

Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, Frankfurt, 1979
(*Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace, Cambridge, 1985)¹

Review by Denis Trierweiler

It may be that the final statement of the *Tractatus* – “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence”² – is true; but what this means more precisely is quite simply that what we cannot speak about in a *certain* way, we must speak of in *another* way.

Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*, p. 426.

At the seventh German conference on philosophy, in 1962, a young newcomer burst upon the philosophical scene with a challenge that was as surprising as it was innovative in the category of “secularization,” which had become increasingly entrenched since 1949 – the year in which Karl Löwith formulated his thesis on what he regarded as the fundamental misunderstanding of modernity: the idea of progress. It was quite generally accepted at the time that progress – but also reason, science, individual freedom, technology, and so forth – were none other than secular versions of concepts that originally and properly belonged to the domain of the Christian Middle Ages. Hans Blumenberg’s critique was to provoke vehement reactions, to the point that in 1966 he responded with the first version (to be followed by two other editions, revised and augmented) of his conception of the origin of the modern age and its legitimacy. *The Legitimacy of Modern Times*³ was an epoch-making work.

Who was this young newcomer, and how had he worked out his reflection on the history of thought and constructed his theory on the legitimacy of modernity?

Born in Lübeck in 1920, Hans Blumenberg studied philosophy, German letters, and classical philosophy at Paderborn and Frankfurt; in 1947, in Kiel, he defended his thesis on medieval scholastic ontology, and in 1950 earned his *Habilitation*, also in Kiel, with an examination of the *Krisis* of Husserl’s phenomenology (both works remain unpublished). Subsequently, he was to teach at Giessen, Bochum, and then Münster, until his retirement in 1985. Blumenberg was awarded the Kuno Fischer prize in Heidelberg in 1974 and the Sigmund Freud Prize in Darmstadt in 1980. In his acceptance speech for the Kuno Fischer prize, it was to Ernst Cas-

sirer that he chose to pay homage – more specifically, to a work by Cassirer that he thought unjustly forgotten: *The Concept of Substance and the Concept of Function* (*Substanzbegriff un Funktionsbegriff*, 1910, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 3/1969). Blumenberg took inspiration from this distinction of Cassirer's in order to point out that modern concepts suspected of being secularized Christian concepts contain, in their very substance, something entirely other than medieval Christian contents. True, they differ only in their substance, not in their function; the latter remains the same. This means that, in the system of possible declarations about the world and about man, they *reinvest* (*Umbesetzung*) precisely the places that were once occupied by theological contents. This is how new contents can be grasped. This analysis was to be refined by Blumenberg's approach to metaphor.

In *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, published in 1960, the author presented a programmatic book exposing a methodology and announcing the work to come over the next thirty-six years, in fourteen published works,⁴ half of which are monumental in their sheer breadth. Metaphorology is therein defined as a subsidiary method "in the service of the history of concepts"⁵ which is just now in the process of being established. What interested Blumenberg is the *antechamber of the formation of concepts*, and he sees *metaphors as fossils that guide the way*. A metaphor is *absolute* when it cannot be reduced to a concept. But *in a purely hypothetical way, metaphors can also be fundamental components of philosophical language, as "transpositions" that cannot be traced back to logic.*⁶ Blumenberg refers to paragraph 59 of the third critique, where Kant makes the distinction between schematic and symbolic hypotyposis. *The schemas proceed demonstratively, Kant writes, the symbols by means of an analogy... Our language is filled with similar indirect presentations using an analogy...* Blumenberg notes that the use here of "the concept of symbol... is close to that of absolute metaphors."⁷ Kant again: *Between a despotic State and a windmill, there is of course no resemblance, but between the rules of reflection upon them and upon their causality, there is indeed a resemblance. This activity has been very little analyzed up to the present, whereas it deserves far more thorough investigation.*⁸ Blumenberg was to make this task his life's work.

The task of metaphor in this process will be to *approach the sub-structure of thought, the underground bottom, the solution [where] systematic crystallization [takes shape]*.⁹ And, conceived as a contribution to a theory of inconceivability, it will, we shall see, accord a significant place to an analysis of myth.

