

COHERENCE AND INCOHERENCE
OF MYTHIC STRUCTURE:
ITS SYMBOLIC FUNCTION

Those who study myth today consider with some predilection societies with no written language, such as are studied by ethnologists, wherein they hope to find myth of a more pure and more living nature than is to be found in civilizations where it has been treated in a "literary" form. To me, it does not appear at all obvious that the least elaborate should necessarily be the most pure and the most revealing. While, as they develop, societies may be invested with structures of an increasing complexity and which are superimposed to such an extent that their organizational plan sometimes seems confused, at the same time the social functions are diversified and each of them becomes more simple. Is it in a society where the same character is at one and the same time king, priest and chief warrior that the

Translated by Valerie Brasseur.

distinctive characteristics of political authority, sacerdotal office and military activity are the most clearly illustrated, or is this clearer in a society where the different responsibilities are dissociated—even if, in their effective execution, it appears that complex relationships connect this authority, this office and this activity one with the other? In the same way, are not societies where there is coexistence and confrontation between clearly distinct conceptual thought and mythic thought, each aware of its own specificity, those that allow us best to understand the essence of the myth in its greatest purity?

My reflections are principally founded on the study of ancient religions, and more particularly the Greek religion.

There is no doubt that, in Greece, myth appears to be less restrictive than in many societies with no written language. We find there numerous versions which have been modified or renewed with the passage of time. While it is rare that myth commands strictly defined behaviour on the part of individuals, it nonetheless influences their conduct and their judgement, as can be seen not only through poets and philosophers but also through historians and political orators who offer models in which individuals are free to try and discover the signification in each case, in concrete situations. It is sometimes held that this flexibility of the Greek myth, this liberty which is constantly left to individual invention, is a sign of decadence and weakness. But is it not rather the contrary? We should remember that it has survived (and has been renewed for close on two thousand years) all sophistic criticism and the elaborations of Aristotelian logic. The rigidity of some mythic structures, of systems of social organization and conduct imposed by traditional rules—of which the mythic system is a direct part—are not these rather the signs of sclerosis and aging?

In Greece, as in other places, many correlations connect the myth with the ensemble of religious activity; it is often bound up with ritual behaviour. But it should not be forgotten that it is also connected with the functioning of all social institutions: each community and their most important organs have myths which throw light on their insertion in the religious order of the world. Rite renews or confirms this insertion; at the same time it forms the link between human conduct and the divine. In a somewhat ambiguous manner, too, myth throws light on the

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conditions of such conduct and on the meaning of the choices it implies; it inspires moral reflection. The relationship between myth and rite is therefore not unique, and it would be wrong to invest it with privilege. Furthermore, it is a variable relationship, most often a complex one. While in some cases an aetiological fable seems to have been built up later in order to explain certain details of ritual operation, in many others the ceremony includes a representation or, at least, an evocation of the mythic event within which its whole intelligibility is to be found. But in the majority of cases, rite and myth each follow their own laws, rite using its specific mechanisms¹ in the same way as myth obeys its intrinsic logic: it is impossible to establish any exact correspondence between the elements of one and those of the other.

If they are inter-connected, it is through their community of aims, but they each operate in their own way and each has its own intelligibility. In order to understand the whole signification of the myth, it is necessary to situate it in the totality of the civilization of which it forms part—which must be analysed by using the language in which it is expressed—but it is also legitimate to seek how the myth itself operates, and what it means.

In the first place it takes the form of a tale; as such, it belongs to the word and it is therefore in its form as a use of language that we must first examine it. We should nonetheless note that many tales are inter-connected and that they tend to constitute a system within which their meaning is made clear. This should therefore be the next subject of our study. Is it a pure, formal structure or, being indissociable from its content, is it a message in itself?

In this short article which, as it stands at present, is a resumé of many years' reflection and uninterrupted perusal of ancient documents, I am forced to simplify matters. I will concentrate on partial systems, with no claim at explaining all the fables and without indicating how other mythic ensembles are related. I will not quote any sources, for at each line I would have to mention texts and documents of all sorts and show how, in spite of the

¹ Cf. J. Rudhart, *Notions fondamentales de la pensée religieuse et actes constitutifs du culte dans la Grèce classique*. Geneva, 1958. (In this article, however, I underestimated the significance of the myth in Greek religion).

diversity of their origins, they provide converging information which is intelligible in a system of thought which is always of the same type. When I do quote examples, I will choose from traditions which are usually well enough known for it to be possible to be brief.

I. SITUATING THE PROBLEM. TERMS OF THE THESIS.

A. In order to identify what it takes in and in order to integrate it within its operations, intelligence analyses the empirical premise and breaks it down into objects which are apportioned to several classes. The system thus formed permits it to describe the empirical premise in conceptual terms, to manipulate it and to give it some intelligibility.

In this operation, the intelligence is interdependent on the language which serves as its tool. Language carries out the same type of analysis and the same type of classification, for the correlative actions of denomination and identification both require the same conditions: intellectual structures and linguistic structures are homologous.

The development of intellectual knowledge consists in choosing with greater precision the distinctive criteria of objects, by considering the commodity of the operations effected in the classification system, and the agreement of the results to which these lead us with those of practical activity, the knowledge of which thus ensures success. The classifications implied by language, adopted by an entire social group, allow its different members to speak in a univocal manner and mutually to understand each other. Classifying and operational activities which are common to both intelligence and language are thus doubly effective: they make communication possible and increase our power over things.

Methods of structural analysis allow us to study the conditions and laws of such activity; but their limits must be recognized.

Any classification is subject to constraints. In order to classify, we must in the first place distinguish the objects in the complexity of the empirical premise and dissociate what experience has given us through continuity. Among the various qualities which are thus separated out, we must in the second place choose privileged

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characteristics in consideration of which we can discern oppositions and resemblances between certain objects and situate them within a class. So we must at the same time break the coherence of the experience and systematically reduce its richness.

It is true that intelligence, through the way it operates, or language, through the phrases which make up its composition, constantly re-establish a link between dissociated objects, in the very act by which they identify or name them, and attempt to restore the broken unity; but the unity thus restored no longer coincides with experienced unity.

