



X. India and the Mythopoetic Mind of Man (1967)

Lecture given by Heinrich Blücher Bard College, April 27, 1967

"Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch, wohnet Der Mensch auf dieser Erde."

Hölderlin.

That means:

"Full of merit, yet poetically, is man living on this earth."

Yet Poetically! The first impact the world makes on man is received collectively. In the time of myths then, we find collective consciousness. We can get an idea of what this means if we look closer at our own manipulators of public opinion, (the press, the media, and so on), for they too are really inventors of legends and myths. They have given us the myth of America, the myth of this, the myth of that, and they are also trying to build a collective consciousness. In a way this would be ideal for them, because in a collective consciousness consensus would indeed be in, automatically, so to speak, hence the time of myth is always a time of consensus, because collective consciousness is really there. Why?

Man, in the beginning, does not live alone. He is born into a tribe and he is disciplined by the tribe. That is the mythical time. He organizes this tribe, and everything, every principle of organization that is needed to make this tribe stick together is identified with nature. He needs this, to be able to defend himself against nature. Here we see the strange sociological phenomenon of a group consciousness that is identical with natural consciousness. We now have to see where this leads.

It leads first, to the most primitive steps in the direction of world consciousness and self consciousness imaginable. The fact that man is a being born with world consciousness, that he insists on world consciousness and a little later on self consciousness; this fact is first visible in the mythical world schemes that we can today control by science. Even today we can discover the strangest myths among savage tribes that we meet. Newer ones, bigger ones, some of them crazy and some of them very funny. But if we go back historically (and we can go back very far), we find that when man first appears on the globe he appears in groups. This means that group experience is the first experience he necessarily has, and it is to this that we refer, when we speak about the development of collective consciousness. The time is oral. The tradition is oral. But before it becomes oral it is present in the form of remembrance, and the first remembrances are dramatic, are more showing than talking. Every rain dance, every ritual, every world of rituals, every performance that is made in accord with nature, is repeated again

and again and again. The last movement of a dance is remembered forever, and man develops his memory first according to rituals. Then, and only then, comes speech.

So when we analyze myths we find that almost all the time, at the basis of them lies a dramatic performance. There are no representative powers in myths. Everything is real, or believed to be real. If professor Cassirer thinks he can explain myths symbolically, then the explanation is not valid, because mythical people never do anything symbolically. If they could, then they would already be in the logical age. Their rituals are performed immediately and according to the assumption that they are imitating reality and the world. Now this is strange, isn't it? This insistence of man, even in the earliest times, on getting hold of a kind of world picture. No other creature, no other animal, seems to want that. The world for them is just an environment. Sometimes it is a small environment, at other times it is a large one, but however that might be, their principle task is to orient themselves in these environments.

Man, on the other hand, is a funny being who insists on considering everything he observes. He insists that he experience a world, which, in itself, hangs together. It is a poetic idea. Any time that you create a poem, every element in it must be related to every other element. The poem must form a perfect whole if it is to be a good one. Everything in it must hang together, and so that is why we often call myths and mythical thinking, mytho-poetic thinking. This is so, because it is clear that the main roots of mythical thinking lie in poetry, and it is a very strange kind of poetry. It is a kind of poetry that pretends to truth. It wants to teach the truth, and so it takes itself to be the entire reality. It is not self consciously poetical. Rather, it just is.

This is so, because the first means by which we relate everything to everything else, is strangely enough, not the symbol, but the metaphor. Any poet well knows that with the help of a good metaphor you can unite the most divergent experiences into one. We do that all the time, so in a way poets must know how it feels to make myths, although in reality myths are never made by individuals, only by collective peoples. It is only later that individuals start to make myths (the myth of the Nazis, of the Communists, of the Americans). We call them myths, but we should make a distinction here, because although they start with individuals they are almost always made out of plain lies. They can say, as Picasso once said about his art, that they first invent a lie and then make it stick. That is easy, because in art one does not start with a lie, but only with an experience. But to make a lie stick in politics is very hard work. You need the whole machinery of propaganda, but it can be done. It was done in Germany, to make one so called metaphysical lie stick, and the consequence of this was endless murder. They, (the political ideologists) are not really mythical people. They rather misuse the idea of myth, because it promises absolute unity, and they preach unity and nothing but unity. So we have a race myth, a class myth, and God knows what other kinds of myth.

