*Pierre Smith*

# THE NATURE OF MYTHS

## I. MYTH AND DREAM

Among the many subjects that come within the range of social anthropology, the one dealt with in this article may at first glance seem the remotest from the border area between biology and social anthropology, the least apt "to reveal a basic problem of bio-anthropology."* Is not the realm of myth that of those incorporeal beings called gods? A realm where the laws of matter and of life are abolished? The one in which thought takes seemingly unrestricted flight and shows itself capable of begetting worlds, monsters, stories without visible root in reality?

But the same might be said about dreams; and the detour via dreams may bring us a glimpse of an unexpected shortcut. It is now known that sleep devoid of dreams is not restorative; if one is waked at the outset of the phase in which dreaming occurs, intolerance in both animals and humans is very rapid, and experiments upon animals have shown that this deprivation, if prolonged, can be a cause of death. Hence from the standpoint of survival, dreaming is quite as necessary as sleeping. Now, certain characteristics of myths, characteristics through which they are related to dreams, lead us to wonder whether they are

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not indispensable to the smooth functioning of waking thought as are dreams with respect to sleep.

Their contents do not obey strict rules governing things in the real world; they do not seem to come under the system of co-ordinates responsible for maintaining an adjustment between thought and the body the way the body adjusts to the outside world; both always strike us like the pronouncements of an anonymous voice, intimate and forceful; and finally, when entering the mill of conscious thought, they both seem to require handling as messages that have to be interpreted rather than simply understood and responded to; these are several reasons why myths and dreams seem implicated in what is deepest down in the mind's functioning. It is in myths and dreams that specific mental laws are revealed, laws which, up to a certain point, are impermeable to those of the objective world, and where every element treated by the figures and tropes of poetics, appears more like a unit of thought than like the reflection of a feature of the perceived world.

Throughout every part of the world, societies seem to have sensed that myths and dreams are laden with what is most meaningful in human destiny, and the link between the interpretation of dreams and the reference to myths is present even before the birth of psychoanalysis, in what may be considered the first properly anthropological theory of myth, the animist theory propounded in the second half of the last century, notably by E. B. Tylor, one of the leading British founders of social anthropology. According to him, it was dreaming and the illusions of dream that generated belief in the souls and spirits which so-called "primitives" see inhabiting everything. Myths could therefore be considered the fruit of beliefs themselves arising out of a confused analysis of reality. As for how they came to get narrative form, Tylor borrowed an argument from Max Müller and the "naturalists" who thought that the gods and the other heroes of mythology should always be interpreted as personifications of natural forces, personifications which in their turn would be traceable to the failing inherent in language, that "disease" which, doubling the infirmities of thought, permits inanimate objects to become the subjects of verbs appropriately used to describe human actions: for example, *the sun rises, summer is coming*, and so on.



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This hypothesis, one sees, fitted nicely among the evolutionist theories current at the time, those theories which, taking exotic contemporaries as representatives of an archaic stage, built betwen them and us all the barriers of distance needed to prevent questions raised in their regard from being turned around and raised in ours. What in fact we are observing here is one of the permanent effects of the way myths operate, this being that we never acknowledge a myth as such unless it is a myth belonging to someone else. And so, as made out by the evolutionists, myths were at once an intellectual effort to render the world intelligible and the manifestation of hazy, primitive, irrational thinking, "embryonic thought," to quote Frazer. In their eyes, so-called primitive people were endowed, as are we, with intellectual curiosity—a positive acquirement which subsequently underwent occasional eclipse—but as captives of their dream-begotten illusions and animistic notions they were obliged to make do with myths which a minimum heeding of experience could have brought into immediate discredit. To the evolutionists it was in any case clear that in our civilization mythic thinking was something of the past, and that, indeed, therein lay one of the key distinctions between us and those who had not yet emerged from it.

For the exact locating of this point of view it must be remembered that mythology, from the very beginning, had always meant Greek mythology, which authorized the idea that the switch away from mythic thinking to a new form could be dated precisely, since the Greeks themselves had expressed the passing from archaic times to the classical age as that from *mythos* to *logos*, from the narrative spun out of illusion to a discourse framed out of strictness and truth.