The word is a witness to this disaccord, which it tries to denounce and abolish by using stylistic processes wherein the image plays a predominant role. But what is the function of the image? We say that day breaks, night falls, a mediocre student at his examination vomits the matter he has ingurgitated during the course of the year. We associate the name of an inanimate category with a verb of an animate category, or a verb of a material category with a noun of an immaterial or mental category; in this way, we are using the terms of language contrary to the rules of classification within which they are defined. The image disputes and disrupts the intellectual or linguistic structure in order to restore the continuity and coherence of experience.

The image therefore has an ambiguous relationship towards structure. Its stylistic use is conditioned by the structure within which its disintegrating function is defined, but it may exercise such a function only to the extent that it is an intimate part of an experience which intellectual analysis alters and which cannot be integrated in its structure.

Many terms of a language could undoubtedly be used as images, as can be glimpsed from the language of the poet or of the people. Yet it is noticeable that certain terms are used much more frequently than others. Certain images are repeated within extremely varied contexts; analogous images appear in several civilizations, which are part of different linguistic systems. From this it may be concluded that some experiences which have been lived through present a greater resistance than others to analysis and classificatory reduction—and that the expression of such experiences gives rise to the use of the same images in different places. The fact that such images are to be found outside any

linguistic context—in painting or sculpture, for example—confirms that they possess their own expressive power even if their meaning is determined in a different manner within each cultural context. Such images induce a reaction in everybody, which may be confused as long as the person is in ignorance of the context; when he does know it, it may evoke in him a profound experience which he is incapable of describing in discursive language because the very conditions of the language make it disintegrate or impoverish it.

Such images are not allegoric but symbolic: they signify something which can be neither designated nor appreciated except through the very symbol by which they are expressed.

B. The myth, which speaks in images, makes use of a great number of these dominating images. It should however be noted that mythic images are distinguished by several characteristics from the images which the profane word employs.

(1) The myth is social. The mythic image is not born of individual protest against classifications made by the intelligence; it is molded in advance by a tradition which imposes it on a whole group and which invests it with objectivity: it has a name—it may be Noun, Re, Ptah or Aphophis, Apsou, Tiamat, Enlil or Gilgamesh, or again Oceanos, Cronos, Zeus or Prometheus.

But this name belongs to language; it is defined in the system of differential variations, of oppositions and categories which defines all its terms.

(2) The social objectivity of the mythic figure and the permanency of its name allows of a longer and more subtle elaboration of the myth than that to which the image occasionally created by the individual word lends itself. The myth unites the traditional images of which it makes use in a developed tale and, within an extremely complex system, many mythic legends are inter-related.

(3) Images thus constitute the units of an original language; it is within the structure which characterizes it that the virtual power of signification proper to isolated images is actualized, and that the meaning of each of them is defined.

For, whatever may be its universality, and although it has its own expressive power, the dominating images does not have the same signification in all its uses.

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Many cosmogonies, for example, characterize the state of things at the beginning of creation by the image of primordial water. But in some systems this primordial water is inert and passive; creation is the work of a god who is independent of it; water symbolizes the indetermination of that which was not divine at the origin of time. In other systems, on the contrary, it is dynamic, animated, vivifying; it gives birth to subsequent entities and illustrates its creativeness to the full extent of its generative force; it symbolizes the Divine itself in its first indetermination. The image of water therefore does not have the same meaning everywhere, but its meaning cannot be anything at all; its uses are not unlimited. It has the power to signify several things, from the absence of form and complete indetermination, to vivifying or generative force. Myth uses it for this force, but does so in several different ways and its signification is actualized by its definition solely within one particular system.²

(4) However, while the mythic name belongs to language and while the mythic image is defined within a system, it is never completely reabsorbed in the structure and loses nothing of its disintegrating power.

(a) The mythic name, as all other names in the language, may be considered in its material aspect: the acoustic image formed by the succession of syllables which compose it constitute the "content" of the names Uranus and Oceanos, for example. This material manifestation evokes an immediate content, the images of Heaven-God or River-God; but these images have remarkable characters. Uranus is at one and the same time the starry sky stretching away over our heads and a dominating male jealous of his authority; Oceanos is a profoundly turbulent river and an old man who lives in a distant palace alongside his spouse Tethys. All mythic names thus evoke a plurality of images which alternate or coexist in the same texts, in the same phrases, in such a manner that the mind cannot stop at any one of them: carried along from image to image, it must go even deeper. The image is therefore not the real content of the mythic name; it is an instrument, a content-manifestation leading the mind in

² Cf. J. Rudhardt, *Le thème de l'eau primordiale dans la mythologie grecque*. Published under the auspices of the Société suisse des sciences humaines. Berne, Editions Francke, 1971.

search of an ultimate content which escapes representation and cannot be restricted by any structure.

(b) Furthermore, we will see that mythic structure itself has its faults; the mechanisms which engender it constantly break its unity; the principle of its coherence is therefore to be found in a law of constitution.

(5) In spite of the breaks which characterize it, the mythic system includes at least some attempts at classification, amenable to structural analysis, and may provide an instrument for several intellectual operations. But that is not its whole *raison d'être*. Its internal arrangement is not practical, it is significative. From this point of view, mythic structure is a symbol in itself, it leads the mind on to a point beyond itself, in search of a meaning; only this meaning can ensure the unity of a mythic system.³

It is to this symbolic function of structure that I would like to draw attention. In order to make myself understood, I will consider an example of a mythic system: that of the Greek myths relating to the origins and primitive history of mankind which, as I shall show, are bound up with cosmogonic myths.

II. GREEK MYTHS RELATING TO THE ORIGINS AND PRIMITIVE HISTORY OF MANKIND.

While many mythologies give a central place to the legend of the creation of man—in consideration of which the meaning of all cosmogony is defined—and tell of a small number of events which, occurring between this creation and the beginning of historical time, define the present situation of humanity, Greek mythology—apart from some tardily attested traditions—does not seem to place any particular importance on anthropogeny. Among numerous cosmogonic and theogonic legends, it introduces some secondary fables relative to the birth—in various places—of a first man, a first king, a founder of a race, and tells of even more numerous events which undoubtedly influence the present

³ On these different points, cf. J. Rudhart, "*Une approche de la pensée mythique: le mythe considéré comme un langage*," *Studia philosophica*, Basle, 1966, p. 208-237, and "*Images et structure dans le langage mythique*," *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme*, 1969, p. 87-109.

