge. He who can *recollect* possesses an even more precious magico-religious power than he who *knows* the origin of things. In ancient India, for example, a clear distinction is made between "objective" knowledge of the origin of the various realities and "subjective" knowledge based on remembering earlier lives. "We know thy birthplace (*janitram*), O Dream," exclaims the author of a myth in the Atharva Veda (VI, 46, 2). "We know, O Agni, that thy birthplace is threefold" (*ibid.*, XIII, 3, 21). By virtue of this knowledge of the origin ("birthplace"), man can defend himself against dreams and can handle fire without being hurt.

But knowledge of one's own former lives—that is, of one's personal history—bestows even more: a soteriological knowledge and mastery over one's own destiny. He who remembers his "births" (origin) and his former lives (= periods made up of a considerable series of events undergone) succeeds in freeing himself from karmic conditionings; in other words, he becomes the master of his destiny. This is why "absolute memory"—such as the Buddha's, for example—is equivalent to omniscience and gives its possessor the powers of Cosmocrator. Ananda and other disciples of the Buddha "remembered

VI.

Mythology, Ontology, History

The essential precedes existence

FOR *homo religiosus* the essential precedes existence. This is as true of the man of "primitive" and Oriental societies as it is of the Jew, the Christian, and the Moslem. Man is what he is today because a series of events took place *ab origine*. The myths tell him these events and, in so doing, explain to him how and why he was constituted in this particular way. For *homo religiosus* real, authentic existence begins at the moment when this primordial history is communicated to him and he accepts its consequences. It is always sacred history, for the actors in it are Supernatural Beings and mythical Ancestors. For example: man is mortal because a mythical Ancestor stupidly lost immortality, or because a Supernatural Being decided to deprive him of it, or because a certain mythical event left him endowed at once with sexuality and mortality, and so on. Some myths explain the origin of death by an accident or an oversight: God's messenger, some animal, forgets the message, or lingers idly on the way, arrives too late, and so on. This is a plastic way of expressing the absurdity of death. But in this case too the story is still "Sacred History," because the author of the message is a Supernatural Being and, after all, if he had wanted to he could have annulled his messenger's mistake.

If it is true that the essential events took place *ab origine*, these events are not the same for all religions. For Judaeo-Christianity the "essential" is the drama of Paradise, which instituted the present human condition. For the Mesopotamian the "essential" is the formation of the World from the dismembered body of the sea monster Tiamat and the creation of man from the blood of the demon Kingu mixed with a little earth (in short, with a substance directly derived from the body of Tiamat). For an Australian the "essential" is nothing more than a series of acts performed by the Supernatural Beings in the "Dream Time."

There is not space here to enumerate all the mythical themes that, for the various religions, represent the "essential," the primordial drama that constituted man as he is today. It will be enough to mention the chief types. Then too, at this point in our investigation our first interest is to discover the attitudes that *homo religiosus* takes or has taken toward the "essential" that preceded him. We suppose *a priori* that there could have been several attitudes because, as we have just seen, the content of this "essential" which was determined in mythical Times varies from one religious vision to another.

Deus otiosus

Many primitive tribes, especially those arrested at the hunting and gathering stage, acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being; but he plays almost no part in religious life. In addition, little is known about him, his myths are few and, in general, quite simple. This Supreme Being is believed to have created the World and man, but he soon abandoned his creations and withdrew into the Sky. Sometimes he did

not even complete the Creation, and another Divine Being, his "Son" or his representative, took over the task. We have elsewhere discussed the transformation of the Supreme Being into a *deus otiosus*; here we shall confine ourselves to a few examples.¹ Among the Selk'nam of Tierra del Fuego the God, who is called "Inhabitant of the Sky" or "He who is in the Sky," is eternal, all-knowing, omnipotent, but the Creation was finished by the mythical Ancestors, whom the Supreme Being also created before he retired beyond the stars. This God lives apart from men, indifferent to what goes on in the World. He has no images and no priests. He is prayed to only in case of sickness ("O Thou on high, take not my child from me; he is still too little"), and offerings are made to him chiefly during storms.

The Yorubas of the Slave Coast believe in a Sky God named Olorum (literally, "Owner of the Sky") who, after beginning the Creation of the World, left it to a lesser god, Obatala, to finish and govern it. For his part, he withdrew once and for all from human and earthly affairs; and there are neither temples nor statues nor priests for this Supreme God who became a *deus otiosus*. He is nevertheless invoked as a last resort in times of calamity.

Withdrawn into the Sky, Ndyambi, the supreme god of the Hereros, has abandoned mankind to lesser divinities. "Why should we offer him sacrifices?" a native explains. "We have nothing to fear from him because, unlike our dead, he does us no harm."² The Supreme Being of the Tumbukas is too great "to be concerned with the ordinary affairs of men." Dzingbe ("the Universal Father") of the Ewe is invoked

¹ Cf. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 46 ff.

² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

only during drought: "O sky, to whom we owe thanks, great is the drought; let it rain, let the earth be refreshed, let the fields prosper!"³ The distance and indifference of the Supreme Being are admirably expressed in a saying of the East African Gyriamas, which depicts their god as follows: "Mulugu [God] is above, the ghosts are below!" The Bantus say: "God, after creating man, no longer cares for him." And the Pygmies repeat: "God has gone far from us!"⁴

As these few examples make clear, the Supreme Being seems to have lost *religious actuality*; he does not figure in cult and the myths show him as having withdrawn far from mankind, he has become a *deus otiosus*. The phenomenon, be it said, is also found in the more complex religions of the ancient East and the Indo-Mediterranean world; the celestial Creator God, omniscient and all-powerful, is supplanted by a Fecundator God, consort of the Great Goddess, epiphany of the generative forces of the Universe.⁵

In some respects it could be said that the *deus otiosus* is the first example of the "death of God" that Nietzsche so frenziedly proclaimed. A Creator God who removes himself to a distance and disappears from cult is finally forgotten. Forgetfulness of God, like his own absolute transcendence, is a plastic expression of his religious nonactuality or, what amounts to the same thing, his "death." The disappearance of the Supreme Being did not find expression in an impoverishment of religious life. On the contrary, it could be said that the genuine "religions" appear *after* he has vanished. The richest and most dramatic myths, the most extravagant

³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 64 ff.

rituals, Gods and Goddesses of the most various kinds, the Ancestors, masks and secret societies, temples, priesthoods, and so on—all this is found in cultures that have passed beyond the stage of gathering and small-game hunting and in which the Supreme Being is either absent (forgotten?) or amalgamated with other Divine Figures to the point where he is no longer recognizable.

