The Concept of Myth

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Abstract. In search of a scientifically useful minimal definition of the term "myth", this article traces the development of the concept from the cultural environment of classical Greece, in which it was born, until its modern use in the framework of socio-anthropological studies.

Of all the terms of the vocabulary of religious anthropology "myth" is certainly the most used one. Unfortunately, its wide-spread use is directly proportional to its indeterminateness. Moreover, it regards not only the everyday lexis (what is exactly intended, when, for instance, people call an actor or a soccer player "mythic"?), but also academic communications: various authors can intend by this concept diametrically opposed things.

Keywords: Myth, traditional story, fairy-tale, folk-tale, legend, Ancient Greece

Introduction. The studies on myth can be traced back to the 4th century B.C. Ancient Greece, where the traditions linked one way or another to folklore as oral versions go over to writing, which is more concrete from the rational point of view, so that myths, hardened in inevitably petrified texts, appear to the new reading audience as odd and bizarre stories. This article pays a particular attention to the meaning of myth from its origin as oral versions of folklore, its literary development as invented and false stories, to its modern state within the framework of a minimal scientific definition.

Methods and literature. Fundamental scientific works on this issue were used as literary source for this article. Main theories related to the development of myth's scientific concept are cited. Historic and comparative analysis of five basic classical theories of myth was made.

Results and conclusion. Despite the abundance of literature on this issue, still there is no single, commonly agreed on and recognized concept of myth. Having

picked five main theoretical concepts of myth and drawing upon them, the author devises a minimal formula that contains propositions that do not contradict to any of these concepts and allow state the meaning of "myth" in concrete terms.

The Concept of Myth

1. Questions on the meaning of myths can be traced back to 4th century B.C. Greece, when the world of tradition, linked in one way or another to the orality, definitively gave way to the rationalistic-oriented writing culture, so that, hardened in inevitably indurated texts, the *mythoi* appear to the new reading audience as only odd and incomprehensible stories.

From the Mycenaean age to Plato - who, while recognizing the irreplaceable social function of an implicit and universally shared knowledge, suggests replacing traditional tales with a "state" mythology[1] - the set of stories of gods and heroes about which Hesiod appears to be so concerned was a narrative legacy known to all the Greeks and immediately intelligible to all of them. Since then, the ancient way of transmission "from mouth to ear", so simple and at the same time so exciting, has existed only near babies' cradles and in the most remote settlements, and the *mythoi* were preserved mainly in written works that loaded the shelves of big libraries. At the same time, scholars of literature and artists of the three continents found in the intercourses of Zeus and Danaë, in the fight of Theseus with the Minotaur, in the mad murder of Medea and in many other scenes an equally evocative and inexhaustible source of inspiration; in Alexandria, in Pergamon and in all big cultural Hellenistic centres the aggregate of the exhausting polymathic and philological researches was developed that then constituted the foundations of mythography.

The belief that behind the bizarre stories to which the verses of Homer often allude must be a profound meaning required, however, to go beyond the tight limits of mythographical studies. The meaning of myths was sought along two directions. For Euhemerus of Messene, the author of the *Sacred history* at around 300 B.C.,

Uranus, Zeus and all other gods would be considered as divinized ancient kings. This historifying interpretation was opposed by the more widely spread allegoresis - traced back to Theagenes of Rhegium (second half of the 4th century B.C.) and systematically utilized, till the end of the ancient age, by the historians and the neoplatonists - through which the ancient purport was conserved for the myths, making them the heart of the same physical and moral truth that were being discovered by philosophical studies.

Diligently collected and catalogued by many generations of chirographists, the Greek myths go through the Middle Ages like a marginal component that was, however, always present in the pedagogical procedure of cloistral schools. If a professor prudently recommends to his students to limit their studies of classical texts to *lectio* and *declinatio*, they wouldn't face the risk of falling to the level of inert point of grammatical exercises because the major part of the scholars was convinced that *sub falso tegmine* in the pages of poets and orators the treasures of the truth were hidden, the treasures that belong rightfully to Christianity, as had been previously asserted by Origen, appealing to the biblical image of wealth adopted by the Israelites from the Egyptians.

