



## **The Hermeneutics of Myth**

The myth has been considered for a long time as a fable, fiction or invention. It is a real story, precious due to its exemplarity, to its sacred dimension.

Nowadays, the word *myth* has two meanings: a *story* (a primordial revelation) or a *sacred tradition* (a unique exemplary model). The second definition is familiar to historians of religion and to ethnologists. The myth was translated by story, but it is not a story in its literary meaning, but a *saga*, rather tradition or traditional story. At the beginning, it meant spoken action. The concepts of *mythos* and *logos* are not opposed. Moreover, they both exist in the concept of *mythology*. The myth was considered as pure invention or even a lie. The error comes from the exaggeration of rationalism, atheist propaganda and peripheral journalism. The correction of the error lies in the Greek meaning of the term “mythos”. The central meaning of the Greek word has been ignored, namely that of tradition.

The myth is defined as fantastic story, which includes the belief of ancient people in the origin of the universe, natural phenomena about gods and legendary heroes. It is neither reduced to a fable, nor to ancient times or to cosmogony, as it emerges from this incomplete definition. There are about 5,000 attempts to define the myth, but it comes out eventually that myth is actually undefinable. The *Larousse* dictionary, after indicating the Greek etymology of the word, defines myth as a fable, a story from the fabulous and heroic times (*fable, récit des temps fabuleux et héroïques*). In the same idea, Didier Julia, notes in his dictionary that myth is a fable, a story from fabulous

and heroic times, a concept of mythology: „the myth is the first way to explain things and universe, a sentimental, not a rational explanation”.

The myth works with hypotheses like the science does. There is a clear difference between mythical and scientific knowledge, as they are the result of two different experiences. Then their methods are also different. At the basis of science, there are the demonstration and the experiment, but they do not characterize the myth, which is concerned with the intuition and the feeling. Despite these, the science and the mythology are not opposed, but complementary to each other and there is a direct relation between the two, because they have the same goals. The mythology is considered as a primitive science, with the meaning of being at the origins. The scientific theories are in essence hidden modern myths. Both scientific myths and philosophical myths may occur.

The ancient religions could be understood as mythological religions. The criteria of this understanding should not become absolute. Some religions with a pronounced mythological character remained unchanged and they did not aim at metaphysics, despite the general tendency towards it. We can then talk about a certain transition from myth to religion, or a tendency to systematize abstract concepts and religious ideas. The religious dogmas are not simple interdictions of human behaviours, but definitions of religious principles.

The myth blends with the archetype, the symbol or the exemplary narrative, while the theology with the dogmas. The philosophy of religion comes out from the mythology, too. For instance, the Hellenic religious view was not irrevocably separated from the traditional mythology. The myth is strongly connected both to religious experience

and to cognition. There is as well an interdependency between myth and belief. The sense of myth is not reduced only to the communion with the cosmic dimension and nature, but also to the communion with society. Thus, Victor Kernbach considers that the religious code is actually the application of the systematized mythology to the needs of the community. One of the errors frequently made by researchers is not the identification of the religion with the mythology, but their complete superposition, which leads to their mixture. The religion aims to join *the initial mythical point* (the intuition or the revelation) with *the mystical goal point* (the self or God).

Mircea Eliade considers myth as a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred. In his attempt to give an original definition, he determines the most essential meanings of myth: „the myth narrates a sacred history, it describes an event which took place during the primordial times, during the fabulous time of the origins”<sup>1</sup>. The myth not only narrates a sacred history, but also a sacralized one. Moreover, it could also tell about a history that has not happened yet. It could be an anticipation. It should not be isolated in the distant past, as it is a vivid presence in the contemporary world, as well as a perennial reality.

Bronislaw Malinowski, the Polish scholar who considers the myth as a code of thought and as a verbal sacred expression, brings the interest upon myth back to present by seeing it as a lively power, which constantly produces new phenomena<sup>2</sup>. Bronislaw Malinowski maintains that the role of myth is to confirm, to validate the traditions and the institutions of the modern world. Despite its present interest, the myth should not be minimized to the sphere of events.

Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling sees myth as a condition for the humans to re-gain the core, to recreate the truth<sup>3</sup>.

As Michel Meslin points out, myth is not a fruit of imagination, but the expression of a reality learned through intuition and, consequently, „a profound religious expression”<sup>4</sup>.