Georges Sorel, a French philosopher, who was also a kind of socialist, once wrote a book about violence, and he said that the socialists would never arrive at anything unless they could invent a new myth. The myth he proposed was the myth of a general strike. If the majority of workers could be brought to believe in the infallible power of a general strike, then the whole of society could be changed. In Russia and later China, we saw the emergence of a similar myth, only the man who gave it was not Marx, but Trotsky. His myth was the myth of a permanent revolution, and you have that right now in China. They are trying to create a permanent revolution, and God

only knows how long the poor Chinese people can go on. Human beings are not like that. Somehow, things must go back to normal, or otherwise everything will be ruined. So (these ideologists) proudly call themselves myth makers. They have nothing whatsoever to do with real myths.

Myth is an original belief and faith in the world. It is almost as if man says to himself:

"My God. I am presented with a world, and I know this is my world.

I know I have to live here, and so I had better trust and care for this

thing, because otherwise I shall never be comfortable in it."

We start to see one invention after another taking place. At the basis of each of them lies a metaphysical assumption. These are the first metaphysical assumptions ever made. What do I mean by a metaphysical assumption? During the time of myth there is no science, and so science is ruled out. Every metaphysical assumption contains as much factual thinking (real experience) as it contains willful, or wishful and hopeful thinking. It means that man (metaphysically speaking) uses all of his capacities (to think realistically, wishfully, willfully, and hopefully) in the creation of some organic scheme. That makes for the denseness and infinite interpretability of myths. In every piece of myth we analyze we find ourselves first, in a poetic world, then, in a pre-scientific world of cold observed facts, and finally, in a world of plain wishful thinking where the whole scheme no longer seems understandable. We can go on endlessly this way, unless we discover a metaphysical common denominator that will make the entire invention comprehensible. This metaphysical common denominator is the first world view of man.

The first answer that man gives to the tremendous impression that the world makes upon him is a protective one. He uses as much of his free imagination as he can possibly mobilize in order to create an overall meaning to what he is confronted with. How does he proceed? Today, with the help of science, we can analyze many myths. Typology helps us tremendously. Psychology also helps as well as other sciences, and whatever the explanations that they give at least one thing is certain. There is no unity in them. In our own analysis we will consider one big example, and we will handle only this one. That is an example of Indian myths.

The world of Indian myths: What a strange phenomenon. It is the only civilized country (as against tribes that live in isolated areas) where myth still survives. They have been refined into the most subtle kind of religion, a kind of mythical religion. India is the most holy country in the world. It is full of holy men (or holy bums as Kipling once said) and they run all over the country like the cows who are sacred to them. These cows cannot be slaughtered, and so the holy men live in misery for lack of nourishment. The myths that they develop go farther and farther. On each new day newer features are added to this tremendous mythical invention, and there is a good reason for that. Because they could never make the turn to change the world. They have always lived under the same conditions, as a kind of slaves. They had to protect themselves against the world, and so they escaped from it. They are surrounded by a jungle society of ironclad castes. They are fenced in by them, and so the imaginative world in which they live is as rich as none other.

Friedrich Nietzsche once observed that India and England represented the two different poles of the gift of speculative thinking. India is the richest in terms of speculative, or metaphysical thinking. What is the world picture of this type of man? Here, in the beginning, we see a kind of hidden history. The development of man's world consciousness in union with the development of his self consciousness. That is really all that interests me in this philosophic course. The fact that man can orient himself in the world, can learn more and more about himself, and finally, in the end, can even come to himself; that, is the real inner history of the development of mankind. This very important and decisive historical development is what we are analyzing and watching. It all starts with this first conception. Now I have, of course, analyzed many myths (Babylonian and so on). I have studied the field, and I have found finally that there exists one common denominator in Indian myths. This common denominator is that man behaves, or thinks as if his primary task is to relate everything to everything else. In a way this task has already been accomplished. It is no longer a task, because it has been done. It is there. Later, men will reduce it all to a method, or give it an abstract formula. Mythical people never give abstract formulas. In later India, as the myths develop, we will see the beginning of abstract thinking, of philosophy and so on, but it is all merely based on myths. They are never really broken with.