Seeing this spate of stories flow in from every corner of the world, fantastic stories which seemed to attest to a free play of the imagination but which also, notwithstanding the diversity of themes and sources, exhibited profound and startling similarities to those contained in the mythologies of antiquity, the pioneer anthropologists felt they had good grounds for setting a limit in time to the reign of myths on the human mind.



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This idea of two distinct and opposed stages of thought had to be discarded once its proponents encountered their subject in the flesh, i.e., once social anthropologists went themselves out into the field. Unlike the amateurs, missionaries, travellers, administrators who had preceded them, they were there not simply to gather data but to ponder the epistemological status of these data and notably to study how the symbolism with which they are laden impinges upon the daily life of the community. It did not take them long to realize that these people, once one was willing to learn their language and was prepared to live in their midst, seemed to have their feet just as firmly on the ground as we, even if their reality differed on certain scores from the one with which we are familiar. No intellectual deficiency prevented these men from coping effectively with their environment; they were not given to mistaking dreams for reality or words for things; and they were able to learn and profit from experience. Nothing any longer warranted the hypothesis of inevitable recourse to phantasmagoric tales to aid shaky faculties of thought and perception.

In the meantime there were several things which kept social anthropologists from dismissing these stories as mere intellectual pastimes without real pertinence. First of all, their existence was certified in every society they investigated; secondly, as a rule all the members of a given group adhered and referred to them. This twofold universality implied that there was there a problem for anthropology. Furthermore, the social anthropologist could not help noticing the special relationship myths were having with the conduct of his study. Most often, one does not succeed in having myths related to one simply by asking to hear them, as is possible with other kinds of stories. Rather, it is by a judicious posing of the questions which interest him most that the anthropologist is most likely to find himself obtaining, by way of answers, recitals of myths or at least fragments of myths. They appear then as the explanation provided by the society itself, of the problems sociological inquiry has touched upon: How did the society first come into being? What is the significance of such and such an institution? Of this holiday or that ritual? What is the reason for the taboos? What underlies



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this particular group's system of values? What makes authority legitimate? What shape do relations take between men and the other world of gods, of spirits, of ancestors? What accounts for and what is implied by the prerogatives of a given sex, age-group, clan, caste, category of kinsmen?

Should then mythic thinking be regarded as a rival of scientific thinking? And are we simply going to leave them separate, or, to the contrary, are we to try to reduce one of them to the terms of the other? While the evolutionists with their theory of stages chose the former solution, the latter, which can work in either of the two directions, afterwards became embodied in a pair of diametrically opposed attitudes.

For the functionalists and notably for Bronsilaw Malinovski, the first social anthropologist to have drawn all the inferences from experience in the field (in the Trobriand Islands, Melanesia) mythological tradition is to be grasped within its social context as one among a number of elements which together make the group cohere. Hence the purpose myths fulfill is not so much to explain, to reply to a curiosity of some scientific, philosophical or literary kind, as to justify, to reinforce and to codify the beliefs and practices constituting the wheels and levers of social organization. As with other institutions, myths are to be approached and understood solely through their function within the social framework; for Malinovski they comprise the "dogmatic backbone of primitive civilization," they are its "pragmatic charter."

This conception, which was to dominate the whole of British social anthropology, had as its corollary a profound concern for myths. On the one hand, it disdained to take into consideration and to account for the enormous chaff of symbols, of imaginary beings, of apparently gratuitous tales left over in mythologies after one has winnowed out everything justifying the social order; it implied, on the other hand, that there was nothing to be found in myths that couldn't be apprehended better in the social organization itself, myths simply constituting a reflection of its workings, a sort of rear-view mirror showing you nothing more than the landscape you just had in front of you.