By such allegoric interpretation, not only Virgil (who was already "christianized" in the 4th century) could have been made up for the Christian culture, but also - properly reorganized in centos and anthologies - a fair share of the literary legacy of classical antiquity, including *Metamorphoses*, *Ars amatoria* and *Remedia amoris*.[2]

The resumed interest in *humanae litterae* comes across to liberate the classical mythology from the monachal "prisons" in the 14th century. Demanding for the pagan poetry the same autonomy attained by the philosophy of the Ancients, Boccaccio in his *Genealogia deorum Gentilium* (1367) tries to redeem the "wonderful tales" that through the stories of gods and heroes talk, indeed, about "…what are the deeds of nature and what happens perpetually by rule…". The method is still allegorical and it always stems from the assumption that the ancient poets were "…hiding their most profound ideas in their verses…"; nevertheless, the assertion that, as regards mythology, there was not a single shift between the medieval and

the Renaissance concepts,[3] seems to be not completely true. If the monks tried to eradicate from their own cultural humus the extracts of the *auctores*, considering them to be important only as the exemplification and the paraphrase of the Holy Scripture, the humanists recognize for the pagan religion its proper validity, as well as the truth for myths that was not dependent from the Revelation. The "ancient tales", interpreted in the light of Neo-Platonism and from the perspective of Lucretius, reveal to the Florentine academics the secrets of the Transformed Nature and urge Plethon to advance a hypothesis on a true pagan "restoration".[4]

"0 Egypt, Egypt, of your reverent deeds only stories will survive…". At the extreme limit of the humanist-renaissance experience Giordano Bruno sees in the Greek myths the remains of a sublime wisdom, overcome by the religion of Christ. The neophyte, however, still can decipher someone of these messages, and in the inspired eyes of the author of *Lo spaccio della bestia trionfante*, Actaeon - who, having contemplated the nudity of Diana, was transformed in a stag and torn apart by his hounds - looks like a transparent allegory of the fate to which "heroic frenzy" leads the intellect.

With a growing decline in the authority of the ancients the bizarre stories of Greek mythology boil down just to literary citations. In *De sapientia veterum* (1609) Francis Bacon, the herald of a modern cognitive ideal, uses them only to present elegantly the doctrines of his new philosophy to the elite public. Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique-critique* (1697), a few years after Perrault renowned *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, dismissed them as "a pile of rubbish".

Exactly in those years, when one of the spiritual leaders of the Age of Enlightenment expressed his severe judgment towards heroic deeds and divine genealogies, Bernard De Fontenelle in *De l'origine des fables* (published in Paris in 1724, though presumably conceived around 1690) was exploring the way to the scientific study of myths. It seems to be a queer coincidence, but actually there is a not accidental relation between the two facts: the critical attitude of the first Enlightenment philosophers was creating that "distancing" that made mythology susceptible to an objective study.

The era of first big ethno-anthropological reflection of the modern age, the 18th century, abandons the attempt to reveal the sublime secrets and the hidden truths of the *fables* for considering them a cultural product: "… It is not science to have one's head filled with the extravagances of the Phoenicians and the Greeks, but it is science to understand what led the Phoenicians and the Greeks to these extravagances…".[5]

The fact that struck deeply the attention of the first travelers-philosophers was the similarity of customs of the "savages" to those of the "ancients", and the comparison of "…the fables of the Americans and those of the Greeks…" is the starting point of the works of Fontenelle, to the innovative character of which the occasional concessions to the current euhemerism didn't mean anything. The indigenous populations of the New World assumed the evil souls to go to slimy and nasty places, so as Greeks imagined them in the rivers of Styx and Acheron; the Peruvian traditions attributed to Inca Manco Guyma Capac, the son of the Sun, the same civilizing functions as were recognized for Orpheus in Greece, also being of solar breed. This would demonstrate "…that the Greeks were for a certain period of time as savage as the Americans, that were saved from the barbarity by the same means, and that the imaginations of these two peoples so distant from each other tallied on endowing the children of the Sun with extraordinary capabilities…'.[6]

For J.-F. Lafitau, the author of the fundamental *Moeurs des sauvages ameriquains comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps* (1724), as well as for Ch. De Brosses, the author of *Des Dieux fétiches* (1760), *les moeurs des sauvages*, the vestiges of a remote cultural phase, constitute the basis for the understanding of the classical mythology; for them it is also clear how they can be the issues of the same anthropological research, aimed at enucleating common elements of different societies.