The “eclipse of God,” in the terms of Martin Buber, the remoteness and silence of God that obsess certain contemporary theologians, are not modern phenomena. The “transcendence” of the Supreme Being has always served man as an excuse for indifference toward him. Even when man still remembers him, the fact that God is *so distant* justifies every kind of neglect if not complete unconcern. The Fang of Equatorial Africa put it simply but courageously:

“God (Nzame) is above, man is below.

God is God, man is man.

Each in his own place, each in his house.”⁶

The same view, as it happens, was held by Giordano Bruno: God “come assoluto, non ha che far con noi” (*Spaccio della bestia trionfante*).

One thing, however, should be noted: from time to time the forgotten or neglected Supreme Being is remembered, more especially in cases of a threat that comes from the celestial regions (drought, storm, epidemics, etc.). The reader may refer to the examples given above (pp. 94). In general, this forgotten God is only called upon as a last resort, when all approaches to other Divine Figures have failed. The Supreme God of the Oraons is Dharmesh. In moments of crisis

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

a white cock is sacrificed to him, with the words: “Now we have tried every thing, but we still have you to help us! . . . God, thou art our Creator, have mercy on us!”⁷ In the same way the Hebrews forsook Yahweh and took up with the Ba’als and Ashtartes whenever history made it possible, each time that they experienced a period of comparative peace and prosperity. But they were inevitably brought back to God by historical catastrophes. “And they cried unto the Lord, and said, We have sinned because we have forsaken the Lord, and have served Baalim and Ashtaroth: but now deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, and we will serve thee” (I Sam. 12:10).

But even when the Supreme God has completely disappeared from cult and is “forgotten,” his memory survives, camouflaged and degraded, in the myths and tales of the primordial “Paradise,” in the initiations and narratives of shamans and medicine men, in religious symbolism (symbols of the Center of the World, magical flight and ascension, sky and light symbols, etc.), and in certain types of cosmogonic myths. Much could be said on the problem of a Supreme Being being forgotten on the “conscious” level of collective religious life and of his larval survival on the level of the “unconscious” or on the plane of symbol or, finally, in the ecstatic experiences of some privileged individuals. But to discuss this problem would take us too far from our subject. We will only say that the survival of a Supreme Being in symbols or in individual ecstatic experiences is not without consequences for the religious history of archaic humanity. Sometimes such ecstatic experience or prolonged meditation on one of the celestial symbols will be enough to bring a strong religious personality

⁷ J. G. Frazer, *The Worship of Nature* (London, 1926), p. 631.

The murdered divinity

Besides the Supreme and Creator Gods who become *dei otiosi* and vanish, the history of religions knows Gods who disappear from the surface of the Earth, but disappear because they were put to death by men (more precisely, by the mythical Ancestors). Unlike the "death" of the *deus otiosus*, which leaves only a gap that is quickly filled by other religious Figures, the violent death of these divinities is *creative*. Something of great importance for human life appears as the result of their death. Nor is this all: the new thing thus shares in the substance of the slain divinity and hence in some sort continues his existence. Murdered *in illo tempore*, the divinity survives in the rites by which the murder is periodically re-enacted; or, in other cases, he survives primarily in the living forms (animals, plants) that sprang from his body.

The murdered divinity is *never* forgotten, though men may forget one or another detail of his myth. It is the less possible to forget him because it is primarily after his death that he becomes indispensable to mankind. We shall presently see that in many cases he is present in man's very body, especially through the foodstuffs that he eats. Furthermore, the death of the divinity radically changes man's mode of being. In some myths man, too, becomes mortal and sexed. In others the murder inspires the scenario of an initiatory ritual, that is, of the ceremony that transforms the "natural" man (the child) into cultural man.

The morphology of these divinities is extremely rich and their myths are numerous. Nevertheless, we find certain essential common features: these divinities *are not cosmogonic*; they appeared on Earth *after* the Creation and did not re-

The African example now to be given is that of a secret society common to the Mandja and the Banda, but there is reason to believe that the same scenario is found on more archaic levels of culture. The society is named Ngakola and its initiation rituals re-enact the following myth: In times past Ngakola lived on Earth. His body was very black and covered with long hair. No one knew where he came from, but he lived in the bush. He had the power to kill a man and bring him back to life. He said to men: "Send me people, I will eat them and vomit them up renewed!" His advice was obeyed; but since Ngakola gave back only half of those he had swallowed, men decided to destroy him. They gave him "great quantities of manioc to eat in which stones had been mixed; thus they weakened the monster and were able to kill him with knives and assegais." This myth provides the basis for and justifies the rituals of the secret society. A flat sacred stone plays a great part in the ceremonies. According to tradition this sacred stone was taken from Ngakola's belly. The neophyte is put in a hut that symbolizes the monster's body. There he hears Ngakola's dismal voice, there he is whipped and tortured; for he is told that "he is now in Ngakola's belly" and being digested. The other initiates sing in chorus: "Ngakola, take our entrails, Ngakola, take our livers!" After other ordeals the master initiator finally announces that Ngakola, who had eaten the neophyte, has now vomited him up.¹¹

As we said, this myth and ritual resemble other African initiations which are archaic in type. For African puberty rituals that include circumcision can be reduced to the follow-

¹¹ E. Anderson, cited in *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp. 204-205.

beings. As for the murdered *dema*-divinity, she survives both in her own "creations" (food, plants, animals, etc.) and in the house of the dead into which she was changed, or in the "mode of being of death," which she established by her own demise. We could say that the *dema*-divinity "camouflages" her existence in the various modes of existing that she inaugurated by her violent death: the underground realm of the dead, the plants and animals that sprang from her dismembered body, sexuality, the new kind of existence on Earth (that is, being mortal). The violent death of the *dema*-divinity is not only a "creative" death, it is also a way of being continually present in the life of men and even in their death. For by feeding on the plants and animals that sprang from her body, men actually feed on the very substance of the *dema*-divinity. Hainuwele, for example, survives in the coconut, the tubers, and the pigs that men eat. But, as Jensen has well shown,¹⁶ slaughtering the pig is a "re-presentation" of Hainuwele's murder. And its repetition has no other meaning than to recall the divine exemplary act that gave birth to everything that exists on Earth today.