In existential terms, Hans Blumenberg, the author, a man who is discreet to the point of secrecy, is huddled deep inside the cave¹⁰ of his immense erudition, whence, from time to time,¹¹ he allows a book to filter out, which the reader will receive as an enigma and a challenge. To take up this challenge is to make the mind a burrower.¹² For Blumenberg's analyses till the soil of all certainties, and end up unsettling every premise and every approach. In Blumenberg's eyes, what is worth seeking must be in the depths. Attesting to this are the richness and variety of his analyses, often so teeming that the reader can feel baffled. For rarely is the thesis expressed wholesale; rarely can it be easily discerned in unambiguous terms. And yet Blumenberg's fundamental thought is, in sum, a very simple thought, which may even appear trivial. It is in *Arbeit am Mythos* (*Work on Myth*) that it will be most masterfully elucidated, while it was still latent in *The Legitimacy of Modern Times*; however, it is this last-mentioned work that enabled Blumenberg to refine this thought and to delineate his thesis of the absolutism of the divine.

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If we tell stories, it is to keep danger at bay – most often, time, but also, and especially, the fear (*WM* 34; *AM* 40) that is generated by the real, which is present as an absolute. At the beginning of the experience of the world, there is no astonishment and admiration, but only terror. The most original feature of the real that confronts man is what is nameless, foreign, troubling, *unheimlich*, *deinós*.¹³ Mythical stories, religious doctrines, rituals of worship, metaphysical systems, and to some extent also scientific construction are related to this necessity of mastering the terrible by naming it and by keeping it at a distance. It is not with Copernicus that *the eternal silence of infinite spaces becomes terrifying*, but from the beginning and for all time.¹⁴ One of the first human inventions for protection against the terror of the real was myth.

All trust in the world begins with names, in connection with which stories can be told. This state of affairs is involved in the biblical story of the beginning, with the giving of names in Paradise. But it is also involved in the faith that underlies all magic and that is still characteristic of the beginnings of science, the faith that the suitable naming of things will suspend the enmity between them and man, turning it into a relationship of pure serviceability. The fright that has found the way back to language has already been endured. (*WM*, 35; *AM*, 41).

Blumenberg defines himself as a “latter-day metaphorologist,” living in an age when the stories are nearly forgotten. But he is not among those who herald the end of the great stories while continuing to feed off them surreptitiously. He simply invites us to lend an ear to listen for what can still be heard.¹⁵ But the metaphorologist is indeed a latecomer, an *epigone*, coming after the Enlightenment, after “the death of God,” after metaphysics, after science, after the “destruction of reason in the twentieth century.” He is a man of modern times. And if once he strove to defend the legitimacy of modernity, he does not prohibit himself from analyzing its possible pathologies in *Arbeit am Mythos*.

In what sense is modernity legitimate? For one thing, it opposes man’s self-affirmation to the arbitrary god of medieval nominalism, and in contrast to medieval Christianity, it has succeeded in surpassing gnosis. True, there would be no grounds for affirming this legitimacy if modernity had not been accused of illegitimacy, precisely through the category of *secularization*.¹⁶ In Blumenberg’s view, this is a *category of historical injustice*. It explains nothing, but rather prohibits any understanding. Modernity contains its own justification, for it brings new, unprecedented answers that are no longer either those of myth nor those of dogma. But that does not imply that it is necessary to take the Enlightenment’s claim of rational foundations at face value.

There exists an extravagant attitude toward the establishment of rational foundations that assumes from the beginning, or at least accepts, that only those who are professionally commissioned or self-commissioned to carry it out can afford to engage in it. If, however, enlightenment allows thought to be legitimated only by the fact that everyone does it himself and for himself, then thought is the only thing that has to be excepted from the human capacity to delegate actions. From that, in turn, it follows that something that everyone unavoidably has to do himself and for himself simply must not be an “endless task.” As such, it stands in indissoluble contradiction to the meager finitude of the life that the thinker-for-himself has disposition over.