Lafitau, missionary Jesuit among the Canadian Iroquois, reports the analogies that he attributed to the common descent of the Indians and the Europeans from the sons of Noah. Volney, on the contrary, rejects any diffusionist theory and, taking into consideration the impressive similarity between the ideas of the Native

Americans about fate and those expressed in the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, theorizes the presence of a proper relation between the "manners of existence" and "the inclinations and customs", but also advances the hypothesis that the universal character of those concepts depends on their being "a natural product of the human spirit".[7]

The two fundamental ideas of the Enlightenment philosophers about the myths - that they originate from an archaic type of socio-economic environment and make up a universally human phenomenon - are retrieved by Heyne and Herder.

With the new pre-romantic atmosphere the enthusiasm for the 'primitive' and the irrational replaced, indeed, the analytical spirit of the *Idéologues*, and attention was no longer paid to the myths as documentary elements within a comparative anthropological research, but to the Myth, assumed as a product of a psychologically and historically primordial perception of the world - closely connected to poetry, according to the content/form relation. The precursors of this position were Giambattista Vico's *Principles of a new science inside the nature of nations*, published as a first draft in 1725: "...The poetic knowledge that was the first knowledge of the heathens, must have started from a metaphysics that wasn't reasoned and abstract..., but sensed and imagined...".[8]

What Heyne, rejecting the implicit negative connotation in terms like *fabula, fables, favolette*, calls *mythus,* becomes the object of a new specific science.

2. Tracing the vastest labyrinth of studies developed around the myth over the last two centuries, highlighting all the definitions that were provided and all the ensuing hermeneutic criteria, would obviously go beyond the objectives of this study. What is indeed its main purpose is to note along which lines those researches tend to proceed, and in this sense it can be observed right away how the hypostatization of myth processed by the German culture since the second half of the 18th century marked a radical turning point at the methodological as well as at the epistemological level.

The idea that behind the myths there could be found a specific and archaic insight of the world was, however, fostered over those years by the discovery of a literary legacy foreign to the classical world that, being fundamentally different in the content, just in the manner of seeing and transfiguring the reality seemed to have a contact point with the Greek mythological *corpora*. After the publication of *Edda* (1753) and the spurious *New Songs of Ossian* (1760-63), some fundamental Iranian and Indian texts were translated in quick succession: *Zend-Avesta* (1771), *Bhagvadgītā* (1785), *Śākuntala* (1789), *Upanishad* (1801). [9]

Among the Romanticists the one who strongly endeavoured to define the Myth as a vent through which the divine is shown to humanity was certainly Friedrich W. Schelling, who dedicated to Greek mythology many of his first writings (in which besides the influence of Heyne and Herder, perhaps, should be caught that of Karl Philipp Moritz'es *Götterlehre oder mythologische Dichtungen der Alten* [1791]) and, in the end, made it the object of his last reflections, gathered in the posthumous *Philosophie der Mythologie* (1856).

The Schellingian perspective of study mustn't have survived its own cultural *milieu*. Destined to be retrieved after almost a century by W.F. Otto and K. Kerényi, it faded, coinciding with the rise of the "comparative mythology", a field of studies that indirectly was connected to it through the work of Friedrich Schlegel (whose *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* [1808] marks the emergence of Indo-European studies) and through the one, much controversial, of Friedrich Creuzer. [10] While the Hellenists, jealous of a material that they had become accustomed to consider their own exclusive field of competence and mistrustful of the new interpretative proposals (that emerged, in fact, from a wish to break the tradition that often implicated the Hellas), pursued their researches in the strict isolation, Friedrich Max Müller (*Comparative Mythology*, 1856) and Adalbert Kuhn (*Die Herabkunft des Feuers*, 1859) were certain about having found within linguistic comparison and meteorological allegoresis the two keys of access to the indo-european mythology. A typical example of their method is the famous equation Dyaus Pitar/ Zeus Pater/ Iuppiter/ Tyr, from which it was proven that the Indians,

the Greeks, the Romans and the Germans once worshipped the same "heavenly Father".[11] The science of myth risked being transformed into "a lively conversation about the weather", as was noted by one contemporary; however, being severely criticized for its naturalist reductionism, "comparative mythology" dominated the second half of the 19th century. The last representative of this school was J.W.E. Mannhardt, who added to the comparative interest towards ancient mythologies a rising attention to folklore, a field of study toward which the Grimm Brothers drew the attention of the mythologists and the antiquity historians as early as 1835.