For the paleo-cultivators, then, the "essential" is concentrated in this primordial murder. And since religious life consists primarily in recalling this act, the worst sin is to "forget" any episode of the primordial divine drama. The different moments of religious life continually evoke the event that took place *in illo tempore* and thus help man to remain conscious of the divine origin of the present World. As Jensen says,¹⁷ the *puberty ceremonies* recall the fact that man's capacity to procreate derives from the first mythical murder,

¹⁶ Cf. *Mythes et cultes chez les peuples primitifs*, pp. 189 ff.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

and at the same time show that mortality is inseparable from procreation. The *funeral ceremonies*, which are concerned with the journey of the deceased to the realm of the dead, recall that the journey is only a repetition of the first such journey, performed by the *dema*-divinity. But it is the reiteration of the slaying of the *dema*-divinity that constitutes the essential element. *Human sacrifices* or *animal sacrifices* are only a solemn commemoration of the primordial murder. And *cannibalism* is explained by the same idea that is implicit in the eating of tubers—that, in one way or another, men are always eating the divinity.

The religious ceremonies are, then, festivals of memory. "Knowing" means learning the central myth (the murder of the divinity and its consequences) and endeavoring never to forget it. The real sacrilege is to *forget* the divine act. "Wrong," "sin," "sacrilege" is "not remembering" that the present form of human existence is the result of a divine act. For example, among the Wemale the Moon is a *dema*-divinity; it is believed to have its menstrual period at the new moon and to remain invisible for three nights. This is why menstruating women are isolated in special huts. Any infraction of this interdict requires an expiatory ceremony. The woman brings an animal to the cult house, where the influential men are gathered, confesses her guilt, and goes away. The men sacrifice the animal, roast it, and eat it. This killing rite is a commemoration of the first blood sacrifice, that is, of the primordial murder. "The sacrilege of *not having remembered* is logically expiated by *remembering with special intensity*. And because of its original meaning, blood sacrifice is a particularly intense 'reminder' of this sort."¹⁸

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

of this short book to examine them all. We may say here, however, that the celestial Supreme Being and Creator recovers his religious activity only in certain pastoral cultures (especially among the Turco-Mongols) and in the monotheism of Moses, in the reform of Zarathustra, and in Islam. Even when his name is still remembered—Anu of the Mesopotamians, El of the Canaanites, Dyaus of the Vedic Indians, Ouranos of the Greeks—the Supreme Being no longer plays an important role in religious life and is but little represented in mythology (sometimes he is completely absent from it—e.g., Dyaus). The “passivity” of Ouranos as *deus otiosus* is plastically expressed by his castration: he has become “impotent” and unable to take part in the affairs of the World. In Vedic India Varuna supplanted Dyaus, but he in his turn first gives way before a young warrior god, Indra, then is completely supplanted by Vishnu and Shiva. El yields the primacy to Ba'al as Anu does to Marduk. Except for Marduk, all these Supreme Gods are no longer “creative” in the active sense. They did not create the World, they only organized it and assumed the responsibility for maintaining order and fertility in it. Primarily, they are Fecundators, like Zeus or Ba'al who, by their hierogamies with the Earth goddesses, ensure the fertility of the fields and the abundance of harvests.¹⁹ Marduk himself is not the creator of *this World*, of the Universe as it exists today. Another “World”—almost unthinkable for us, because fluid, an Ocean not a Cosmos—existed before this one: it was the World ruled by Tiamat and her Spouse, in which three generations of God lived.

These few indications will suffice. What must be stressed is the fact that the great mythologies of Euro-Asiatic poly-

¹⁹ Cf. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 64–93.

But
 Anu
 and
 Indra
 are not
 inferior
 gods.
 On the
 contrary.

back"—no longer a *regressus* obtained by ritual means, but a "going back" accomplished by an effort of thought. In this sense it could be said that the earliest philosophical speculations derive from mythologies: systematic thought endeavors to identify and understand the "absolute beginning" of which the cosmogonies tell, to unveil the mystery of the Creation of the World, in short, the mystery of the appearance of Being.

But we shall see that the "demythicization" of Greek religion and the triumph, with Socrates and Plato, of strict and systematic philosophy, did not finally do away with mythical thought. Then too, it is difficult to imagine a radical outmoding of mythological thought as long as the prestige of the "origins" remains intact and as long as *forgetting* what took place *in illo tempore*—or in a transcendental World—is regarded as the chief obstacle to knowledge or salvation. We shall see to what an extent Plato is still a partisan of this archaic mode of thought. And venerable mythological themes still survive in the cosmology of Aristotle.

In all probability, the Greek genius left to itself and its own devices could not have exorcised mythical thought, even if the last God had been dethroned and his myths brought down to the level of children's tales. For, on the one hand, the Greek philosophical genius accepted the essence of mythical thought, the eternal return of things, the cyclic vision of cosmic and human life, and, on the other hand, the Greek mind did not consider that History could become an object of knowledge. Greek physics and metaphysics developed some basic themes of mythical thought: the importance of the origin, the *arche*; the essential that precedes human existence; the determinative role of memory, and so on. This, of course, does not mean that there is no solution of continuity between

Greek myth and philosophy. But we can easily understand that philosophical thought could employ and continue the mythical vision of cosmic reality and human existence.

It is only through the discovery of History—more precisely by the awakening of the historical consciousness in Judaeo-Christianity and its propagation by Hegel and his successors—it is only through the radical assimilation of the new mode of being represented by human existence in the World that myth could be left behind. But we hesitate to say that mythical thought has been abolished. As we shall soon see, it managed to survive, through radically changed (if not perfectly camouflaged). And the astonishing fact is that, more than anywhere else, it survives in historiography!

VII.

Mythologies of Memory and Forgetting

When a yogi falls in love with a queen . . .