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condition of human beings, but in which none plays any decisive role in this respect.

One can undoubtedly explain this multiplicity by the diversity of local traditions. But such an explanation is insufficient. We still have to understand the reason for this proliferation of traditions, and the possibility of their coexistence among a people always conscious of their religious unity.

I propose to show that none of these legends can be understood by itself, that each receives its meaning in consideration of a complex system, which is coherent even though it may have different versions, aiming at entirety even if it is never displayed in a complete manner, and that this system gives us at the same time the key to its plurality. I also propose to show that the entire system forms an image, that the rules of its development and its internal arrangement constitute a system full of signification.

A. Anthropogenic themes

Authors of theogonies and mythographers sometimes point out the presence of mortals when telling of the succession of divine births, without however informing us as to how they came into the world, as if the question presented no obscure points in their eyes. Only occasionally are they more explicit, and then the tales have several forms. Here are the major ones.

- (1) Man is born of the union of two divinities.
- (2) Man is born of the union of Zeus with the divinity of a spring or river, of a mountain or a site.
- (3) Man is born of the union of a river with a local nymph, or with the daughter of a person otherwise unknown and who bears the name of a place.
- (4) Man is autochthonous; he is earth-born.

There is no doubt that each of these tales lends itself to a primary exegesis, and one could, in particular, cull information on well-known images—that of autochthonism or of birth from water. But this first exegesis is insufficient, for it does not take account of the plurality of legends, nor of the multiplicity of versions which sometimes tell of the birth of the same character in two different ways. It ignores the fact that the river or spring themselves have parents, that they belong to a genealogical

structure in which characters from other legends also have their place. We shall see that legends concerning autochthonism, which appear to be the exception to this rule, nonetheless fit into a structure of the same type.

B. *Genealogical structure*

In the first place, we will concentrate on genealogical structure. As it connects anthropogeny with theogony and cosmogony, it is at this level that we must try and understand the laws of its constitution and its symbolic function.

(1) *At the cosmogonic and theogonic level*

It is obvious that the genealogical system is an instrument for classification, and the Greek certainly used it as such. From the very earliest days, authors who attempted to present myths in an ordered fashion had recourse to genealogical classifications which, vertically, gave the lines of descendants which were then subdivided, and on a horizontal level gave the generations. Even if lacking in erudition, the Greeks spontaneously classified their gods in these categories.

But this is not the only function of the genealogical system. We should first of all note that genealogy implies generations, which we would be unwise to consider solely as the formative constituent of a system of classes. Texts insist on the generative strength of Oceanos and on the fecundity of his wife Tethys; their qualities are bound up with the vivifying power of water, which the texts further stress in several ways. The generative activity of Uranus is interrupted by castration. In a general manner, generation is connected with sexuality, which myth and rite associate with animal or vegetable fecundity.

If we look at things closer, we see furthermore that there exists, between ancestors and descendants, a constant play of resemblances and differences of which the dynamism and the evolution of generations increase the importance without altering its coherence.⁴

United with his sister Theia, goddess of things which shine—such as gold or glory, for example—Hyperion, the son of Heaven (whose name means “he who goes, who moves above the earth,”)

⁴ P. Philippson, *Untersuchungen über den griechischen Mythos*, Zurich, 1944, provides some interesting suggestions on this point.

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gives birth to the Sun, the Moon and the Dawn. Brilliant Phoebe begets Leto who is to be the mother of Apollo and Artemis, respectively the divinities of the sun's and the moon's rays. The ancestral Water-God, Oceanos of the deep turbulence, gives birth to springs and rivers.

A community of nature links the ancestor to his descendants; Hyperion who moves in the heights, to the Sun and the Moon; brilliant Phoebe to Apollo and Artemis; the cosmic water of Oceanos to rivers and springs. In spite of this relationship, however, marked traits distinguish the children from father and mother. Some features are common to the younger gods, even though they are descendants of different ancestors. Hyperion, Phoebe and the ancestral Oceanos are entities—powerful no doubt, but distant, elusive, barely specified—whereas the Sun, the Moon and the Dawn, Springs and Rivers are clearly visible, just as Apollo and Artemis are identifiable, present in the actions which they exercise on men, accessible through their cults. Thus a community of nature links the ancestor to his descendants, but the latter reveal qualities which were intermingled and implicit in the former, in a diversity wherein each quality is better defined. The older divinity is richer but also more distant, less accessible, less present or less active than the younger divinity, the latter possessing qualities or powers which are less various but more clearly determined and more effective.

The examples we have chosen are particularly clear; in other cases the relations which unite the children to their parents are less immediately obvious to our eyes. Over and above rivers and springs, Oceanos' progeniture included Pluto, wealth, Eurynome, the great dispenser, Eudora and Polydora, goddesses of good and multiple presents; it also included Metis, intelligence or prudence. But attentive consideration of the role of Oceanos in life and in the balance of the cosmos proves to us that he in fact possessed the generous fecundity and the moral qualities of which such daughters are the symbol.⁵ Similarly, if—apart from the stars and several other meteorological phenomena—the descendance of heavenly Uranus included Cronos and Zeus, the successive masters of the world, this is because Uranus himself already possessed power and sovereignty.

⁵ *Op. cit.* above, note 2.

Briefly, if genealogy is indeed an instrument for classification, it is at the same time the symbol or image of a dialectic inherent to the divine and which commands the modalities of its manifestation.

The Mythic reflection of the Greeks makes use of this image with as much constance as subtlety, by elaborating varied but homologous cosmogonic systems. Let us consider briefly the two most important of these.