There are scholars who consider myth as a disease of the language, its perversion.

Max Müller reduces myth to language and explains it through grammar only. He also reduces the types of myth to the natural myth, by stating that all myths are natural.

This is an external view, as G.S. Kirk calls it. Despite these, there are solid arguments that the myth, together with the symbol, is a language of the sacred. The essential myth of humanity is the language, the logos. Ernst Cassirer was emphasizing that the myth and the language have common origin<sup>5</sup>. We could identify the metaphor as being this primordial structure, situated at the basis of the myth and of the human language.

For Eric Gould, myth is characterized by a double absence: both of sense and of author<sup>6</sup>. The myths are indeed anonymous, but they are full of sense, as: „the myth is a revelation of the Being and of the Truth”<sup>7</sup>.

By continuing the research on myth started by James George Frazer, the Cambridge school (Jane Harrison, F.M. Cornford and Walter Burkert) insists on the fact that myth is a ritual. It either derives from the ritual, or it is closely linked to it. *The myth*

*is the saying and the ritual is the doing*, which can be interpreted as a sort of difference between the theory and the practice.

Although exaggerating when he sustains that the meaning of myth is given by its structures present in all myths, Claude Lévi-Strauss has a very interesting vision on myth as a bridge between oppositions. It is a means of reconciliation the oppositions, an expression of the philosophical concept known in Latin as *coincidentia oppositorum*.

When it comes to the myth, Ivan Strenski outlines the parallel of certain opposed significations, but he gave himself over to the radical dualism, without seeing the complementarity: sacred history or false history, reality or fiction, symbol or meaning, archetype or stereotype<sup>8</sup>. The conclusion of the American scholar is that myth is an illusion and that we can not talk about veritable myths, but only about prefabricated ones, in fact about a myth factory.

The myth is a way of resisting the aggression of the profane, of the diachronic present, of the events. It is necessary for the myth to be related first of all to the sacred, cosmic, cyclic, reversible time, called the mythical time. Mircea Eliade pleads for the abolition of the profane time and for the return to the sacred time: „Transcending the profane time, returning to the Big Mythical Time equivalates to a revelation of the ultimate reality”<sup>9</sup>.

The myth is polyvalent and multifunctional. It has a lot of practical functions such as: the knowledge, the education, the shaping of the personality, the control of the instincts, the defence, the physical and psychological cure (the therapy through myth),

the cultivation of the virtues and the liberation. One of the functions of myth is to adjust the human relation with the world. Ernst Cassirer maintains the importance of the intuitive function of myth. This has also a significant shaping role. Karl Jaspers insists on the modelling of life through myths, saying that the humans and their works last in a world of myths, which protects their lives<sup>10</sup>.

There are four ways of accessing to the fundamental answers: the superstition, the myth, the philosophical speculation and the scientific research. The myth reminds us of sacred facts and rehabilitates the order of archetypal events. The sum of myths of one nation constitutes an epic system. Along with the religious visions, metaphysical concepts, scientific theories and art works, Lucian Blaga categorized myth within the „spiritual creations through which the human being tries to reveal the mystery of existence to himself“<sup>11</sup>.

Romulus Vulcanescu distinguishes three categories of myths: a) heteronomous, which belong to humanities, that used the myth for auxiliary goals; b) autonomous, which belong to the independent statements of the science of myth, and c) inter-disciplinary, which belong to the interdependent focalization<sup>12</sup>.

Victor Kernbach distinguishes four categories of myth: 1) *the memorial myth* – the memory of ancestral data orally transmitted: the golden age, the primordial human being, the initial revelation, the battles in the sky and the cosmic events; 2) *the phenomenological myth*: the cosmology, the anthropology, the eschatology and the cosmic events; 3) *the cosmographic myth*: the theogony and the pantheon of gods; 4) *the transcendental myth*: the archetypal hero, the destiny, the time, the life and the death etc<sup>13</sup>. This classification is restated in another of his works<sup>14</sup>. The essential

humankind myths start from symbolic and amoral notions. The myths can be universal, national or local. They are also simple, simplified, compact or vast.