MATSYENDRANĀTH and Gorakhnāth are among the most popular master yogis of the Indian Middle Ages. Their magical exploits have brought forth a rich and extensive epic literature. One of the central episodes of this mythological folklore is the amnesia of Matsyendranāth. According to one of the best-known versions the master, traveling in Ceylon, fell in love with the queen and went to live in her palace, completely forgetting his identity. A Nepalese variant relates that Matsyendranāth succumbed to temptation in the following way: while his body lay guarded by a disciple, his spirit entered the corpse of a king who had just died and restored it to life. (This is the well-known yogic miracle of "entering another's body"; the saints sometimes make use of this method to enjoy the pleasures of love without polluting themselves.) Finally, according to the poem *Goraksha-vijaya*, Matsyendranāth was made a prisoner by the women of the country of Kadali.

On receiving news of his captivity, Gorakhnāth realizes that his master is doomed to die. He accordingly descends into the realm of Yama (Death), searches the Book of Fates, finds the leaf containing the destiny of his *guru*, and erases

his name from the list of the dead. "He then goes to Matsyendranāth, in Kadali, presenting himself under the form of a dancing girl, and falls to dancing, at the same time singing enigmatic songs. Little by little, Matsyendranāth remembers his true identity; he understands that the 'way of the flesh' leads to death, that his 'oblivion' was, basically, forgetfulness of his true and immortal nature, and that the 'charms of Kadali' represent the mirages of profane life."¹ Gorakhnāth urges him to return to the way of Yoga and make his body "perfect." He tells him that it was Durgā who had brought on the "forgetfulness" that had almost cost him immortality. The spell, Gorakhnāth adds, symbolizes the eternal curse of ignorance laid on the human being by "Nature" (that is, Durgā).²

This mythical theme can be analyzed into the following elements: (1) A spiritual Master falls in love with a queen or is made prisoner by women; (2) in either case, there is a physical love that immediately provokes a state of amnesia in the Master; (3) his disciple seeks him out and, through a series of symbols (dance movements, secret signs, mysterious language), helps him to recover his memory, that is, consciousness of his identity; (4) the Master's "forgetfulness" is assimilated to death, and—vice versa—his "awakening," or *anamnesis*, proves to be a prerequisite for immortality.

The central motif—especially the amnesia-captivity brought on by an immersion in Life, and the *anamnesis* procured by the signs and mysterious words of a disciple—rather suggests the celebrated Gnostic myth of the "Saved Saviour," as found

¹ M. Eliade, *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom* (New York, 1958), p. 314.

² *Ibid.*, p. 314.

in the *Hymn of the Pearl*. As we shall see later, there are also other analogies between certain aspects of Indian thought and Gnosticism. But in this particular case there is no need to assume any Gnostic influence. Matsyendranāth's captivity and forgetting are a pan-Indian motif. Both misfortunes plastically express the fall of the spirit (the Self; *ātman*, *purusha*) into the circle of existences and, as a consequence, loss of consciousness of the Self. Indian literature uses images of binding, chaining, and captivity interchangeably with those of forgetting, unknowing, and sleep to signify the human condition; contrariwise, images of being freed from bonds and the tearing of a veil (or the removal of a bandage from the eyes), of memory, remembering, being awakened, the waking state, express abolishing (or transcending) the human condition, freedom, deliverance (*moksa*, *mukti*, *nirvāna*, etc.).

Indian symbolism of forgetting and recollection

The *Dīghanikāya* (I, 19–22) affirms that the Gods fall from Heaven when their "memory fails and they are of confused memory"; on the contrary, those Gods who do not forget are immutable, eternal, of a nature that knows no change. "Forgetting" is equivalent, on the one hand, to "sleep" and, on the other, to loss of the self, that is, to disorientation, blindness (having the eyes blindfolded). The *Chandogya Upanishad* (VI, 14, 1–2) tells of a man whom bandits carried far from his city, blindfolded, and abandoned in a lonely place. The man begins to cry: "I have been led here with my eyes bandaged, I have been left here with my eyes bandaged!" Someone removes the blindfold and points out the direction of his city. Asking his way from village to village,

the man manages to reach home. In the same way, the text adds, he who has a competent Master becomes able to free himself from the blindfolds of ignorance and inevitably attains perfection.

Sankara's commentary on this passage is famous. It is the same, he explains, with the man carried by thieves far from Being (that is, from the *ātman-Brahman*) and trapped in this body. The thieves are the false ideas of "merit, demerit," and the like. His eyes are blindfolded with the blindfold of illusion, and he is hobbled by his desire for his wife, his son, his friends, his cattle, and so on. "I am the son of so-and-so, I am happy, or unhappy, I am intelligent, or stupid, I am pious, etc. How shall I live? where is there a way of escape? where is my salvation?" So he cries out, caught in a monstrous net—until the moment when he meets one who is conscious of true Being (*Brahman-ātman*), who is freed from slavery, happy, and, in addition, full of sympathy for others. From him he learns the way of knowledge and the vanity of the world. Thus the man who was the prisoner of his own illusions is liberated from dependence on worldly things. Then he recognizes his true Being and understands that he is not the lost wanderer he had thought himself to be. On the contrary, he understands that what Being is, is the very same thing that he, too, is. His eyes are freed from the bandage of illusion created by ignorance (*avidyā*), and he is like the man from Gandhāra returning home, that is, rediscovering the *ātman*, full of joy and serenity.³

We recognize the clichés through which Indian speculation attempts to make the paradoxical situation of the Self comprehensible: entangled in the illusions created and fed by its

³ Sankara, commentary on the *Chandogya Upanishad*, VI, 14, 1–2.

temporal existence, the Self (*ātman*) suffers the consequences of this “ignorance” until the day it discovers that it was only *seemingly* involved in the World. Sāmkhya and Yoga take a similar position: the Self (*purusha*) is only apparently enslaved, and liberation (*mukti*) is simply its *becoming conscious* of its eternal freedom. “I believe that I suffer, I believe that I am bound, I desire liberation. At the moment when—having ‘awakened’—I understand that this ‘I’ is a product of matter (*prakṛti*), I at the same time understand that all existence has been only a chain of moments of suffering and that true Spirit ‘impassively contemplated’ the drama of ‘personality.’”⁴

It is of importance to note that for Sāmkhya-Yoga, as well as for Vedānta, liberation can be compared to an “awakening” or to a new consciousness of a situation that existed from the beginning but that one was unable to *realize*. From a certain point of view “ignorance”—which, in the last analysis, is an *ignorance of oneself*—can be thought of as a “forgetting” of the true Self (*ātman*, *purusha*). “Wisdom” (*jñāna*, *vidyā*, etc.), which by tearing the veil of *māyā* or overcoming ignorance makes liberation possible, is an “awakening.” The Awakened One par excellence, the Buddha, possesses absolute omniscience. We saw in an earlier chapter that, like other sages and yogis, Buddha remembered his former lives. But, the Buddhist texts insist, while the sages and yogis were able to remember a certain number of existences, even a considerable number, only the Buddha was able to know them *all*. This is a way of saying that only the Buddha was omniscient.