According to the first, the Earth was the original entity. First undifferentiated, it brought forth from itself the Heavens, Uranus, and the Seas, Pontos, then it was united successively with one and the other of these gods. All creatures were later to be born from these two primordial couples: Heavens-Earth, Seas-Earth.

According to the second system, a pair of water divinities, Oceanos and Tethys, were the primary reality. They were united and gave birth to Heaven and to Earth, as well as other children, and these were to be the ancestors of all creatures.

In both cases, we can see an apparently simple reality at the origin of things—earth or water. The two symbols are not equivalent, they imply different ways of contemplating the world and divine reality, but they do have common characteristics. The primordial gods are both cosmic and animated, sexed and fecund, have their psychological and moral qualities although their personalities are but vaguely defined. They imply both the wealth and the undifferentiation of the divine at the beginning of time. Not yet situated in space, with no definite boundary, primordial Earth is not yet opposed to the heavens or the seas, it has no contours or relief (mountains have not yet made their appearance); and the fluidity of the original water, with no form of its own, with no horizon to restrict its surface, and no land yet surrounding it, has the same significance.

Yet another thing: the original earth is One, like primordial water, but this unity—pregnant with all the multiplicity which generation is to manifest—is imperfect. Eros—a constituent whose activity will always be immanent—can coexist with earth (which is to become really feminine only when she has brought forth the masculine gods to which she will be united), whereas primordial water, One in this image, is dual under the image of the divine couple whose name it bears: Oceanos Tethys.

Thus, starting from an entity of which (according to the

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system) the very rich symbols of earth and water signify the qualities, the whole of reality is to proceed, from a state of simplicity, of imperfect or confused unity, under the impulsion of a generative force which is inherent to it and in a progressive differentiation process which will lead to a multiplicity distinct from what is revealed.

In this process, the first phase is rich in all the powers and the qualities which are clearly to be revealed in its descendance, but these qualities and powers are still latent and unrevealed. Each of the subsequent entities, less rich or less universal, will be better defined, more immediately active and actual. From this point of view, we first of all see some progress: power, by diversifying itself, becomes more individual, has greater presence and efficiency. But this progress subsequently reaches a limit: the definition becomes more vague, and actuality ends by reducing itself to factitiousness. In the last phases of genealogy, an immortal, a god, gives birth to a mortal creature—human or monstrous, it hardly matters yet: mortality is the outcome of delimitation.

Briefly, while genealogy may well be the instrument of classification, it is something else again even more essential. We have already seen that the same mechanism which constitutes it includes a signification. We can now see that the whole arrangement of the system engendered forms an image heavy with meaning. If I do not consider this image in its symbolic function, then the reality of the myth escapes me.

(2) At the anthropogenic level

It is within such a system and in consideration of such a meaning that we must situate and understand each of the anthropogenic legends.

Like other mortal creatures, man is born of a couple of gods. Offspring of the forces which give birth to the universe and are manifest in him, he is related to the world as he is to the divine. But he appears at the end of a diversification process; the powers at work in him have dwindled because they are more narrowly specified; he has a more concrete existence and possesses an individuality which is better defined, no doubt, than that of all the gods—whose personality always remains elusive—but at the same time he is limited in space and time. By reason of being actual, his existence is no more than an existence *de facto*; this

restriction separates him from the divine, in spite of his origin.

Man is not born of *any god*. More often than not he is the offspring of a great god and the local goddess of a spring, mountain or site, or sometimes of a river and of a divinity who bears the name of a place. Myth thus defines in a very clear manner one of the aspects of the determination which specifies it: it is geographic. Man is not abstract: he is born here, or there, connected with the particularity of one region of the world. An Athenian is a man to the extent that he is Athenian; to be Athenian is his specific way of being a man; and this implantation defines the particular relationship which unites him to the divine.

But the symbols of the spring or river, those of the mountain or of the earth, include other significations. Each of them merits being studied for itself in the particular context of each legend. Here I will make only the following remark.

Springs and rivers are directly descended from Oceanos who was the primordial divinity—according to one of the dominant traditions, “the generating source of all things,” as a verse of the Iliad expresses it, and the waters of Oceanos continue to run into them. Limited though he may be, man therefore owes his existence and his life to that which was the source of all the realities in the world and of all the gods.

According to another tradition, the Earth was this primordial entity. By illustrating how she decided on her limits when she brought forth the Heavens and the Seas and made herself into the earth with its contours and relief (symbolized by Hesiod’s High Mountains), myth tells us that the Earth herself underwent progressive determinations. In fact, myth never uses a unique conception; it alternates the schema of generation, for example, with that of division or physical delimitation. We should remark in passing that this plurality of schemas alters the homogeneity of mythic structure and restricts the validity of the classifications on which it is interdependent, but it does not prejudice the coherence of the meaning expressed. If the mountain or site are not the children of the Earth, they nonetheless constitute an actual specification of some of the powers or virtues which were those of the primordial entity, and the divine quality of the latter survives in them. From this point of view, the divinity of the place has a position similar to that of the river or spring, and fills the same function. In giving birth to man, it delimits

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him geographically but, at the same time, it connects him to the original source of all beings and designates in him the direct constituent of human life.

Autochthonous myths have a similar meaning. They are no longer immediately associated with the system of genealogy, but with other schemas which symbolize the same process of progressive differentiation. Primordial Earth, feminine but pregnant with masculine constituents, brought forth from herself the Heavens and the Seas; she is defined in a geographical relief and configuration. Autochthonous myths tell us that, in the same way, the earth brings forth from herself or produces certain men; however, man is not then born of the earth understood as a universal cosmic entity—he emerges from the soil in a well-defined region at the end of yet another determination. Cecrops, for example, is born of the soil of Attica, half man, half serpent. His ophidian tail is a reminder of this chthonous origin, his chest and head are witness to his humanity; his royal quality and his eponymous function imply his political nature. The myth of Cecrops symbolizes at one and the same time the implantation of the Athenian city in the Attican soil and the link which unites it to Earth, the original divinity.