The religion of Hinduism is today a world religion, or it claims to be. It claims to be the only religion possible, because it already has accomplished what we Europeans are only starting to do. Namely, assembling Protestants, Jews, Catholics, and trying to unite them. They welcome everyone. Jesus of Nazareth, every God you can invent, is welcome in the Hindu pantheon. This tremendous power, which still rules millions of men, is a very interesting phenomenon, because it is the culmination of the greatest mythical development humanity has ever witnessed. It can always be renewed. It grows like a kind of jungle overgrowing everything. Jehovah, Krishna, are all just incarnations of the God Head or divinity, which continually appears in newer and different incarnations. Hinduism, strangely enough, has many more adherents than we would like to believe, because the Theosophists in America (as well as other sects throughout the world) whether they confess it or not, share with Hinduism this basic belief.

The Theosophists are religious or pseudo-religious. They care only for their own souls and they take over as much of Hinduism as they can. Hinduism wants to take over every kind of speculation, and even our dear friends who try in vain with drugs (with L.S.D. and so on), who try to have visions, are only using Hindu methods in order to pray themselves into those visions. It is a strange mixture, and that means that the power and beauty of this mythical worldview is still tremendous. It has a single basic principle. All is One. As simple as that. Man is not distinguished from nature. The gods are not distinguished from nature or from man. It is all the same and it is All One. This All that they are speaking of is a kind of pretension to explain the whole of Being. Whatever can happen is already in the All. It is One with It, because in every simple thing there is something invisible, a soul so to speak, which partakes of it.

Henri Frankfort has said that one of the preconditions for myth is the incapacity to distinguish between our dream life and our real life. Another precondition is that a myth must work by sympathy. Everything in the world, a stone or a snake, is a brother and belongs to an overall brotherhood, because every thing definitely contains some thing in it; some thing, not some body because all mythical religions in the end recognize only One holy thing. That holy thing is

the stuff out of which they suppose the soul is made. In the Brahmanic time (ancient Hinduism) a Brahman would teach his son the basis of his religion by maintaining one principle. He would tell his son to put salt in a glass of water and then shake it:

"See how clear the water has become. The salt has vanished. That means there is some substance which can be mixed with every single thing on earth. Mixed in it will be invisible, but it will be there and it will rule."

Hinduism has indeed become a mixed religion. It has taken in many many religions, has become a kind of hodge podge, but it represents (especially in its later form) the most refined metaphysical speculation of our time. We (in the west) have done a great deal of philosophy in the meantime, and yet we still cannot get away from the basic belief that the soul is a substance. The Hindus call it the self (atman) and there is one final God above everything and that is Brahman. They are always basically monotheists and are the worst polytheists you can imagine. They take everybody in. Brahman is the world soul to which we all belong, and in life we can only do one thing and that is return to the world soul. This is not easy, because you have to constantly purify yourself ethically. Hinduism teaches that we will all be born according to our karma (what we have done), and this will go on endlessly. Friedrich Nietzsche thought he had invented the concept of eternal reoccurrence, but my God, it had been invented long before by the Indians. Because everything in the world is supposed to return to Brahman forever and ever. It is an eternal circulation of life. The secret of life is to be found in this invisible soul which can change into everything (like the basic idea of the alchemists who wanted to change every element into every other element).