⁴ M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

the "popular" beliefs and the "philosophic" speculations. It is this continuity which is of particular concern to us.

The Goddess *Mnemosyne*, personification of "Memory," sister of *Kronos* and *Okeanos*, is the mother of the Muses. She is omniscient; according to *Hesiod* (*Theogony* 32, 38), she knows "all that has been, all that is, all that will be." When the poet is possessed by the Muses, he draws directly from *Mnemosyne's* store of knowledge, that is, especially from the knowledge of "origins," of "beginnings," of genealogies. "The Muses sing, beginning with the beginning—*ex arkhēs* (*Theog.* 45, 115)—the first appearance of the world, the genesis of the gods, the birth of humanity. The past thus revealed is much more than the antecedent of the present; it is its source. In going back to it, recollection does not seek to situate events in a temporal frame but to reach the depths of being, to discover the original, the primordial reality from which the cosmos issued and which makes it possible to understand becoming as a whole."⁵

By virtue of the primordial memory that he is able to recover, the poet inspired by the Muses has access to the original realities. These realities were manifested in the mythical Times of the beginning and constitute the foundation of this World. But just because they appeared *ab origine*, they are no longer perceivable in current experience. J. P. Vernant rightly compares the poet's inspiration to an "evocation" of a dead person from the world below or to a *descensus ad inferos* undertaken by a living man in order to learn what he seeks to know. "The privilege that *Mnemosyne* confers on the

⁵ J. P. Vernant, "Aspects mythiques de la mémoire en Grèce," *Journal de Psychologie* (1959), p. 7. Cf. also Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Recollection, Indian and Platonic," Supplement to the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, No. 3 (April-June, 1944).

bard is that of a contact with the other world, the possibility of entering it and freely returning from it. The past appears as a dimension of the beyond."⁶

This is why, in so far as it is "forgotten," the "past"—historical or primordial—is homologized with death. The fountain *Lethe*, "forgetfulness," is a necessary part of the realm of Death. The dead are those who have lost their memories. On the other hand, certain privileged mortals, like *Tiresias* or *Amphiaraus*, preserve their memory after death. To make him immortal, *Hermes* gives his son *Aethalides* "an unchangeable memory." According to *Apollonius of Rhodes*, even when he crossed *Acheron*, forgetfulness did not submerge his soul; and though he inhabits now the realm of shades, now that of the sun's light, he always remembers what he has seen.⁷

But the "mythology of Memory and Forgetting" changes, and becomes enriched by an eschatological meaning, when a doctrine of transmigration takes shape. It is no longer the primordial past, but the series of *former personal lives* of which a knowledge is important. The function of *Lethe* is reversed. The soul newly freed from the body no longer finds in its waters forgetfulness of earthly life. On the contrary, *Lethe* blots out memory of the celestial world in the soul returning to earth to be reincarnated. "Forgetting" no longer symbolizes death, but returning to life. The soul that has been rash enough to drink from the fount of *Lethe* ("gorged with forgetfulness and vice," as *Plato* puts it, *Phaedrus* 248 c), is reincarnated and again cast into the cycle of becoming. In the gold plates worn by initiates in the *Orphico-Pythag-*

⁶ J. P. Vernant, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁷ *Argonautica*, I, 643, quoted by Vernant, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

world.²³ "Shake off the drunkenness in which thou hast slumbered, awake and behold me!" says a Manichaean text from Turfan.²⁴ And in another we find: "Awake, soul of splendour, from the slumber of drunkenness into which thou hast fallen, . . . follow me to the place of the exalted earth where thou dwelledst from the beginning."²⁵ A Mandaean text tells of the celestial messenger's waking Adam and continues: "I have come and will instruct thee, Adam, and release thee out of this world. Hearken and hear and be instructed, and rise up victorious to the place of light."²⁶ The instruction also includes the injunction not to succumb again to sleep. "Slumber not nor sleep, and forget not that which thy Lord hath charged thee."²⁷

Of course, these formulas are not used only by the Gnostics. The *Epistle to the Ephesians* (5:14) contains this anonymous quotation: "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." The motif of sleep and waking recurs in Hermetic literature. We find in the *Poimandres*: "O ye people, earthborn men, who have abandoned yourselves to drunkenness and sleep and to ignorance of God—become sober! cease from your intoxication, from the enchantment of irrational sleep!"²⁸

It is significant here that overcoming sleep and remaining awake for a long period is a typical initiatory ordeal. It is already found on the archaic levels of culture. Among some Australian tribes novices undergoing initiation are not allowed

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁸ *Corpus Hermeticum*, I, 27 f.; H. Jonas, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

As we have seen, Indian philosophical speculation, especially Sāmkhya-Yoga, takes a similar position. The Self (*purusha*) is essentially a "stranger" and has nothing to do with the World (*prakṛti*). As Isvara Krishna writes (*Sāmkhya-kārikā* 19), the Self (the Spirit) "is alone, indifferent, a mere inactive spectator" in the drama of Life and History. Indeed, he goes even further: if it is true that the cycle of transmigration is prolonged by ignorance and "sins," the cause of the "fall of the Self" into Life, the origin of the relation (which is, however, illusory) between the Self (*purusha*) and Matter (*prakṛti*), are insoluble problems, or, more precisely, insoluble in the present human condition. In any case, just as for the Gnostics, it is not an original (i.e., human) sin that precipitated the Self into the round of existences.