Reason, as what cannot be delegated, must then reach some accommodation with this fundamental condition of our existence: Here is the breach through which certainties that must simply be accepted make their entrance. This is unquestionably a serious gap in the protection provided by rationality; but if the only way to close it were to give everyone's thinking-for-himself to a small avant-garde of professional "thinkers-for-themselves on behalf of everyone" as a mandate, then any danger would be worth confronting at this point in order to avoid having to pay that fatal price. Philosophy has to keep this antinomy of life and thought in mind in connection with all the self-addressed demands for rationality that spring from its own womb. (WM, 164; AM, 181-182.)

The antithesis between myth and reason is a late and nefarious opposition (WM 49; AM 56), for myth has never been eliminated by being replaced by reason. *Logos* is not a substitute for *mythos*. True,

philosophy, in opposition to myth, brought into the world above all restless inquiry, and proclaimed its "rationality" in the fact that it did not shrink from any further question or from any logical consequence of possible answers.... Myth lets inquiry run up against the rampart of its images and stories: One can ask for the next story – that is, for what happens next, if anything happens next. Otherwise it starts over again from the beginning. (WM, 257; AM, 287).

Thus "myths do not answer questions; they make things unquestionable" (WM, 126; AM, 142). "Myth does not need to answer questions; it makes something up, before the question becomes acute and so that it does not become acute" (WM, 197; AM, 219). But does this mean that *logos* is immune to *mythos*? Certainly not! The difference – it is important to know this – is that he who asks "Why?" can only be disappointed by the answer, which falls far short of his expectations (WM, 258; AM, 287). Here is the task facing philosophy today: it must accept to back down on great expectations of meaning. These have been disappointed and will ineluctably continue to be disappointed in the future. And the pernicious point is that "with regard to the effort – which spans all of human history – to overcome anxiety relating to what is unknown or even still unnamed, myth and enlightenment are allies in a way that, while easy to understand, is reluctantly admitted" (WM, 163; AM, 180). "There is no end of myth, although aesthetic feats of strength aimed at bringing it to an end occur again and again." (WM, 633; AM, 685). Only work on myth makes it possible to arm ourselves against the work of myth. But beware

the breach... Thus, after the great stories have supposedly fallen silent,

[t]he type of effort that is involved in satisfying the paradigm established by Idealism's fundamental myth is exemplified again in Schopenhauer's transmigration of souls, in Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of the same, in Scheler's comprehensive schema of the God who is in the process of becoming... and in Heidegger's story of Being, with its anonymous speaker.

Such total schemata are mythical precisely in the fact that they drive out the desire to ask for more and to invent more to add. While they do not provide answers to questions, they make it seem as though there is nothing left to ask about. (WM, 288; AM, 319).

As for *Work on Myth*, it must endlessly question. "The Enlightenment claims to have made a new beginning by virtue of natural reason, and to be unable to lose this thread again. But it has the burden of also having to explain, now, how this same reason could let things get to the point where a radical historical incision even became necessary" (WM, 380; AM, 415). The Enlightenment by no means wanted to be a new Renaissance; but

if reason is a constant in man's equipment, on which one was supposed to be able to depend henceforth, it is only with difficulty that one can understand why it had not been a constant in the history of mankind from time immemorial. Reason's absolute self-establishment, in its judicial quality, inevitably exposed its contingency – and contingency does not make a future more reliable than its past. (WM, 380; AM, 415)

The Enlightenment had no tomorrow that sang with promise. No sooner had it arrived than it came to terms with myth. Can we forget Fontenelle's uncomprehending observation that it was not enough to establish the "non-truth" of myth in order to banish it from the earth's surface?

The reader of *Arbeit am Mythos*, starting out from the absolutism of the real, summoned to witness histories becoming History, will also learn that it was the desacralization of the theft of fire perpetrated by Prometheus, through whose intervention humanity escaped the absurdity of existence, the indignity of being. Blumenberg will chart all the metamorphoses of the Titan, all the way to the aesthetic breakthrough that the *Aufklärung* thought it offered, which purported to be definitive. And suddenly, the reader notices that all the vanishing traces of the book he holds in his hands are as if magnetically drawn by a single