There is a strange story that illustrates this interchangeability. It is a mythical story, but it says that in the earliest times when Vishnu was still the major God in the pantheon of the gods, there appeared before him one day a man who had taken the figure of a boy.¹ This man had been a servant (in the form of an architect) to the God Indra, a lower God, who had begun to behave like a tyrant. He has mishandled his heaven, he has mishandled his underlings, he permanently wants new palaces to be built for him, and he is working this poor man to death. So finally this man appears before Vishnu, and explains the matter to him. Vishnu listens, and then sends him home with the promise that he will give him peace. On the next day there is a knock at the door of Indra's palace, and a boy appears. Indra receives him, and he starts to wonder about the eyes of this boy. He asks "what do you want of me" to which the boy replies by asking several

¹ Referring to the sentence that states "in the earliest times when Vishnu was still the major God in the pantheon of the gods", there is a problem as to Vishnu's importance as a God in the early Hindu mythology. The earliest known texts (based on the earliest oral traditions of the Hindus) are the Rigvedas (Hymns In Praise Of The Gods). Of the five or six hymns addressed to Vishnu only three belong to Book I (following the chronology of early to late speculation) while the rest are in Books IV, and VII. H.P.Griswold in his The Religion Of The Rigveda (Humphry Milford, Oxford University Press, 1923) calls Vishnu:

"A god of minor significance in the RV., but of primary importance in the later history of India, in view of his inclusion in the great triad, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva". (Pgs. 282-283)

questions of a metaphysical nature which Indra answers insufficiently. Then, the boy suddenly says to him:

"Indra, look there, at that ant down on the floor. The ant that is crawling across the floor. Look at that ant".

Indra looks at the ant and says "what about him"?

"That ant. Is he eternal? Are we eternal, we carrions of things and of life? I am Vishnu, and one day of my life is ten thousand days of your life. But how often have I been that ant, how often have I worked myself up through all the appearances of life to gain the purity to become Vishnu again. Be humble Indra, be modest, because you are just a lower God, and soon you will be that ant, or a snake, or something else."

What we see here, is a story about the eternal interchangeability of a certain stuff that holds forever. This is the way children are brought up in India. They believe in such things. They wash themselves ceremoniously every day. In the higher castes the tradition has been written down, and so they learn these stories. In the lower castes the tradition is still oral. It has to be learned by heart, and spoken again and again and again. This eternal repetition of the mythical stories runs parallel to the eternal repetition in time and space of the phenomenon of life. They achieve, in one stroke, everything within the human imagination. Where we must try to relate everything to everything else step by step, to make some sense out of it, and to give a meaning to it, they have it all with this one stroke-just by that little means of the life substance itself. This is a substance, don't forget it. There is no question of personality, or something human. It is merely a stuff, which the holy men of India know very well. There are really no gods. All of the gods are in the world, but by being in the world, they are only the world's highest appearances, the highest incarnations of that life stuff, or life soul. There is nothing else. The appearances can go down again. They can change. The holy men of India are supposed to compete with these gods, but there is no transcendent God. There is no Jehovah. The gods are in the world, they are part of the world, and are interchangeable with the world, for how else could the life cycle run? The gods are immanent, so to speak. An immanent monotheism within polytheism. Hinduism has both. Everything must ultimately return to Brahman, and so in order to reach him the holy men live lives of austerity. Yoga, self torture, no worldly desires, everything blotted out until exhaustion. He becomes an ascetic, sitting in the woods all alone, doing these things in order to rejoin the world soul, to rejoin Brahman.

There is a story about one of these saints. According to the myth he lived for a thousand years and inflicted terrible austerities upon himself. He gained such spiritual power (power over that soul stuff), such purity of soul, that he was able to command Vishnu into his presence and Vishnu had to come, because he exerted so much power. What kind of power is this? Is it extra-sensory perception? How did he exert this? God knows, what concentration of mind? In any event Vishnu had to come, he had to obey this holy man. He appeared before him and said:

"Why have you called me. What do you want"?

To which the saint replied:

"I have done so much in order to see you. You have finally arrived now and I see you before me, and I have only one wish. I would like you to explain to me how you do your maya?"