In opposition to this view, which, refusing to recognize a rival in mythic thinking, heavy-handedly reduced it to its purportedly scientific explanation, other social anthropologists,



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and notably in France, the school headed by Marcel Griaule, chose to surbordinate their own thinking to myths. Working since the early thirties in the Sudan among such peoples as the Bambara and the Dogon who seem to have been particularly deliberate and systematic in working out ways of thinking based upon myth, analogy, symbolic signs, correspondences and esoterism, Griaule and his followers have, when in the field, directed all their attention and efforts to the reconstruction of a coherent world view, steeped in symbols and self-sufficient, complete in itself. In this approach what comes first is the study of myths, or rather of mythology conceived as a coherent and orderly system of diverse myths and beliefs. The myths, all of them, are examined thoroughly (which is in itself a great step forward) and each detail must be reckoned with in the overall interpretation; but this interpretation emerges directly from the Dogons' or Bambaras' own conceptions, clotted by the ethnographer's scrutiny and insistent questioning. Under conditions such as these, where everything is referred to the myths and where symbol, analogy or metaphor are conceived as constituting in themselves an explanation, myths end up running the entire social show. The bridge enabling one to get from fabulous stories to an understanding of social practices is provided by the initiatory grades, successive stages in esoteric knowledge which gradually decode and link together the various sets of symbols contained in myths, rites, graphic signs, architecture, customs, prohibitions, objects, etc. Once initiated, the ethnographer, although in possession of a wealth of findings, comes back with really nothing more to say about Dogon society than what the Dogons say about it themselves, and the specificity of each culture thus observed and thus grasped excludes any attempt at comparison and generalization and therefore any genuine anthropological perspective.

Here, it is the study of social reality that is neglected, since this reality never comes through in any other way than as the more or less accurate reflection, the more or less adequately experienced aspect, of the ideological and symbolic constructions contained in myths.



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## III. "THE SAVAGE MIND" AND STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

The picture that has emerged so far is that of a basic incompatibility between mythic thinking and rational thinking, the two either repelling each other or else coming together only to their mutual destruction. Before considering the decisive step achieved thanks to the hypotheses and the methods of structural analysis, let us indicate at once how Lévi-Strauss will resolve this dilemma: for him, the line separating these two modes of thought is no longer to be drawn between peoples and cultures, nor even between differently educated persons belonging to the same culture. That line is to be drawn inside each individual. In opposition to the "savage" kind of thinking which operates according to laws of its own in myths, in art, doubtless in dreams, he sets a "domesticated" thinking which, supervised by consciousness, is, within the precise limits it must assign itelf, able to carry analysis further, to perform it more rigorously and to obtain and accumulate results that the savage mind never attempted because it is oriented towards an overall efficacity, anxious to grasp everything and to connect everything with everything else.

But so-called savages are no more devoid of a capacity for the domesticated kind of thinking than we are for the other. Hence, while we may look upon them as one of the most typical products of the savage mind, myths, or whatever stands in their stead, should not be considered as something belonging to only a portion of mankind. "The savage mind is logical, in the sense and in the same way ours is, but only as ours is when it is grappling with a universe in which it simultaneously recognizes physical properties and semantic properties... This thinking proceeds via intelligence, not via affectivity, with the aid of distinctions and oppositions, not by confounding identities and blurring contours."[1]

Let us say at once, even if we cannot enter into the details here, that these last propositions have been wholly verified thanks to the structural analysis method advocated by Lévi-Strauss and applied by him to the myths of North and South American Indians.

[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, p. 355.



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One of the first results of structural analysis, in any case, was to make plain that as a general rule myths do not constitute a reflection of social organization. In his comparative studies of the mythologies of the Indo-European peoples, G. Dumézil, who may be considered as a precursor of Lévi-Strauss in this domain, had already been forced by his own uncompromising thoroughness to reach that conclusion against his own initial hypotheses. He had to admit then that the system of three functions, myths, epics, and rites, he had uncovered in so many Indo-European pantheons most of the time corresponded to nothing at all in the actual organization of society and that it reflected only the mind's activity and was only a sort of tool intelligence had wrought for itself, an analytical instrument which over the course of the ages and of these peoples' dispersal over whole continents had proven sturdier than any institution. Lévi-Strauss, for his part, was to demonstrate that in a great many cases myths contradict social organizaion, or refer to the social organization of neighboring peoples rather than to that of the people who tell them.

What has just been said with regard to social organization is egually true with respect to the various other special planes to which some have always wanted to confine the import of myths. This critique applies also to psychoanalytical interpretations, even if these indulge in a final appeal to an order of realities by definition just as elusive as that of the gods. This does not mean that relations of consanguinity are not one of the types of reference most universally mythologized nor that their probable anteriority in the mental history of individuals does not give them a very particular importance. All the same, within the perspective of structural analysis kinship relations are only one symbolic code among others, referring to other codes as those codes cross-refer back to it.