The myth has two fundamental meanings: a) *subjective experience* and b) *objective interpretation*. As a subjective experience, the myth means getting back to present, connecting to the immediate reality. As objective interpretation, the myth appears as a scientific research, as a method of understanding within the mythologic phenomenology. Any myth starts from a revelation or spontaneous rediscovery. Then it distinguishes itself and continues as a vivid interpretation of it. The myth is first illumination and secondly message. The subjective and objective nature blend greatly together, as well as they do in hermeneutics. The two impulses or natural human will are the knowledge and the culture (on the spiritual level), and the comfort of life or the civilization (on the material level). The myth is linked both to existence and to knowledge. The existence matter is not reduced only to the social element. Victor Kernbach was emphasizing that myth is not only a result of human consciousness<sup>15</sup>.

The myth is the first metaphysical ground of the universe. It points to the principle of unity of existence in general. The myth makes us go back to our roots and archetypes. In difficult times, we use the help of myth. It has power as a defensive weapon. The power of myths is rather spiritual and metaphysical than psychological and physical. Despite living in a modern world, the need for myths did not end, but it remained constant in time. The ability of human mind to continually create myths is impressive. The creator of myths acts intuitively. The old myths are preserved, but in different versions than the original forms. The myth never disappears. The demythisation or the remythisation of myth occur.

One could perceive the birth of history from myth. The myth is a parallel history. It is another kind of history, coming from *illud tempus* (primordial time) and covered with a story layer. The myth is often perceived as a story. It is important though to be understood not as a false story or fable, but in the sense of a history which blends the reality with the imaginary.

Myth and history are complementary. Myth is not against history. It incorporates historical facts and events. The historical dimension of myths should be understood the same as the mythical dimension of history. Victor Kernbach proposes history to be seen as a documentary memory, while myth as a metaphysical memory<sup>16</sup>. The mythical history is the spiritual value of history. It means to abolish the profane view of perceiving history as a chain of events, an accumulation of data and facts.

In the center of the hermeneutics of myth lies the interpretation of history. The mythical history is a sacred history and it stands out from the profane history, temporal, irreversible and based on events. The process of becoming a myth is a transfiguration of the historical facts in transhistorical, a good example being historical heroes becoming part of myths. The periodical regeneration of the archaic societies was done through repetition, by disconsidering the time as duration and by giving value to the round, cyclic and cosmic time (with the meaning of universal as opposed to the profane time). On the other side, the profane history is grounded on the oppressive sense of passing and irreversible time, seen as duration.



The myth has an important content of truth, covered by a story. The myth should be uncovered from the story layer in order to understand the truth and its message. The myth is not a false history. Human being believes in the truth and in the existence of myths, admits that what the myths reveal has happened during a remote past. In the modern world, myths are rejected as they are often confronted with gossips and they cannot be always scientifically confirmed.

The scholars belonging to the last century considered myth as it was perceived in fact by the archaic societies. The myth is understood in the sense drew by primitive societies, always alive, as it provides value and sacrality to human existence. The myth signified the symbolic originary form.

Robert A. Segal considers that the interpretations related to the origin, functions and significations of myth are closely related with the universe of culture, religion and psychology<sup>17</sup>. Andrew von Hendy offers a critical presentation of the concepts of myth in modern period. He starts from the reinvention of the concept of myth in the XVIII-th century and then looks into modern theories of myth, finding out four major directions for the hermeneutics of myth in the XX-th century: 1) the revaluation of the romantic vision about the myth in psychology, literature, philosophy and phenomenology of religion; 2) the revitalization of the folkloric theory in ethnology and classical studies; 3) the birth of some ideological theories as the ones stated by Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, and 4) the recent expression of the theories of myth as needs in the fictional artistic work<sup>18</sup>.

Besides the psychological theories of Carl Gustav Jung and Sigmund Freud, in regards to the interpretation of myth, there could be distinguished the following

anthropological theories: *animist* (Edward Burnett Tylor): the myths are born from the ignorance regarding the natural phenomenon, being considered as protoscience; b) *ritualist* (James George Frazer): the myths are explanations for religious rituals; c) *functionalist* (Bronislaw Manlinowski): the myths are used justifications and validations of the religious, social, economical and political realities, and d) *structuralist* (Claude Lévi-Strauss): the myths incorporate logical models and represent a language which needs to be decoded.