Only one myth appears to be an exception to this logic. After the flood, and obeying the advice of Zeus, two survivors—Deucalion and Pyrrha—gathered stones on the ground and threw them behind them. From the stones thrown by Deucalion, men were born, and from those thrown by Pyrrha, women sprang forth. It appears therefore that the continuity we have noted in the differentiation process is here interrupted and that after the flood men were no longer the descendants of the gods. This appearance is deceptive. Several versions of the myth stress the appurtenance of stones to the ancestral Earth; in this case, the myth of birth from stones is a simple variation of the autochthonous myth. It is important to note, moreover, that, later, myth makes no more mention of these men born of stones; while they are not simply episodic, at least they form an anonymous mass, without any influence on the destiny of mankind. The Greek flood is not invested with the radical nature of the Semitic floods. Many men survive them in different places, and they have descendants; furthermore, Deucalion and

Pyrrha themselves have children, then grandchildren to whom myth attributes much greater importance than to the anonymous population sprung forth from stones; for they were to be the ancestors of the great Hellenic races.

Thus, in spite of the flood, of which I will make more mention later, continuity is not broken and the men born of stones play a secondary role.

The nature of man, relative of the gods and of the world in which they are manifest, but separated from them by the extreme individualization which makes him mortal, is undoubtedly universal. But this does not prevent man from being varied. The identity of each people and its specific characteristics are determined by the place in which they first appeared and by the particular qualities of the divinities which engendered the first ancestor.

Some myths illustrate this qualitative relationship between the generative divinity of a race and its descendants in a particularly clear manner. Many royal families are born of the union between a local divinity—which ensures their implantation in geographical reality—and Zeus who is, *par excellence*, the god of sovereignty.

C. *The theme of conflicts and of the establishment of order*

Several critical events separate the creation of the first man from the present epoch in which mankind now finds himself. In order to understand the myths which tell of them, we must first consider them in the structural relationship which links these events to the cosmogony. The latter does not occur uniformly at the will of a simple development of genealogies.

(1) *At the cosmogonic level*

We know that it develops through a series of fights and conflicts, power passing successively through the hands of several gods who triumph one after the other over a predecessor. The succession of reigns creates no doubt a new possibility of classification of which the Greeks effectively made the most they could; but the whole *raison d'être* of the myth of conflicts for the possession of divine sovereignty does not lie in such an operation.

In creating multiplicity, the cosmogonic process engenders the possibility of both oppositions and conflicts. The most ancient

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entity possesses wide but well-defined powers, while the younger entity (whose skill may be somewhat more limited) possesses, within this limit, greater efficiency. But, specified though they may be, these skills are determined within the limits of a domain which was that of its ancestor, so that at this point one is in competition with the other. There is one field where this competition necessarily degenerates into conflicts—that of sovereignty. Uranus, the first sovereign, holds power without limit. The gods he engenders, defined though they may be, encroach on his power. He therefore tries to prevent their coming into the world, and retains them in the heart of mother Earth.

We know how one of these sons revolted. Pushing an arm up from the earth, Cronos castrated Uranus. Like all images, the image of castration includes a meaning which it would be unwise to try and define too rapidly. In order to understand it, it is important to consider the effects castration produces: it delivers the children imprisoned in the maternal breast, it allows them to come into the world, it allows diversified powers to be made manifest and the cosmogony to follow its course; it puts an end to the generative activity of the sovereign god but, paradoxically, it is necessary in order for such activity to produce fruit. The integrity of the first entity must be broken so that all the riches it carries within itself may be made manifest; pure power must have a limit in order to be creative; the mutilation of Uranus symbolizes this necessity.

Cronos, who succeeds his father, is already more individualized; but, in his person, the specification has not yet reached its term; he retains the immoderation which characterizes all the gods of his generation. The idea of restriction is intolerable to him and while he can no longer hinder his children from coming into the world, he devours them at birth, thus trying to retain their various powers in the unity of his own power. We know how Rhea, his sister and wife, managed to save one of them, Zeus. The latter gave his father an emetic and Cronos vomited the children he had devoured, thus allowing creation to follow its course.

Analogous to that of Cronos, Zeus' revolt put a new restriction on power or sovereignty. This vomiting made power effective by forcing it to admit the existence of other powers which

delimit it. Vomiting at this stage therefore filled the same function as castration at an earlier stage. This synonymy is confirmed by the fact that, according to other versions, Zeus castrated Cronos in the same way as the latter had castrated Uranus.

In this first series of conflicts, each generation triumphs over the preceding one; better specified, the younger powers reveal themselves to be also more efficient; but the balance between power and determination has now been reached.

While subsequent generations may well have had better defined individualities and a more immediate or more concrete presence, their powers were also less wide, so narrowly circumscribed that they could no longer put the sovereign god in any real danger. Furthermore, Zeus is well enough specified to admit spontaneously that other skills also exist besides his own. He is therefore no longer in opposition to the progress of the cosmogony, as his predecessors had been.

Each of these conflicts is, as we can see, subject to the same structural conditions. The younger and better specified are in opposition to the older, to him who refused restriction, to the most indistinct, and he throws them over in order to ensure the continuation of the differentiation process. This is not all. No generation can conquer alone: Cronos castrates Uranus with the complicity of Earth, his mother; Zeus escapes Cronos' voracity thanks to a ruse by his mother Rhea, then he defeats the Titans with the help of their brothers, the Cyclops. The triumph of the youngest is assured thanks to him who—contrary to the indistinct powers of the early stages—is not essentially the holder of sovereignty and can accept in advance a coexistence with further, better defined powers.

The meaning of all these conflicts which thus come to an end is revealed in the work of Zeus. Multiplicity had engendered the possibility of conflicts; the delimitation of power created the possibility of order. At the stage of undefined and inordinate power, sovereignty could only be made manifest in the form of repression. At the stage of clearly differentiated powers, it admitted the existence of other skills beside its own; its role was to situate the various powers in suitable places and to define the conditions for their execution. After the victory of Zeus, the final act of the cosmogony was that of the allotment

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of the *timai*, the distribution among the gods of honours and duties.

The two processes of diversification and successive conflicts thus found an outcome and meaning in the establishment of an order which Zeus was to guarantee. But the founding of this order occurred in several episodes, through new crises.