Maya is supposed to be a kind of trick of the gods, the way in which they deceive us about reality. Maya can change time, can change space, and finally everything turns out to be an illusion. Now this holy man wanted to have the means, the secret by which Vishnu produces this maya. So Vishnu answers:

"It is not so easily explained. Stay a while with me, and follow me through the different lands."

They travel together, and finally they come to a desert. Vishnu sits down on a stone and says to the saint:

"You see that house over there. Go and fetch me a glass of water."

He goes, the door opens, and he sees a beautiful young girl. He speaks to her, and upon entering the hut forgets everything Vishnu had told him. He stays with her and eventually he marries her. They have children and eventually he becomes king of that country. He rules it, and grows to be an old man, and finally a big catastrophe, a flood comes, and destroys everything. He finds himself drowning and starts to reach out for his (God only knows why) mother in law, and suddenly he finds himself in the middle of the desert at the feet of Vishnu groping around in the sand, and Vishnu says to him:

"It took you a long time to fetch me that glass of water".

Have you ever experienced that? When you wake up in the morning with a noise that somebody is knocking on your door. Somebody has knocked on your door, and you wake up out of a long dream that ends with a big noise. That dream started before you heard the knocking. It seems to be so long, and yet it takes place all in that split second when you hear the knocking. You see, in dream life time and space play no role. They can be interchanged permanently and voluntarily, and that is the lesson that Vishnu teaches the saint. That is how his maya is performed.

The Hindus are compelled to find a solidarity of everything with everything else. If there is a soul you have to respect it. They are brothers of animals, of snakes, and they have to be mild to them. It is one big solidarity that runs all through the world, but if we look at it in practice, it is all very different. As Krishna says in the Bhagavad-Gita "This (the phenomenal world) is all an illusion".²

² The sentence "This (the phenomenal world) is all an illusion" which is attributed to Krishna, is not a direct quotation of any of Krishna's sayings, but rather a paraphrase of the primary intent of Krishna's speeches to Arjuna (namely, to make him fight his enemies by convincing him that death is not a reality). See The Bhagavad Gita or "The Lords Lay", translated from the Sanskrit (with commentary and notes) by Mohinim Chatterji, The Julian Press Inc, New York, 1960, pgs 33-(as well as commentaries).

"Purify your soul and you might reach high indeed, you might join the gods".

This is their way. Now Vishnu, who is their highest God at this time, is said to be the great world dreamer. He sleeps and dreams up new worlds, and these worlds come into being (which means the world is a dream) and they are composed of changing dreams. But one thing is certain, and that is that Vishnu (and later Brahma) sleep, and that means they are the stuff out of which the whole world is made. It is, so to speak, an iron-clad picture; the first great world explanation we find in all literature.³

Fortunately, it has survived. We can still study it. We really don't need psychology, or anthropology, to explain to us the sense of myth, because we have it before us. That is the reason why Hinduism is still alive. You can always convince most modern peoples to believe in some superstition or other, like extra-sensory perception, or that L.S.D. will give them religious visions, and they can go and join the Hindus and they will be in good company. We have gotten rid of our myths. We are out of the world of mythical thinking, but the Indians can always go back.

When Buddhism arose in India, it challenged the myths and tried to destroy them. Well, where is Buddhism now? Hinduism managed to ease Buddhism out by infecting it with the ideas of myth. Buddha himself became partly a myth, and Buddhism was changed through Hindu influences. They assimilated Buddhism into Hinduism and new myths arose, reinterpreted and then Buddhism was drawn back into the mother's womb. That is the reason why this great world religion has almost completely vanished in India. Everywhere else it was very victorious, and I am not speaking about contemporary Buddhism which is decaying almost as fast as Christianity, but rather about ancient Buddhism. Buddhism became entirely remythologized, because it got squeezed out step by step. For the historian, that is a very useful thing to analyze. Buddhism has prevailed in other countries, and we will talk about it, but in India Hinduism has been absolutely victorious, especially since it has become international. And in the twentieth-century why shouldn't the Indians become international? Why not assimilate all the other gods and put them all in one bunch under one condition; namely, that they are all merely appearances or reincarnations of this same soul stuff (Brahma, or the world soul) which sucks everything back into itself.