While the Germans were seeking the "survivals" of the remote past among the peasants of Hessen and Baden, the English continued to search for them - like the eighteenth-century *philosophes* - among the "primitives" from their colonies. Through the most eminent disciple of Mannhardt, the Cambridge classical philologist James George Frazer, the Germanic interest for the folk traditions ended up welded to the evolutionist anthropology of the Victorians: the fruit of such a union was *"The Golden Bough"* (1890 I ed., 1912-15 III ed.), a disputed monument of the ingenuity and the erudition that closed one epoch to open a new one. [12] After having been transformed from the empirical data (the Greek myths) into a kind of a platonic idea (the Myth of the Romanticists), the myth was brought down to Earth as an exact interpretative category of the social sciences. At that point, the problem was to define its qualifying features.

3. The historical-anthropological debate of the *fin de siècle*, advanced by authors who before being scientists are often brilliant writers (like, for instance, Frazer or Andrew Lang, the coauthor of a very successful series of *Fairy Books*), makes the term *myth* popular. Its intrinsic semantic indeterminateness was, however, overlapped by the misunderstandings deriving from the decades of its scientific use, sometimes groundless and almost always wrongly understood; so, the word started to be used with tiresome frequency and liberty.

In the world of research the picture was also blurred. For the explorers of the psyche the Myth constitutes a particular expression of the unconscious, of which

mythological narrations are nothing more than the most obvious manifestations. Considering it to be paradigmatic of the psychic drama through which each person overcomes infancy, Sigmund Freud put in the centre of his *Traumdeutung* (1900) the story of Oedipus, to arrive, in the end, to the consideration of myths as "…distorted vestiges of the wishful fantasies of whole nations; the secular dreams of youthful humanity".[13] For Carl Gustav Jung, indeed, behind the symbols of which the myths are woven are hidden those archetypes through which the collective unconscious models the civilizations (*Psychologie und Alchemie*, 1944). It is about ideas of a romantic matrix, and it is no coincidence that the already Schellingian Kerényi addresses them.[14]

By the anthropologists and the historians of religion the myth is understood and studied as a social phenomenon. At this point any reference to Hellenic culture is omitted and the greatest attention is paid to the results of ethnographic observations, but it is still not actually clear what, in the growing mass of the narrative traditions that were made an object of the scientific analysis, must be qualified as a myth. If earlier the basic questions used to regard the meaning of myths, now the point is, first of all, what must be precisely intended as a myth. Regardless of the 'meteorological' one - that was an important component of many hybrid-type interpretative proposals, but not anymore particularly significant as it is in the XX century - there are five grand "monolithic" theories. Adapted to different problem ranges and sometimes contaminated among themselves they will exert their influence till the very recent times (till nowadays, in more provincial environments).

The first of them - very typical of the Victorian-epoch vision of the world - considers the myths a sort of protoscience. It was upheld with the habitual ardour by A. Lang (*Myth, Ritual and Religion*, 1887) that, paying an exaggerated importance to the interpretative procedure that was sometimes used by the ancient exegetes, was convinced that myths indicated the cause or explained the reasons of the most important aspects of reality.

The "aetiological"[15] theory, that is certainly applicable to many pseudo-myths invented by the Hellenistic poets, seems to be definitely inadequate to reflect the most of those that seemed to be recognizable as authentic myths. Its major opponent was Bronislaw Malinowski (*Myth in Primitive Culture*, 1926), convinced by his long stay on the Trobriand isles that the myths do not explain reality, but create it: they would be charters (or "patents") that, stating deeds eminent and remote, bolster customs, institutions and beliefs. Less ingenuous than the former, but not very different in substance (the "explanation" simply lost its speculative character), the 'patent' theory seems to be typical of the functionalist perspective, being consolidated in British anthropology in around 1920. Connected to Functionalism - albeit that it was initially elaborated by W. Robertson Smith and J.G. Frazer, both evolutionists - it also seems to be the third theory, a theory in compliance to which myths were nothing else but the attempts to justify the rites that became incomprehensible with time. It found its most important followers among the members of the "Cambridge school", and the prominent study of Jane Harrison dedicated to the social origins of the Greek religion, *Themis* (1912), constituted, undoubtedly, its most coherent and interesting application.