(2) *At the level of the primitive history of mankind*

The establishment of this order, the last confrontations and the final crises which were resolved in it concerned not only the divine world but also the world of men, who had appeared here and there in the course of generations. Their situation in the world had to be defined, as well as the relationship which united them to the gods.

Some of these events concern a limited region of the world and the destiny of a particular people. In a first distribution of the *timai*, Zeus acquired the mastery of the sky, Poseidon that of the sea, and Hades that of the lower world, while the earth remained the common domain of all the gods; within this domain, their respective prerogatives still had to be defined. It is to this context that the famous myths of Athenian tradition belong, for example. Poseidon goes towards the Acropolis followed by Athena who—like him—wants to get possession of it. To make their presence known, Poseidon strikes the rock with his trident and a sheet of salt water appears; Athena also touches it with her spear, and an olive tree springs from the ground. The divinities have proved their power, but their antagonism is not yet solved; they are submitted to a judgement in which the evidence of Cecrops is to be decisive. Cecrops decides in favour of Athena, thus defining the religious vocation of the city which from then on was to be known as Athens. Through the voice of Cecrops, the political community contributed to the definition of its proper place in the sacred order of things: man participated actively in the final episode of the cosmogony.

While several analogous myths thus enlighten us as to the particular situation of a race or a people, others concern mankind in a more universal manner: the myth concerning races, that of the flood, those of the quarrel between Zeus and men, and of Prometheus. All of them have several versions, and never seem to have been logically coordinated in a single exposé; yet between them there are close relationships which the permanency of the

roles played by Zeus and Prometheus bring clearly to light and, following the great cosmogonic myths we have mentioned, they are integrated in a same system of thought.

It would take many articles to illustrate this properly; here, I will only give some rapid indications. The new master of the gods finds an earth already inhabited by many men, born in different places, in the pure proliferation of genealogies. These men, who are not subject to any law, lead a warrior life whose style corresponds to that of the Titan wars which have just come to an end in the divine world; a myth symbolizes their dispositions; they constitute the race of bronze.

At the beginning of his reign, Zeus—who has to assert his power—proves to be touchy and, while he already has the intention of establishing order, he intends to impose it. It is in this situation that a quarrel is started between Zeus and men, on which we are ill informed, though Hesiod makes some mention of it. We know moreover that he deprives men of fire by no longer striking the trees with thunderbolts—which had been one of the major instruments in his recent victory over the Titans—and that, according to Apollodorus, he lets loose a murderous flood to destroy the race of bronze.

In both these circumstances, men are to be defended by Prometheus. Now while Prometheus, the son of one of Cronos' older brothers, belongs to the same generation as Zeus, he is older than the latter. So here we find again the schema of the great conflicts of theogony: a god is in conflict with beings who come after him in the order of generations, and these need the help of an older god in order to triumph. At this stage, no doubt, the younger beings, who have come to the final phase of their individualization, are also weaker and their victory (relative though it may be) does not lead to the downfall of their adversary. But, in the same way as cosmogonic conflicts are solved with the founding of an order, this same dispute between Zeus and men, the latter assisted by Prometheus, leads to a more exact definition of the place occupied by man, of his role and the conditions of his existence.

We know how Prometheus intervened. At the time of the flood, he told his son Deucalion the way to survive; and although Deucalion was not the sole survivor, he was to become the ancestor of the great Hellenic races. When thunderbolts no

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longer struck, Prometheus stole the sacred fire and brought it to man in a narthex stalk, showing them how to preserve it.

He thus went against the will of Zeus, and the latter took his revenge by having him bound in chains. But this chastisement was not the end of the drama, for Prometheus was to be delivered of his chains. The few texts that have been preserved mention a bargain struck between the two opponents: Zeus gives something up, avoids a danger; but the bargain is not made at once. First of all there has to be transformation in the personality of Zeus. Myth gives several indications of this change. Zeus let loose the flood to destroy men, but at the end of the flood it is he who gave the saving advice to the survivor, the son of Prometheus. He ordered Prometheus to be chained, but it is Zeus' own son and champion, the mortal Heracles, who was to deliver him.

One myth symbolizes the end or the outcome of this development: it is that of Metis. Metis must give birth to a wondrous daughter and to a son superior to his father. Daughter of Oceanos, from this point of view she resembles Thetis (the daughter of Nereis, another god of the water) who must also produce a child stronger than his father. But Prometheus knows the destiny in store for Thetis, and it is the revelation of this secret which is the subject of the bargain he makes with Zeus. Warned, the latter renounces Thetis. In revenge, he is united with Metis, but subsequently devours her while she is pregnant with Athena. It will be remembered that Metis signifies Intelligence or Wise Counsel: by swallowing her, Zeus makes her part of his own substance, and from then on Wise Counsel is united in his person to Sovereignty.

However, the embryo Athena develops in the body of the god and when the time for her birth draws near, according to a well attested tradition, it is Prometheus himself who helps in the delivery.

The crisis is finally resolved: Zeus, transformed, has Prometheus liberated, and the latter recognizes the sovereignty of the son of Cronos and the two opponents collaborate. At the same time a change has taken place at the level of mankind which was the object of their fight.

Men had been born, here and there, as we have seen; they proliferated with no particular order in spite of the first geographic

distribution of their ancestors. Without interrupting the continuity which links mankind to his divine origins, the flood reduces its numbers: the men who are spared give birth to a small number of great races destined to people the world, wherein each of them will henceforth have its own place. The flood moreover confirms the distance that mortality had introduced between man and the divine; it was a distance *de facto* and becomes a distance *de jure*. For some time still, the gods are to be sporadically involved with mortals and unions are to be made between them; it is the age of heroes—but this transitory phase does not last.

In the remoteness which henceforth defined the position suited to his mortal condition, man is no longer fed by the spontaneity of a vegetation where the boundless forces proper to the reign of Cronos are made manifest—the ages of gold and silver; nor is he warmed by the flame which Zeus brandished at the time of the race of bronze. His existence now depends on the work that he does—and this situation is that of the race of iron. But Prometheus does provide him with the instruments of his work: he gives him fire and guides him in the invention of the arts. Work engenders civilization, and myth makes of Prometheus the civilizing god.