proposition, the interpretation of which will take no fewer than 300 pages. This is Goethe's famous *terrible pronouncement*¹⁷ in *Poetry and Truth: Nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse*, which could be rendered thus: against a god, only a god. This formula illustrates first of all the young Goethe's identification with Prometheus. And if we cannot expatiate here upon the richness of Blumenberg's treatment of this proposition, it must at least be said that it is the very topos of the coming century's (the nineteenth century's) identification with the Titan. And if Blumenberg decides to trace the myth of Prometheus from its emergence to the culminating point when it is reinvested by Goethe, it is because the ostentatious gesture of the Olympian from Weimar was too complex for his era to take notice of the breach in which it was engulfed. No sooner had the *Aufklärung* left the baptismal font than its vocation to surpass gnosticism was here to become an ultimate perversion, and the self-affirmation of the subject an *unheimliche* megalomania. "Goethe is, after all, not only the author of an out-of-the-way theory of color directed against Newton, against the microscope and the telescope, he is also (without having achieved historical clarity about this himself) opposed to the entire epistemological process that stands behind modern science" (WM, 544; AM, 591). The young Goethe's identification with the figure of Prometheus had not been easy to read. In any case, on the scientific level, his critique of Newton was impossible to accept, as Helmholtz, despite his respect for the writer, was to point out to him.¹⁸ "Only when Nietzsche rediscovers in Prometheus the central figure of ancient tragedy, and finds in that figure the absolute antithesis of the Socratic type, does it become clear that the century had wagered on Prometheus as the victorious conqueror on behalf of mankind, the god who invents ways to combat the gods' playing with men's fortunes, the patriarch of historical self-discovery" (WM, 561; AM, 607). The degeneration or depletion of the absolutism of the real was just what Nietzsche did not want. The "admirer of tragic pessimism" (WM, 337; AM, 368) has at his disposal the adequate metaphysical consolation: art! But he thus failed to see the truly tragic subject of the Prometheus story: "man in his natural unworthiness to exist" (WM, 337; AM, 368) – for a mortal, it was better not to be born. And thus Nietzsche missed

his true target. For to leave *Unheimlichkeit* untouched is to proscribe “work on myth as a great and burdensome effort of the generations to put superior power into their picture, to draw what is too large to themselves and down to themselves, with the full right of one who thereby makes life possible for himself” (WM, 337; AM, 368). What is at issue here, what is still behind and ahead of myth, because it is not yet mythic itself, being still formless and faceless, but above all nameless, will end up reappearing in its terrifying form as the return of the repressed. Soon Freud will see it and will establish the symptom, by no means arbitrary, of the century’s association with the figure of the Titan.

Is this danger a feature of the modern age? Others will interpret it as having been ineluctably programmed by the advancement of being... by the essence of technology. Whereas it may perhaps be just a breach...? A breach through which the *Aufklärung*, had it been more radical, would not have been swallowed up (?) In any case, it gives one pause, or as Blumenberg writes in one of his finest texts, it makes one pensive. Speaking of that state in which we meditate, wondering “where we are at,” he writes:

And although in the meantime we must be assured that no answer can be formulated, and that no answer that one can formulate can be imposed, we give up only with difficulty, only now and then, retaining faith in ersatz answers. We reflect on where we are at because we have been disturbed in the act of not considering it. *Nachdenklichkeit* (“pensiveness”?): because everything doesn’t go entirely without saying, as it used to. That is all.¹⁹

That is not quite all. The pensive metaphorologist, disabused of any illusions of the *tabula rasa* as well as those of lofty promises, is hard pressed to take leave of the great traditions from which the very fibers of his being take their nourishment. This is why each of his books is also a work of mourning, and as he said in *Arbeit am Mythos*, a bag packed for other journeys – other crossings towards a more luminous, yet never attained, *Aufklärung*. Hans Blumenberg died 28 March 1996. *No need to be concerned*: he had written that these were the words he would have liked to hear Heidegger utter on his deathbed.

“What to philosophize...”