In short, there is no key to myths. These, taken as a whole, aim not so much to depict the real as to speculate upon its latent potentialities; not so much to think something through as to walk the boundaries of the thinkable.

Consequently, while knowledge of the social, economic, psychological context is often indispensable to analysis, the meaning of myths is to be got not from it but from the study of the patterns belonging to the texts themselves. Often enough, as it turns out, institutions, practices, prohibitions are clarified by the



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analysis of myths, even when the latter contain no allusion to them, for this analysis reveals the categories and types of relationship underlying the thinking which has produced them all. But in the same way that the various codes operative in the myths refer back and forth to each other unendingly, so each mythic tale refers above all else to other mythic tales which constitute its variants and which themselves refer on to others until after a long journey beset by twists, turns, transformations through oppositions and inversions, back you are where you started. "The world of myths is round," is how Lévi-Strauss once put it, meaning by that to express the conviction that what he had undertaken within the scope of the Americas could be extended to the entire planet, and that one could thus show that all the myths of all societies constitute in fact "limitless series of variants oscillating around the same frameworks." Now, for Lévi-Strauss, these frameworks keep a close relationship to those of the human mind itself; and that is why "the myths enable us to get at certain modes of operating... so widespread... that we may regard them as fundamental and look for them to turn up in other societies and in other areas of mental life where formerly we had no inkling that they were involved."

## IV. THE MYTH AS NARRATIVE

Let us consider now the fact that myth, according to its traditional definition, is first of all a narrative. Among all the literary genres, it lends itself most readily to translation, for its interest resides above all in the story told there and not in the quality of the language in which it is expressed.

The interest of the story recounted in myths cannot, however, be identified with the interest of a content that would be independent of myth and linked to human experiences of another type, for, to begin with, in most of these narratives the characters are fabulous, having no consistency outside the myths themselves; and, too, as we already know, it is in the very nature of mythic deeds and happenings to gainsay experience, usually harking back to some primordial period, to a "mythic age," a pure confection of the imagination.

At the same time almost all societies make the very sharpest



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distinction between marvellous tales, looked upon as inventions and relished for their imaginativeness, and myths, narratives of the most solemn importance, which would lose all their potency if their indisputable and eternal truthfulness were ever called into question.

Myths are, thus, effective as explanatory accounts to which one refers when some problem arises, which are taught to children to make mature persons of them, and from which one draws one's fundamental motivations. Now, analysis brings out that this seriousness characteristic of myths results less from the diachronous aspect of the exploits evoked in them than from a synchronous order underlying them, an order that the narratives, unreeling according to the linear pattern of speech, steadily deploy in a manner reminiscent, to borrow Lévi-Strauss' comparison, of the developments of a musical theme. Thus, superimposed upon the horizontal reading there must be a vertical reading which singles out the pertinent oppositions in the welter of repetitions, and links them together by means of some such equations as: the cooked is to the raw as ornament is to nudity; the too great nearness of the sun is to its too great distance from the earth as an interminable honeymoon is to an overly long separation, that is to say, as the burnt is to the rotten, and so on.

Hence, if structural analysis of myths is adequate, that is if it does nothing more than make us conscious of the mental processes behind the myths' spontaneous creation and, at the same time, behind their power to impress the minds of those who listen to them, it is clear that the crucial interest of the whole thing resides in the constituting of categories, usually founded upon a logic of perceptible qualities, and engendered by the endless game that consists in establishing connections between a culinary code, a cosmological code, a weather code, a sociological code, etc., in such a way that each person or object mentioned in the myth registers in the mind as standing for a knot of relationships.

A first conclusion to draw is that the narrative character of myths is dispensable to their underlying nature and is probably not necessary to the function myths assume. In fact, societies exist, in Black Africa particularly, which have developed practically no mythology but where brief scraps of commentary on a



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very rich body of rites and symbolic objects appear to play the same role and are amenable to the same kind of analysis.