In this meaning, Prometheus leads mankind from a state of nature to a state of culture and thus invests him with a quality which distinguishes him from all other creatures: he endows mankind with a specific character. After Aeschylus, some authors were to say, more categorically, that he created humanity.

It is not sufficient to separate in order to establish order; it is also necessary to ensure fair relations between the elements determined by this order. Man must keep to his place, but the success of his work requires the collaboration of the gods and the accomplishment of divine schemes requires the activity of men. The cult ensures this conjunction. But myth throws light on the establishment of the cult.

Comments have often been made on the legend of the unequal sharing out by Prometheus of the flesh of an ox, in order to deceive Zeus. As has been said, this episode certainly belongs to myths concerned with the establishment of sacrificial practices, but it seems to me to have been forgotten that another episode is complementary to this one and that they cannot be

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properly understood one without the other. The deceptive sharing out takes place at the beginning of the quarrel between men and the gods. Zeus accepts being deceived in order to have a better foundation for his vengeance—to deprive men of the fire they need. This particular offering—which Hesiod does not exactly call by the name of sacrifice—far from establishing a cultural relationship between men and the gods, completes the breach between them.

Another episode replies to this towards the end of the long quarrel and the changes to which it contributes. At the end of the flood, Deucalion accomplishes a sacrifice which Zeus accepts. This second sharing has a different function. The recollection of what had been a major act in the dispute, accomplished by man as a gesture of supplication and accepted favourably by the god, clearly symbolizes their reconciliation and defines the terms of their new relationship in the newly established order. The allusion to the Promethean deception—implied in the composition of the sacrificial shares—has a meaning: sacrifice creates a communication between man and god, greater than the distance which it cannot fill. The importance of the sacrifice accomplished by Deucalion is well stressed by some authors who hold it to be the first of all sacrifices, or say that Deucalion was the inventor of altars and the originator of the cult.⁶

Once again, the different tales we have considered are situated in a system within which solely are they wholly intelligible. This system has a structure: it is characterized by a series of conflicts of the same type, the difference between the successive conflicts being explained by the very law of their evolution—which ends in the establishment of order. The arrangement of such a system allows us to classify mythic events, as well as the characters who are involved; furthermore, it allows us to classify the men who live in the present world, but that is not its only function. Like the genealogical structure on which it is superimposed and which it completes, this arrangement is the symbol of a profound dialectic which animates reality, governing the divine activity which is revealed in it.

⁶ Cf. J. Rudhardt, "*Les mythes grecs relatifs à l'instauration du Sacrifice; les rôles corrélatifs de Prométhée et de Deucalion*," *Museum Helveticum* (Basle-Stuttgart), Vol. 27, Fasc. 1, 1970, p. 1-15.

D. To summarize, Greek myths relating to the origin and the primitive history of mankind are extremely numerous, several of them belonging to local traditions or being the product of individual inventions or modifications. They have never been assembled into one global exposé which is clearly inter-connected or logically coordinated. However, in spite of their diversity, they are integrated—in the same way as cosmogonic myths—in the same system of thought. It is probable that this system was never clearly appreciated by the Greeks and that they never developed it in its entirety. The relations by which the different tales are connected are even more remarkable. Many of these tales are to be found in the communal conscience; each time a Greek recounts one of them, he refers implicitly to the others with a coherence which forces us to recognize a profound permanency in the way of thinking. But he does not build up all these tales in the same way according to constant structural principles: on the contrary, he has recourse to heterogeneous schemas, but each tale is understood in consideration of a global system, never completed, in which all the others could virtually be integrated and of which only the aims of the meaning ensure any coherence.

If we are not afraid of having recourse to a certain amount of artifice, we can lay down the broad outline of the system in the following manner.

Starting with the confused unity of the first stage of the cosmogony, the generation process gives rise to distinct multiplicity; at the same time it creates the possibility of conflicts. But, in conjunction with the progress of specification, the succession of these conflicts leads to the establishment of an order wherein the one and the multiple are conciliated. The creation of man and his primitive history belong to the last stages of the cosmogony, and more particularly to that of the final dispositions of universal order. The two mechanisms of generation and conflict still command the way it unfolds. Generation explains, diversifies, actualizes; at the ultimate end, actuality is reduced to factitiousness. The most individual and concrete being is mortal. The play of conflicts sorts out the innumerable ancestors of mortals; gives them a place suitable to their condition, and determines the modes of their relations with the gods.

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The ensemble of cosmogonic and anthropogenic myths thus symbolizes a dual relation between man and the primordial sources from which he originated, like the gods themselves, and between mankind and the final order of the world in which each man has his place. This dual relation defines for each one the meaning of his existence and of all his activities: through such a meaning (which has no other expression than a symbolic or mythic one) man escapes from the factitiousness of his mortal condition.

III. MYTHIC STRUCTURE CONSIDERED IN ITS SYMBOLIC FUNCTION

A. Recalling the preamble

Having considered an example of the mythic system, we can now take up the study of the problem we posed.

Its social character confers on each of the mythic images an existence which is independent of individual subjects and allows the latter to group the images in a subtly elaborated system, without the throwback from image to image which would deprive this complex system of its intelligibility.

It is endowed with a structure within which the meaning of each image is defined, but this meaning is not constituted or even really determined by the play of relations which unite the images to each other within such a structure.

We have already said that the mythic name has a different significance from the words of profane language. It evokes several incoherent images in such a way that the mind, carried on from image to image, reaches beyond them in search of a hidden content which escapes representation.

We have furthermore observed that the structural principles which command the formation of the mythic system are heterogeneous; for example, the genealogical schema alternates with that of subdivision or pure fragmentation, without there existing between them systematic connections, and other schemas are superimposed on them such as that of conflicts and the transmission of sovereignty, without one ever being able to define exactly the modes of their inter-relationship. The myth therefore does not owe its coherence to the unity of formative constituents;

the heterogeneity of the schemas hinders both the recomposition of the system starting from any particular number of its elements or, the system being globally known, the deduction of those of its elements which are not yet known; its operational possibilities are therefore limited. The principle of its unity, its meaning, must be sought beyond the structure, beyond what the structure contains.