For the purpose of our investigation, the importance of the Gnostic myth—as also the importance of Indian philosophical speculation—lies primarily in the fact that they reinterpret man's relation to the primordial drama that brought him into being. As in the archaic religions studied in the preceding chapters, for the Gnostic too, it is essential to know—or, rather, to recollect—the drama that took place in mythical Times. But, unlike a man of the archaic societies—who, learning the myths, assumes the consequences that follow from those primordial events—the Gnostic learns the myth in order *to dissociate himself from its results*. Once waked from his mortal sleep, the Gnostic (like the disciple of Sāmkhya-Yoga) understands that he bears no responsibility for the primordial catastrophe the myth narrates for him, and that hence he has no *real* relation with Life, the World, and History.

The Gnostic, like the disciple of Sāmkhya-Yoga, has already been punished for the "sin" of *forgetting his true Self*.

the "perfect man." Indeed we could say that, by supplying exemplary models for civic and moral life, Livy and Plutarch played the same role in the education of the European elites as myths did in traditional societies. But it is from the nineteenth century on that historiography has been led to play a role of primary importance. It seems as if Western culture were making a prodigious effort of historiographic *anamnesis*. It seeks to discover, "awaken," and repossess the pasts of the most exotic and the most peripheral societies, from the prehistoric Near East to "primitive" cultures on the verge of extinction. The goal is no less than to revive the *entire past of humanity*. We are witnessing a vertiginous widening of the historical horizon.

This is one of the few encouraging syndromes of the modern world. Western cultural provincialism—which began history with Egypt, literature with Homer, and philosophy with Thales—is being rapidly outmoded. But that is not all: through this historiographic *anamnesis* man enters deep into himself. If we succeed in understanding a contemporary Australian, or his homologue, a paleolithic hunter, we have succeeded in "awakening" in the depths of our being the existential situation and the resultant behavior of a prehistoric humanity. It is not a matter of a mere "external" knowledge, as when we learn the name of the capital of a country or the date of the fall of Constantinople. A true historiographic *anamnesis* finds expression in the discovery of our solidarity with these vanished or peripheral peoples. We have a genuine recovery of the past, even of the "primordial" past revealed by uncovering prehistoric sites or by ethnological investigations. In these last two cases, we are confronted by "forms of life,"

VIII.

Greatness and Decadence of Myths

Keeping the World open

ON THE ARCHAIC levels of culture religion maintains the "opening" toward a superhuman world, the world of axiological values. These values are "transcendent," in the sense that they are held to be revealed by Divine Beings or mythical Ancestors. Hence they constitute absolute values, paradigms for all human activities. As we have seen, these models are conveyed by myths. Myths are the most general and effective means of awakening and maintaining consciousness of another world, a beyond, whether it be the divine world or the world of the Ancestors. This "other world" represents a superhuman, "transcendent" plane, the plane of *absolute realities*. It is the experience of the sacred—that is, an encounter with a trans-human reality—which gives birth to the idea that something *really exists*, that hence there are absolute values capable of guiding man and giving a meaning to human existence. It is, then, through the experience of the sacred that the ideas of *reality*, *truth*, and *significance* first dawn, to be later elaborated and systematized by metaphysical speculations.

The apodictic value of myth is periodically reconfirmed by the rituals. Recollection and re-enactment of the primordial event help "primitive" man to distinguish and hold to the

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real. By virtue of the continual repetition of a paradigmatic act, something shows itself to be *fixed* and *enduring* in the universal flux. This periodic reiteration of what was done *in illo tempore* makes it inescapably certain that something *exists absolutely*. This "something" is "sacred," that is, trans-human and transmundane, but it is accessible to human experience. "Reality" unveils itself and admits of being constructed from a "transcendent" level, but this "transcendence" can be ritually experienced and finally becomes an integral part of human life.

This "transcendent" world of the Gods, the Heroes, and the mythical Ancestors is accessible because archaic man does not accept the irreversibility of Time. As we have repeatedly seen, ritual abolishes profane, chronological Time and recovers the sacred Time of myth. Man becomes contemporary with the exploits that the Gods performed *in illo tempore*. On the one hand, this revolt against the irreversibility of Time helps man to "construct reality"; on the other, it frees him from the weight of dead Time, assures him that he is able to abolish the past, to begin his life anew, and to re-create his World.

The imitation of the paradigmatic acts of the Gods, the Heroes, and the mythical Ancestors does not produce an "eternal repetition of the same thing," a total cultural immobility. Ethnology knows of no single people that has not changed in the course of time, that has not had a "history." At first sight the man of the archaic societies seems only to repeat the same archetypal act forever. But actually he is tirelessly conquering the World, organizing it, transforming the landscape of nature into a cultural milieu. For by virtue of the exemplary model revealed by the cosmogonic myth,

man, too, becomes creative. Though the myths, by presenting themselves as sacrosanct models, would seem to paralyze human initiative, actually they stimulate man to create, they are constantly opening new perspectives to his inventiveness.

Myth assures man that what he is about to do *has already been done*, in other words, it helps him to overcome doubts as to the result of his undertaking. There is no reason to hesitate before setting out on a sea voyage, because the mythical Hero has already made it in a fabulous Time. All that is needed is to follow his example. Similarly, there is no reason to fear settling in an unknown, wild territory, because one knows what one has to do. One has merely to repeat the cosmogonic ritual, whereupon the unknown territory (= "Chaos") is transformed into "Cosmos," becomes an *imago mundi* and hence a ritually legitimized "habitation." The existence of an exemplary model does not fetter creative innovation. The possibilities for applying the mythical model are endless.

The man of the societies in which myth is a living thing lives in a World that, though "in cipher" and mysterious, is "open." The World "speaks" to man, and to understand its language he needs only to know the myths and decipher the symbols. Through the myths and symbols of the Moon man grasps the mysterious solidarity among temporality, birth, death and resurrection, sexuality, fertility, rain, vegetation, and so on. The World is no longer an opaque mass of objects arbitrarily thrown together, it is a living Cosmos, articulated and meaningful. In the last analysis, *the World reveals itself as language*. It speaks to man through its own mode of being, through its structures and its rhythms.

That the World exists is due to a divine act of creation,

into "objects of knowledge." These realities still keep their original ontological condition.