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage

Notes

1. Hereinafter cited parenthetically as *WM*, with page numbers referring to the English translation and the German edition, in that order.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London, 1961), par. 1, 7.
3. Exhaustively translated in the Anglophone, Hispanic, and Italian domains, Hans Blumenberg remains largely ignored, not to say unknown, in France, where the publisher Arche is to be saluted for being the only one to publish three of his texts in a French translation: (*Le souci traverse le fleuve*, trans. Octave Mannoni [1990]; *Naufrage avec spectateur*, trans. Laurent Cassagnau [1994]; and finally *La passion selon saint Matthew*, trans. Henri-Alexis Baatsch and Laurent Cassagnau [1996]). In late 1998 or early 1999, Gallimard will publish *La légitimité des temps modernes*, which was reviewed in 1995 by Rémi Brague for *Le Débat* (no. 83, pp. 173 ff.), which brought Blumenberg's work to the attention of a specialized audience. Les Editions du Cerf is preparing to publish *La lisibilité du monde* in a translation by Pierre Rusch.
4. One year after Blumenberg's death, two posthumous works were published: *Die Vollzähligkeit der Sterne (The Fulfillment of the Stars)*, and "astro-neoetics," by Surhkamp, and *Ein mögliches Selbstverständnis (A Possible Self-Understanding)*, by Reklam, which is by no means autobiographical.
5. See Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997), p. 93 (pp. 81 ff. "Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality").
6. *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* (Surhkamp, 1960), p. 10.
7. *Shipwreck with Spectator*, p. 101.
8. Kant, *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment (Critique de la faculté de juger*, trans. J.-L. Delamarre [Pléiade, 1985], p. 1142).
9. *Paradigmen*, p. 11.
10. See *Höhlenausgänge – Out of the Caves*.
11. See *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt – The Readability of the World* (Frankfurt, 1981).
12. These spun out metaphors, which would hardly be to Blumenberg's taste, are borrowed from F. J. Wetz, *Hans Blumenberg zur Einführung*, a highly useful introduction which contains an exhaustive bibliography through 1993.
13. It would of course be necessary to elaborate extensively on the analysis of these two terms, which play a crucial role in this *terrifying century in which we live and create* (Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*). To my mind the first, which was of course a theme of Freud's, is untranslatable; the second is that of the chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone*, *pollà tà deinà*, "frightening things are many, but none is more frightening than man," which Heidegger attempted to translate and interpret. I cannot develop these points here.
14. See *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt (The Genesis of the Copernican World)*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt, 1981).
15. See *Mattäuspassion (The Passion According to Saint Matthew)*, op. cit., which is certainly Blumenberg's most personal book: what can the contemporary listener still perceive when he hears Bach's *Passion*? Does the disenchanting world in which the modern listener lives still allow him to understand this story, whose contents no longer belong to his frame of thought?

16. After Löwith, among others, and notably by Carl Schmitt: "All the pregnant concepts of the modern theory of the State are secularized theological concepts." *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985). For a detailed examination of this category of secularization, the reader is referred to *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.
17. This is the *Ungeheuere Spruch*, which is usually translated as "unheard sentence," a phrase that, despite its neatness, leaves out the essential element: to wit, that *Ungeheuer* is the adjective Hölderlin had used to translate Sophocles *deinós*. Heidegger was to give the same adjective as a synonym for *unheimlich* in the 1942 seminar on *Ister*, to which only sporadic attention is paid, and which has not yet been translated into French (?). The adjective was also to become the center of the whole debate on nihilism between Heidegger and Junger in the 1950s. It is true that Carl Schmitt was to mock Heidegger savagely in his journal, but without making any contribution to clarifying matters; see *Glossarium*, 5 March 1948: "Heidegger stoops to a platitude of consummate kitsch when he produces words like *unheimlich* as if he is squeezing lemons."
18. See Hermann von Helmholtz, *Über Goethes Naturwissenschaftliche Arbeiten*, "Populäre wissenschaftliche Arbeiten," vol. 1 (Braunschweig, 1865). On this point, see Loup Verlet, *La malle de Newton* (Gallimard, 1993), pp. 162 ff. and *passim*. See also Pierre Thuillier, "Goethe l'hérésiarque," in *La Recherche*, no. 63 (1976), pp. 147-155.
19. "Nachdenklichkeit," in *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung* (Heidelberg, 1980), pp. 57-61.