Nowdays, some critics violently contest myth with the intention to discredit it. The negativistic theories consider myth as a lie or error (based on the ambiguity of language). As Ernst Cassirer was emphasizing, if these kind of conceptions are not raised either from ignorance or a specific tendencious ideology then they arise from a naive realism<sup>19</sup>. There is also the direction of atacking myth from the perspective of representing a megalomaniac originality, as does Ivan Strenski, who reduces the creation of myth to an industry, and who disconsiders the other theories of the myth coming from Erns Cassirer, Lévi-Strauss, Mircea Eliade and Bronislaw Malinowski<sup>20</sup>. Even if not all the visions and concepts about myth are reflected within it, it is nevertheless important the clasification done by Ivan Strenski, who grouped the theories about myth in four big classes, a) rational; b) functional; c) structural; d) psychological<sup>21</sup>. The rational theory asserts that myths were created to explain the natural phenomenon. The functional myths are the ones created for having social control. From the structural theory perspective, myths were created following the brain and human nature model. The psychological perspective on myths shows that they were created based on human feelings.

While a myth stands for an incontestable reality for a certain category of people, it is a mere fantasy for others. The demythisation has imposed itself with the scope of contesting the myths. Many times it does not arise from the hermeneutics of myth or at least from its critics, but from ignorance. In the modern world, people either know nothing about myth or they tend to depreciate it. The demythisation should not mean the contempt of the myth, but disassembling it into its component pieces with the purpose of a fair interpretation and understanding. According to the hermeneut Rudolph Bultmann<sup>22</sup>, the demythisation does not mean irony or contempt towards myth, but uncovering from its story layer in order to understand the sense of the biblical teachings.

The myth often serves as a model, but considering its repeatability and sacred nature, it also offers a justification for human behaviour. It represents a model for the most significant mythical heroes from the past and present society, it reveals their life, adventures and brave acts, raising the human being, as Mircea Eliade was pointing out, from the profane to the sacred time.

Dr. Mircea Itu

Professor of Journalism

Department of Journalism

Spiru Haret University

Bucharest

Romania

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- <sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1963), 16.
- <sup>2</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magie, știință și religie [Magic, Science and Religion]* (Iași: Editura Moldova, 1993), 133.
- <sup>3</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, “Werke”, VI<sup>th</sup> volume (München: E. H. Beck Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1943-1956), 209.
- <sup>4</sup> Michel Meslin, *Știința religiilor [The Science of Religions]* (București: Editura Humanitas, 1993), 240.
- <sup>5</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Limba și mit*, în “Secolul 20” [Language and Myth, in « 20th Century »] Revista de Istorie și Teorie Literară a Institutului de Istorie și Teorie Literară "G. Călinescu", no. 1-2-3, (București: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1988), 235.
- <sup>6</sup> Eric Gould, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 42.
- <sup>7</sup> Carl Olson, *The Theology and Philosophy of Eliade* (London: Mac Millan, 1992), 111.
- <sup>8</sup> Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in the Twentieth-Century History* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1989).
- <sup>9</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Images et symboles. Essais sur le symbolisme magico-religieux* (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1952), 80.
- <sup>10</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, Zürich:Artemis-Verlag, 1949.
- <sup>11</sup> Lucian Blaga, *Ființa istorică [The Historical Being]* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1977), 243.
- <sup>12</sup> Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română [Romanian Mythology]* (București: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1985).
- <sup>13</sup> Victor Kernbach, *Miturile esențiale [The Essential Myths]* (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1978), 8-15.
- <sup>14</sup> Victor Kernbach, *Dicționar de mitologie generală [Dictionary of General Mythology]* (București: Editura Albatros, 1983), p. 351-354.
- <sup>15</sup> Victor Kernbach, *Biserica în involuție [The Church in Involution]* (București: Editura Politică, 1984), 30.

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- <sup>16</sup> Victor Kernbach, *Mit, mitogeneză, mitosferă [Myth, Mythogenesis, Mythosphere]*, (București: Editura Casa Școalelor, 1995),13.
- <sup>17</sup> Robert A. Segal, *Theorizing about Myth* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999)
- <sup>18</sup> Andrew Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).
- <sup>19</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, (New York – London: Harper & Bros., 1946), 103.
- <sup>20</sup> Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in the Twentieth-Century History* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1989).
- <sup>21</sup> Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth*.
- <sup>22</sup> Nicolae Mariș, “Cele două orizonturi în hermeneutică,” în *Studii de istorie a filosofiei universale* [“The Two Horizons in Hermeneutics,” in *Studies in History of Universal Philosophy*], vol. al XI-lea, (București: Editura Academiei, 1999), 55.