Although I have only been able to sketch it out briefly, in a way it is the most encompassing world view (of metaphysical speculation) that mankind has ever developed. It is a sheer wonder to look at it. It is so rich you can study it your whole life, and it changes permanently and remains permanently the same, the same as the world of which it speaks. It changes permanently and remains permanently the same. Both at once. Considered aesthetically (as a kind of poetry, or poetic invention) it is one of the greatest inventions the human mind has ever made. It claims to fully explain everything. Everything hangs together, the universe works perfectly, and there is no riddle left. That means we can stop thinking and go on speculating merely within a framework that always leads to the same results. That means that it can survive for centuries (even millenniums), but there is one thing that it cannot do. It cannot change the world, and that it cannot change the world can be seen in India today where human beings live

³ The two myths that are discussed. For reference see Heinrich Zimmer, Philosophies of India.

under the same miserable conditions, and believe in the same mythical thinking that they always have. It is a religion of people who have agreed to become servants of misery, which is why it is so hard to carry on a revolution in India. The English intellectuals who are trying to reform education have a very very hard time. Gandhi was there, and Gandhi was a great synthesizer of East and West. He spent his whole life trying to change one little thing, which is a tremendous thing; namely, to receive the outcastes, the untouchables, back into society. He failed completely. Other intellectuals came after him. Step by step they are trying to change things, and are facing a task, the dimensions of which they are not even conscious of yet. They have to recondition the whole of society (my God, to modernize that society means that they will finally have to break every framework of metaphysical thinking that ever existed there). That is what is being done in China today only there it has been much easier, because Chinese myth is just a little thing when compared to Indian myth. Indian myth is really a growth, like a plant that grows over everything.

So in all of its glory, we can see it now mainly as a product of the human imagination, as the first, or one of the first attempts at an orientation in the world. It is quite a work of art and it always gives new nourishment to speculative thinking. If you take any Indian myth you will immediately start thinking speculatively, and you will be more or less in philosophy. You might say that you are not a mythical person, and that you don't believe those things; that for you it is not reality, but just a product of the mind. Yet if it is for us just a product of the mind, then it is still very stimulating and fascinating. This is why Nietzsche said, mentioning the gift of speculative thinking, "India and England".

This is the beginning of metaphysics. Real metaphysics has not yet developed, and it cannot develop, because no distinctions can be made. The unity of this world is paid for by never trying to make real distinctions. This is how they can unify everything. Everything flows each into the other; it all seems so clear, and then you find out that you cannot really use it. It cannot be used for any purpose whatsoever, let alone the fact that myth (in general) and Indian myth (in particular) rules out any kind of scientific thinking. There are no objects for them. There are only subjects (living souls) and they have no idea of a thing. A thing for them is not a substance. A thing is a thou (you, this chair, everything in the universe).

It is very hard to learn to make distinctions, especially if one has such a basic theory. In order to learn to make distinctions you need reason, and you don't have reason yet. This is a world before the idea of freedom has emerged, and it shows still today. There is no freedom in India. They are free from the English, that is true, but there is no development of freedom. It is a world without truth (in our sense of truth), because they think that they are the true world and that they live in truth, which is a very different thing. We make distinctions. If we cannot prove something then it is not true. But how could a humanity imprisoned in this kind of thinking (where distinctions cannot be made) ever develop? How could it ever get out of this state of affairs? That is the question we have to ask.

Other people asked that question. Other religions did also. They came out of myths, and it seems to be such a terrible job to break out of this ironclad framework. In India this is exemplified by the effort of one great thinker, an outstanding man who has been called the Buddha, and who tried to smash it. He did not succeed, because the philosophy he tried to

found has become overgrown again by all kinds of mythical speculation. It is a kind of tragedy, but in a way we are the happy heirs. We have this tremendous literature, we can enjoy it, and that is the wonderful thing about myths. To be able to read myths, and read about myths, but not to live in it. Not to live there.