Man and the World

In such a World man does not feel shut up in his own mode of existence. He too is "open." He achieves communication with the World because he uses the same language—symbol. If the World speaks to him through its heavenly bodies, its plants and animals, its rivers and rocks, its seasons and nights, man answers it by his dreams and his imaginative life, by his Ancestors or his totems (at once "Nature," supernatural, and human beings), by his ability to die and return to life ritually in initiation ceremonies (like the Moon and vegetation), by his power to incarnate a spirit by putting on a mask, and so on. If for archaic man the World is transparent, he feels that he too is "looked at" and understood by the World. It is not only the game animal that looks at him and understands him (very often the animal allows itself to be caught because it knows the man is hungry), but also the rock or the tree or the river. Each has its "history" to tell him, advice to give him.

Even while he knows that he is a human being, and accepts himself as such, the man of the archaic societies knows, too, that he is something more. He knows, for example, that his Ancestor was an animal, or that he can die and come back to life (initiation, shamanic trance), that he can influence the crops by his orgies (in other words, that he can do to his wife as the Sky does to the Earth, or that he can play the role of the hoe and she that of the furrow). In more complex

cultures man knows that his breaths are Winds, that his bones are like mountains, that a fire burns in his belly, that his navel can become a "Center of the World," and so on.

But it would be wrong to suppose that this "openness" to the World has its counterpart in a bucolic conception of life. The myths of the "primitives" and the rituals that stem from them show us no archaic Arcadia. By assuming the responsibility for making the vegetable world prosper, the paleo-cultivators also accepted torturing victims for the benefit of crops, sexual orgies, cannibalism, head-hunting. This is a tragic conception of life, resulting from the religious valuation of torture and violent death. A myth like that of Hainuwele, and the entire socio-religious complex that it articulates and justifies, obliges man to assume his condition of a sexed and mortal being, condemned to kill and to work in order to feed himself. The vegetable and animal world "speaks" to him of its origin, that is, in the last analysis, of Hainuwele; and the paleo-cultivator understands its language and, in so doing, finds a religious meaning in everything around him and in everything that he does. But this obliges him to accept cruelty and murder as integral to his mode of being. To be sure, cruelty, torture, and murder are not forms of conduct peculiar only to "primitives." They are found throughout the course of History, sometimes to a paroxysmic degree never reached in the archaic societies. The difference lies primarily in the fact that, for primitives, this violent behavior has a religious value and is imitated from transhuman models. This conception survived quite late into History; Genghis Khan's mass exterminations, for example, still claimed to have a religious justification.

Myth, in itself, is not a guarantee of "goodness" or morality.

Its function is to reveal models and, in so doing, to give a meaning to the World and to human life. This is why its role in the constitution of man is immense. It is through myth, as we said before, that the ideas of *reality*, *value*, *transcendence* slowly dawn. Through myth, the World can be apprehended as a perfectly articulated, intelligible, and significant Cosmos. In telling how things were made, myth reveals by whom and why they were made and under what circumstances. All these "revelations" involve man more or less directly, for they make up a Sacred History.

Imagination and creativity

In short, myths are a constant reminder that grandiose events took place on Earth and that this "glorious past" is partly recoverable. The imitation of paradigmatic acts also has a positive aspect: the rite forces man to transcend his limitations, obliges him to take his place with the Gods and the mythical Heroes so that he can perform their deeds. Directly or indirectly, myth "elevates" man. This becomes even clearer if we bear in mind that in archaic societies recitation of the mythological traditions remains the prerogative of a few individuals. In some societies the reciters are recruited among the shamans and medicine men or among members of the secret societies. In any case, he who recites the myths has had to prove his vocation and receive instruction from the old masters. He is always someone notable either for his mnemonic capacity or for his imagination or literary talent.

The recitation is not necessarily stereotyped. Sometimes the variants depart considerably from the prototype. Obviously, the investigations conducted in our day by ethnologists and

dwell for a little on Greek mythology—less on what it represents in itself than on some of its relations to Christianity.

The problem of Greek myth is one to give the investigator pause. Only in Greece did myth inspire and guide not only epic poetry, tragedy, and comedy but also the plastic arts; on the other hand, only in the culture of Greece was myth submitted to a long and penetrating analysis, from which it emerged radically “demystified.” The rise of Ionian rationalism coincides with a more and more damaging criticism of the “classic” mythology as it found expression in the works of Homer and Hesiod. If in every European language the word “myth” denotes a “fiction,” it is because the Greeks proclaimed it to be such twenty-five centuries ago.

Willy-nilly, every attempt to interpret Greek myth, at least within a culture of the Western type, is in some sort conditioned by the critique of the Greek rationalists. As we shall see in a moment, this critique was seldom directed against what we have called “mythical thought” or the resultant type of behavior. The criticisms were aimed primarily at the doings of the Gods as narrated by Homer and Hesiod. We may well wonder what a Xenophanes would have thought of the Polynesian cosmogonic myth or of a speculative Vedic myth such as that in *Rig Veda* X, 129. Obviously, we cannot know. But it is important to emphasize the fact that the target of the rationalists’ attacks was primarily the adventures and arbitrary decisions of the Gods, their capricious and unjust behavior, their “immorality.” And the main critique was made in the name of an increasingly higher idea of God: a true God could not be unjust, immoral, jealous, vindictive, ignorant, and the like. The same critique was later renewed

bones with a layer of fat, and the flesh and entrails with the stomach. Attracted by the fat, Zeus had chosen the poorer share for the Gods, leaving the flesh and entrails to men (*Theogony*, 534 ff.). Now, Karl Meuli¹ has compared this Olympian sacrifice with the rituals of the archaic North Asian hunters; the latter venerate their celestial Supreme Beings by offering them the animal's bones and head. The same ritual custom has survived among the pastoral peoples of Central Asia. What, during an archaic stage of culture, had been considered the most perfect homage to a celestial God had in Greece become the consummate example of cheating, the crime of *lèse-majesté* against Zeus, the supreme God. We do not know when this shift of the original ritual meaning occurred, nor how Prometheus came to be accused of the crime. We have given the example only to show that Hesiod cites extremely archaic myths, rooted deep in pre-History; but these myths had undergone a long process of transformation and modification before the poet recorded them.