To give an example on the plan of individual experience of the way myths function on the collective scale, one could cite the relationship that everybody, providing he suffers from be it only a grain of mythomania, has to his own personal history. Here too when you call upon your memory it is not at first a narrative that is forthcoming but salient details, outstanding moments, faces, names, gestures, places, that thinking organizes into a coherent and therefore meaningful whole. If a questioner asks you to tell it all to him, the chances are that you'll do so in the form of a narrative, with the hope that with things in this linear order he will be able to grasp connections, i.e. meaning, that it would strike you as odd and pointless to try to communicate just as they are. To convince the listener, you must provide him with the means to compose a picture of your life, but you must do so in such a way that behind the story, he will discover regularities which are less easy to communicate and which, to your eyes, constitute the meaning and value of your past experiences.

One may suppose, of course, that the advent of writing, to the extent it introduced a means for fixing concepts and notions which had aways been very evanescent up to then, caused mythological imagery to retire in favor of more insidious forms. Yet one has only to look at modern advertising to ascertain how much we have to be told and shown before we finally believe in the advantage of making this or that choice.

## V. ASPECTS OF THE FUNCTIONING OF MYTHS

If now we ask ourselves what myths are actually for, the first thing to note is that as distinct from many other literary genres they do not seem designed simply to delight their audience; which explains, furthermore, why they can be effective even in the most prosaic language and can be so easily translated into other tongues. Nor do they serve to inform the listener about some local occurrence as would an interesting news item calling for reactions, judgments or decisions. Nor do they say much of interest about the state of the world in general since most often



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they evoke other worlds or other times. What is plain however is that, more so than any other genre, they aim at inscribing something in the mind and that everything conspires to make this inscription identical in all the individual members of a given culture. One might even say, from a certain standpoint, that a culture or, within complex civilizations, a subculture cannot be better defined than as a community of people who share the same myths; myths that in their turn condition all their other products and attitudes. What myths etch in the mind can therefore hardly be anything other than "ways of thinking."

In this connection, as suggested by the example of the autobiography given earlier, there is a special working relationship between myths and the memory. One may even say that what the memory spontaneously retains out of all that flows through its net bears an overall resemblance to myth, and this is yet more apparent in our literate civilizations where the proportion of loss in what is read is huge. Actually how much does one remember, without struggling, of a big book like *War and Peace* after having read it all the way through? Recollecting the pleasure one had reading it, what arises are the names of the characters, each of whom takes on definition through his relations to each of the other characters, relations that are nothing else than "ways of thinking" which in their turn are expressed in such actions and interactions as enable them to be grasped. And is this not exactly what must have been in the author's head originally for him to have been able to engender this monster capable of communicating a world-view?

What is true of a novel is true also of a history book, of a political tract, of a collection of poems (beyond one's recollection of the music of the words) and even of a popularized treatment of some branch of science in so far as it helps complete or modify our vision of the coherence of things.

For a work, always individual at the outset, to begin to take on the characteristics of myth, it is necessary—and it suffices—that the community first consent to remember it and then agree to refer to it. The discussion ends there: "We do not question the myths of the group," says Lévi-Strauss.[2] "We transform them, the while believing that we are repeating them."

[2] Lévi-Strauss, *L'homme nu*, p. 585.



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In this connection, and in accordance with the requirements of memory, myth has some special relations with the names of persons and places, which also, once agreed upon, are not open to discussion but are the points from which an entire series of recollections may get started. Hence those ways of thinking that myths inscribe in the mind are first embodied in characters' names which, most of the time, are concepts, categories, syntheses of elements, allegories of good or evil, representatives of interconnecting relationships. A god is always the god of something—unless he is the god of several things—and in the myths there is nothing that cannot become a proper noun and a divinity.

Without these names, without its myths, a society would be like the total amnesiac unable to remember his identity and who, before being able to do or say anything sensible, would have to ask himself endless questions about the state of things, or else give up the feeling of existing. Or again, to go back to the idea of world-view, like somebody who would try to understand a map without having the faintest notion of the conventions which presided over its making.

Maps, like the other products of culture, proceed from the fact that the symbolic function specific to human beings creates for them a continual concern for what lies outside the range of perception. Here they can no longer count upon the natural fit which the senses work out between the body and the environment it moves in. Pointing a finger will not show what lies beyond the horizon line. So you must build a model to reconstruct reality. And to do that, you must first agree upon a certain number of conventions which, although partly arbitrary will constitute a code capable of mediating the adequacy of the drawing to the reality being mapped. Now, all the elements that can be used in drawing are already physical properties in the world, properties to which drawing confers semantic values: lines, colors, forms tending, in their combination, to adjust themselves to the human dimension.