The mythic image means something other than what it represents; the structural schema has the same status; the alternation of the schemas correspond to that of the images. The tale means something other than what it recounts, and the relations which connect the tales to each other also have the same symbolic function. I hope, indeed, that I have made it clear that the cosmogonic and anthropogenic myths of Greece are interconnected and constitute a system within which each of them has a meaning and of which the coherence—instead of being the result of simple or homogeneous formative constituents—is the result of an ultimate meaning, impossible to formulate, towards which the whole system directs our mind. From this point of view, the arrangement of the system is indeed a symbol.

B. *On the meaning of mythic image*

Is it possible to define what such an image means? We have recognized that the image, employed as a stylistic procedure, has the function of breaking down linguistic structure in order to express something of lived experience which conceptual analysis wrongly splits up, and in which the very acts of denomination and identification impoverish each of the elements, and of which the intellectual operations which establish relations between them are incapable of reconstituting the coherence or the unity.

In plain words, images are episodic; each of them expresses a particular experience and one cannot pronounce in a general manner on the nature of the message they transmit. Yet we have observed the frequency of certain images which reappear in similar forms in different civilizations, and it suggested to us the idea that experiences which are sufficiently central in the lives of men to be repeated—in very varied circumstances—resist intellectual analysis more than others.

Jung studied such images with a great deal of penetration. However, by straight away grouping together the images of poetry, dream, legend, theology and myth, I fear that he

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neglected that which distinguishes these different sorts of expression and—particularly as far as mythic image is concerned—that he did not understand that this belonged to a system, itself symbolic, in the heart of which only can the possibilities of meaning proper to a type of image be actualized.

I am afraid, moreover, that his psychological interpretation is insufficient. If some central experiences require symbolic expression because they are irreducible to the categories of conceptual intelligence, is it legitimate to use these same categories in interpreting them and to oppose a subject to an object, an interior to an exterior, a psychism to a world, when these oppositions belong precisely to the system of classes which it is the function of the image to break down?

In plain words, images express particular experiences, even if some of them are common to all men. In myth, things are different. Not only does it use above all common or dominating images, but it disposes them all in a system of which the constitutive schemes and the whole arrangement have a symbolic function. What it expresses is no longer an isolated experience, however central this may be, but an ensemble of complementary and coherent experiences.

What is the content of such experiences? It is impossible to define it in discursive language. I believe simply that we must take the myth seriously and accept it primarily as it presents itself. None of these images is definitive, other images are sometimes substituted, they all lead us on to something which is beyond themselves. Yet these images do exist and offer themselves to the mind as an instrument suitable for guiding it towards a meaning. If the myth uses conjointly—and alternates—cosmic, biological, psychological and social images, it must be admitted that it expresses an experience undergone by man in his immediate relationship with what intellectual analysis will subsequently distinguish as a physical world, as a biological activity, as a psychic reality and as a social relation; and if the myth, at the same time, speaks of the gods, it must be admitted that this experience is also that of a primary relation with what language calls the divine.

The socialization of the image and its denomination allow the elaboration of the myth, the composition of schemas which interconnect several images and which themselves constitute second-

degree images; furthermore, they allow the formation of a complex system of images and schemas which constitute a third-degree symbol.

The development of such a system and its coherence signify the continuity of the experience to be expressed; they encourage its full appreciation and elucidation. Through the myth, man tries to understand the world, life, society and his own existence, in consideration of a religious meaning which is revealed by such experience. Myth, as the instrument of this subtle and coherent elaboration, is a form of reason.

Other indications go to prove that man effectively undergoes an experience of which the content cannot be reduced to conceptual analysis. This experience gives rise to affective reactions, to behaviour patterns which man qualifies by the use of words which are always impossible to define although they are employed without hesitation. Thus the Greek, for example, used the adjectives *hieros* and *hosios*. They alone required long study. Let us simply say that they correspond to a duality which the analysis of myths had revealed to us: that of the generative but redoubtable force which is to be seen particularly in conflicts—that of order in which the conflicts are finally resolved and where power, clearly diversified, is exercised in a balanced manner. The adjective *hieros*, which we normally translate by “sacred,” means filled with a beneficent or maleficent power, according to whether it is used within or beyond the limits required by order, whereas the adjective *hosios*, which we do not know how to translate, means “in conformity with this order”—which does not coincide with natural order, nor with social order, but which these can symbolize.⁷

Thus we are led to consider the myth as a form of reason aimed at elucidating the experience that, in the contingent conditions of his existence in the world and in history, man makes of his relationship with the divine; at appreciating fully his experience of sacredness, at understanding the world and history themselves in consideration of the religious meaning which is revealed by this continued experience and which conceptual intelligence is incapable of analysing. Indeed, the Greeks call the mythic tale a *hieros logos*, a sacred logos.

⁷ On Greek expressions of sacred, cf. op. cit. nota 1.

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C. On the intelligibility of the myth

Even though it is a tributary of the code of common language in which it is told and to which it owes some of its intelligibility, myth is distinct from this and obeys its own laws. Although each of its elements is defined within a tradition and although all of them can serve communication, on account of the objectivity which they owe to this social character, myth does not exactly constitute a code. Its structural principles fill a symbolic function, its internal arrangement carries a message.

As it is of a symbolic nature, each image meaning something other than what it represents, each schema something other than what it tells, and the global structure—heterogeneous and constantly broken—something other than an ensemble of relations, this message cannot be decoded.

What it expresses is by its very essence irreducible to the choice of differential variation, to classification, to transformatory operations which are at the foundation of any code, so that any attempt at decoding or translating necessarily lets the meaning escape.

In order to understand myth, one must be in a state to listen to it and to “live” it. One must reconstitute in one’s own mind the ensemble of the system, all the souvenirs and mental structures which condition the experience on which the myth is interdependent, and let the images, schemas and symbolic structures defined in this vast arrangement have their effect on one.

Myth can only be understood mythically.