Obviously, Hesiod does not confine himself to recording myths. He systematizes them and, by so doing, already introduces a rational principle into these creations of mythical thought. Hesiod understands the genealogy of the Gods as a successive series of procreations. For him, procreation is the ideal way of coming into existence. W. Jaeger has rightly brought out the rational nature of this conception, in which mythical thought is given articulation by causal thought.² Hesiod's idea that Eros was the first God to appear after Chaos

¹ Karl Meuli, "Griechische Opferbräuche," *Phyllobolia für Peter Von der Mühl* (Basel, 1946), pp. 185-288.

² Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* (2nd ed., New York, 1945), vol. I, pp. 65 ff.; *id.*, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers* (Oxford, 1947), p. 12.

already suggested that the names of the Gods in Homer represented either the human faculties or the natural elements. But it was especially the Stoics who developed the allegorical interpretation of Homeric mythology and, in general, of all religious traditions. Chrysippus reduced the Greek Gods to physical or ethical principles. In the *Quaestiones Homericae* of Heraclitus (first century A.D.) there is a whole series of allegorical interpretations: for example, when the myth tells that Zeus bound Hera, the episode really signifies that the ether is the limit of the air, and so on. The allegorical method was applied by Philo to decipher and illustrate the "enigmas" of the Old Testament. As we shall see later, allegorical interpretation of a sort, particularly typology (that is, the correspondence between the two Testaments), was freely used by the Fathers, especially Origen.

Some scholars hold that allegory was never very popular in Greece and had more success in Alexandria and Rome. It is none the less true that various allegorical interpretations "saved" Homer and Hesiod in the eyes of the Greek elites and made it possible for the Homeric Gods to retain a high cultural value. The rescue of the Homeric pantheon and mythology is not the work of the allegorical method alone. At the beginning of the third century B.C. Euhemerus published a romance in the form of a philosophical voyage, *Sacred Writing* (*Hyera anagraphe*), the success of which was great and immediate. Ennius translated it into Latin; indeed, it was the first Greek text to be translated. Euhemerus believed that he had discovered the origin of the Gods: they were ancient kings deified. Here was another "rational" way to preserve the Gods of Homer. They now had a "reality": it was historical (or, more precisely, prehistorical); their

Gods or in the original meaning of their myths. All this mythological heritage could be accepted and assimilated by Christianity because it no longer carried living religious values. It had become a "cultural treasure." In the last analysis, the classical heritage was "saved" by the poets, the artists, and the philosophers. From the end of antiquity—when no cultivated person any longer took them literally—the Gods and their myths were conveyed to the Renaissance and the seventeenth century by *works*, by creations of literature and art.

Written documents and oral traditions

Through *culture*, a desacralized religious universe and a demythicized mythology formed and nourished Western civilization—that is, the only civilization that has succeeded in becoming exemplary. There is more here than a triumph of *logos* over *mythos*. The victory is that of *the book* over oral tradition, of the document—especially of the written document—over a living experience whose only means of expression were preliterate. A great many antique written texts and works of art have perished. Yet enough remain to enable the admirable Mediterranean civilization to be reconstructed in outline. This is not the case with the preliterate forms of culture, in Greece as well as in ancient Europe. We know very little about the popular religions and mythologies of the Mediterranean, and that little we owe to the monuments and a few written documents. In some cases—the Eleusinian mysteries, for example—the scantness of our information is explained by the fact that initiatory secrecy was well kept. In other cases what we know of one or another popular belief or cult is due to some lucky chance. To give only one

example, if Pausanias had not recorded his personal experience at the oracle of Trophonius in Lebadeia (IX, 39), we should have had to make do with the few vague allusions in Hesiod, Euripides, and Aristophanes. In other words, we should not have suspected the significance and importance of that religious center.

The "classic" Greek myths already represent the triumph of the literary *work* over religious *belief*. Not a single Greek myth has come down to us in its cult context. We know the myths as literary and artistic "documents," not as the sources, or expressions, of a religious experience bound up with a rite. The whole *living* and popular side of Greek religion escapes us, precisely because it was not systematically expressed in writing.

We must not judge the vitality of Greek religious feeling and practice solely by the degree to which the Olympian myths and cults found adherents. Criticism of the Homeric myths did not necessarily imply rationalism or atheism. The fact that the *classic forms* of mythical thought had been "compromised" by the rationalists' criticism does not mean that all mythical thought was discarded. The intellectual elites had discovered other mythologies able to justify and articulate new religious concepts. On the one hand, there were the Mystery religions, from Eleusis and the Orphico-Pythagorean brotherhoods to the Greco-Oriental mysteries that were so popular in Imperial Rome and the provinces. In addition, there were what could be called the mythologies of the soul, the soteriologies elaborated by the Neo-Pythagoreans, the Neo-Platonists, and the Gnostics. To all this we must add the spread of solar mythologies and cults, the astral and funerary

"elites" find in the extravagance and unintelligibility of modern works the opportunity for an initiatory gnosis. It is a "new World" being built up from ruins and enigmas, an almost private World, which one would like to keep for oneself and a very few initiates. But the prestige of difficulty and incomprehensibility is such that, very soon, the "public" too is conquered and proclaims its total acceptance of the elite's discoveries.

The destruction of artistic languages was accomplished by cubism, dadaism, and surrealism, by atonality and "musique concrète," by James Joyce, Becket, and Ionesco. Only the epigones are left furiously demolishing what has already been demolished. For, as we pointed out in an earlier chapter, the genuine creators are not willing to take their stand on ruins. Everything leads us to believe that the reduction of "artistic Universes" to the primordial state of *materia prima* is only a phase in a more complex process; just as in the cyclic conceptions of the archaic and traditional societies "Chaos," the regression of all forms to the indistinction of the *materia prima*, is followed by a new Creation, which can be homologized with a cosmogony.

We cannot here develop and refine these few observations, for the crisis in the modern arts is only of subsidiary concern to our study. Yet we must dwell for a moment on the situation and the role of literature, especially of epic literature, for it is not unrelated to mythology and mythical behavior. We do not intend to discuss the "origins" of epic literature; it is well known that, like the other literary genres, the epic and the novel continue mythological narrative, though on a different plane and in pursuit of different ends. In both cases