Mythic thinking, in its endeavor to construct models not only of what is not perceived but of that which is not perceivable and which is felt just by the fact that we are able through imagination to escape the confines of the body, proceeds no differently. Laying down the bases for meaning and for com-



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munication, myths serve to constitute and to inscribe in the mind the system of categories which provides root simultaneously to the cultural, the social and the psychological dimensions of human life.

Just like the cartographer's system of co-ordinates, they aim at integrating countless pieces of data into a representational scheme which gives the world an identity and the earth a name.

Now, among the mind's fundamental requirements for accomplishing this work, one, brought out again and again in all Lévi-Strauss' analyses, is to operate upon discontinuous elements not only by stressing the break and divergences that are already there in nature (examples: man and woman, earth and sky) but also by digging out fresh ones inside the continuous (examples: nature and culture, we and the others). The extravagant and emphatic character of mythological themes is no doubt owing to this requirement. One must create monsters in order to eliminate hybrids. Thus, on the map, a few culminating points such as Mount Olympus become monsters or divinities whereby the impossibile portrayal of a whole host of intermediaries can be avoided. In the same way, though political power is shared, at various levels, by many people, from the bottom to the top of the social pyramid, the monstrous and sacred character of the king will help people to draw a clear distinction between the ruler and ordinary men.

In the operations which consist in marking and opening up discontinuities lie the possibilities that permit variations in mythological systems: one can decide that the sea will be blue and the earth green, or the sea green and the earth brown, that different elevations will be shown by colors or rather drawn in; one can choose to have the earth flat or round, and to show only a part of it, on this or that scale, and to mark in the network of mountains and rivers, or instead of these, the network of roads, or else the political divisions, and so on. After that, one will be in a position to try to account for the political divisions on the basis of the network of mountains and rivers, and for the system of roads on the basis of the other two. Everything being a good object for thought, as Lévi-Strauss demonstrated in the case of cooking, everything, still remaining faithful to its own logic, permits, once thought, the thinking of something else, by transferring the categories abstracted from one



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thing to another. But in spite of the infinite variations of these games and to the extent that there is some correspondence between the mind's handiwork and something in the way the world is organized, all mythologies, like all maps, have despite their differences a look of profound similarity.

The differences between a given myth's variants and between the variants of those variants and so on are also governed by the discontinuity requirement. The transformation of a myth does not occur by way of gradual, imperceptible variations but, as is shown repeatedly in Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologiques*, through oppositions and inversions, one myth countering or providing the counterpoint to another. This is probably what explains why, even if on the plane of language myths are the most translatable of all genres, upon the plane of acceptability they are the least, for not just faraway peoples but even your next-door neighbors exhibit an unfortunate tendency to contest your myths tooth and nail.

## VI. THE MYTH AS BELIEF

Herein lies the paradox of myths: were one to ask a social anthropologist the most empirical manner for detecting the myths amongst all the tales and stories offered by the society he decides to study, and specially for distinguishing them from historical accounts on the one hand and fairy tales on the other, he would say, I think, that unlike these last which are presented as inventions meant merely to amuse the company, myths are held to be true although, contrary to what happens in the case of historical narratives, they contain, in the eyes of the foreign observer, practically nothing that is credible.

Some possible reasons have already been adduced for this fantastic character common to myths, but that does not suffice to justify a belief in them which in certain instances goes all the way to fanaticism.

This paradox is further illustrated by the fact that in our tongues the word *myth* has become synonymous with error, while wherever it is operative a myth is considered as the very vessel of truth. This discrepancy shows how prone we are, when talking about myths, to refer to other people's myths only, and how the mythic foundation of our own thinking lies safely



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outside the dissolving reach of conscious reason. It is something comparable to the speaking of a language: someone who is learning to speak it, like, for that matter, someone who is in the act of speaking, cannot challenge the arbitrariness of the signs and is obliged to assume that, as he has been taught, there is somewhere, in spite of appearances, a strict relationship between a particular set of sounds and the particular object they designate; likewise, someone learning to think, like someone busy thinking, cannot take issue with the way the thought process is arranged. In so far as meaning is an effect that the mind produces for itself, the ironclad arbitrary inner core of the given positions from which thought takes wing must remain buried deep in the unconscious.

Belief is further reinforced by the fact that it is to this same arbitrary source that we look for the motor impulse not only of thought, but also of desire, of will, of action. To be sure, the analysis of myths reveals nothing other than a pattern of symbolic devices little able, in themselves, to trigger and steer action or desire in one direction or another. But in practice, just as thought has need of language and must yield to its demands in order to be realized, the effectiveness of mythic thinking makes itself felt only through the ideological use that we draw from its symbolism, a use in which belief crystallizes and which from the same source, neutral in itself, can cause completely different and utterably inexorable attitudes to flow.

If the function of myths has been correctly designated in the foregoing, it is obviously universal and nothing allows us to suppose that any civilization can dispense with myths or their equivalent. To locate them, in a complex civilization like ours, we can, for example, refer to the dismissive attitude performed by each subculture when it accuses others of surrendering to myths: thus the Marxist confronting the Christian, the artist confronting the business man, the younger generation confronting the elder, and reciprocally. Next, one ought to consider that myths always insert themselves in a system of written or oral genres which differs from culture to culture and which affects the particular form the myths themselves assume there. Societies that think of themselves as immutable and recall nothing of their past history will have a mythology with a different center of gravity from what will be found in a society where history is



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stressed. Every genre, literary genres as well as history, political ideology, philosophy and the rest, lies in direct contact with the mythic thinking that fashions the meanings the various genres convey. In this respect a gallery of great men has all the characteristics of a pantheon. The contents of the Old and New Testaments but also of History in general, such as it is taught to children or used to explain or justify present-day things, are myths having all the features of those narratives whose interest resides in the underlying coherence imputed to them and in the prestige adorning them when they are regarded not simply as sequences of past events but, to quote Lévi-Strauss once more, as "schemes possessing a permanent efficacity."

One inevitably comes to see that the borderline between the savage mind's thinking and that of the domesticated or rational mind runs through the middle of scientific thinking itself. Offering us schemes of the same order, scientific faith thereby equips up to identify the mythical element in all the rest. To be read in this regard is the famous work of Lucien Fèbvre, *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI*$^{ème}$ *siècle*, where it is demonstrated that minds as robust and skeptical as those of Rabelais and his contemporaries were yet quite unable to work themselves loose of religion, for they came before the conquests of critical and scientific thinking which finally created room for belief in something else: when *logos* recognizes *mythos* as such, and so deprives it of its efficacity, at the same time it takes over its place and becomes the new working myth.

So, mythic thinking and scientific thinking have many things in common. Both, reaching for relationships lying outside the perceptible, seek equivalences between thought and the world. But while savage thinking, favoring the semantic, merely feeds unconcernedly upon the world accordingly as it has need, domesticated thinking, doing itself violence by favoring the physical as best it can, gives itself to the world to feed upon. It is none the less true, however, that the domesticated beast can perform its job only if it has first of all paid nature her tribute by founding its vitality upon an adequate nurture. As it is true that, for the anthropologist, to understand a culture is first of all to understand its myths, so it may be that if one is to do full justice to science, one must acknowledge the portion of myth it has in it.



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## VII. CONCLUSION

There remains a concluding violence, the one that consists in thought surrendering itself for consumption by the thinking part of the world and returning thereby to the physical bases of semantics. In thus giving myself over to metaphors, I am only too well aware that all along I have done nothing else than evoke some "operations that it will be for other sciences to validate later on when they have at last grasped the real objects at whose reflections we peer."[3] These reflections are made of light and shade: if one can look upon dreaming as the nocturnal twinkling thanks to which thought can remain buried in the obscurity of sleep, the mythical base which underlies thinking is the shade that the mind contrives for itself so as to be able, without being blinded, to confront the brilliance of daylight.

Thus, it is to the very extent myth and dream stand opposed to reality that they will help to locate the ford through which thought connects with the body and to guide science itself to the end of its long journey homeward.

[3] Lévi-Strauss, *L'homme nu*, p. 375.



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