The fourth biggest myth theory is the one of Mircea Eliade. Unlike the others, this one was born outside the anthropological debate, being, in the end, at least for some certain aspects, close to the proclamations of the German "irrationalism". According to Eliade - whose ideas found their first systematic exposition in *Le mythe de l'éternel retour* (1949) - the function of myths is to set exemplary models of all the significant human actions, and, primarily, of the rites (exactly contrary to what was assumed by the *Myth and Ritual school*, and in a close enough manner to the K. Th. Preuss concept of rites). This way it was configured as a 'holy story' that, periodically re-actualized through drama, had a power to reintegrate the 'great times' of the origins.

Among the founders of the "monolithic" theories of myth Claude Lévi-Strauss stands out, being a thinker that most of all others influenced the historical-anthropological researches from the beginning of the 60's and till the end of the 70's.

Anthropological structuralism - a particular aspect of a complex philosophic movement developed in France, after the World War II - appears to be a proposal for the global interpretation of culture, based on the assumption that each product of thought reproduces an identical scheme, in the end deriving from the same structure of the *esprit humain*. Around 1955, after having consolidated his own theory in relation to the systems of kinship, Lévi-Strauss realized its applicability to mythological analysis. At this phase the myth is seen as an intermediary of a logical contradiction (*The Structural Study of Myth*, 1955). Later - at a phase started with *La geste d'Adiswal* (1958) and culminating in the four volumes of *Mythologiques* (1964-1971) -, being then a privileged object of structuralist studies, it lost its well defined function, becoming a means of unconscious expression of a 'profound' content completely unfastened from the superficial meaning of narration, operating through all possible semantic codes. An anthropologist, therefore, is to uncover - through deciphering and recombination fatally exposed to the risk of being accused of arbitrariness - a latent and systemizing structure that is behind apparently different stories.

4. "… the main defect of the modern studies of myths is that they generally consist of a series of universal and reciprocally exclusive theories, each of which can be easily refuted by adducing dozens of indisputable cases in contradiction with it".[16] These are the words of Geoffrey S. Kirk, whose two prominent works *Myth, its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (1970) and *The Nature of Greek Myths* (1974) were a bucket of cold water for the scientific study of myths, which after two centuries of too enthusiastic efforts was actually necessary and salutary.

The arbitrariness of all monolithic theories, including structuralism, the last of them, is definitely proved by the fact that none of them is, in the end, applicable to the complex of the Greek *mythoi,* in spite of their still being valid in specific cases! The *mythoi*, in fact, seem to be too diverse among them to be boiled down to a common denominator that would coincide with some well-defined functional or

morphological peculiarities. The only feature that is common for heterogeneous novels like those that regard Zeus's ascent to the throne, the exploits of Heracles or the deeds of Perseus,- and, on the other hand, uniting the Greek fabulations with the whole complex of narrations of ethnologic origin collected for more than three centuries - is that they are traditional tales: narrations provided with dramatic structure and passed on for ages from one generation to another.

In the atmosphere of rethinking and general prudence followed after the run to extremes under the auspices of structuralism, the essential definition of myth produced by Kirk seems to be shared by the major scholars of mythology. In particular, this definition was even assumed as their own by many experts of the Greek world like Walter Burkert and Marcel Detienne. [17]

Now it is worth recalling that before being mummified by the systematization made by Hesiod and ideally consolidated by the Apollodorus's *Biblioteca*, the functional feature of the Greek myths that stands out the most was that they interconnected the Greeks in time and space. They make up the one of the most important element of the collective memory, and the hints of Homer, the lyricists and the tragedians to the divine and heroic affairs were easily understandable by everyone. On the other hand, the stories that were of a quite "sacred" character, and to which the Greeks entrusted their cultural identity, must have been not so much different from the declamations that Milman Parry heard by one Yugoslavian *guslar*: old stories that were delivered orally and passed on "from mouth to ear". The semantic shift of the term *mythos* from "a thing said" to "a false story" marks the progress of the written culture in comparison to the oral one. If Thucydides refers the ancient poets' narrations - already often criticized - to the area of *mythodes*, using a concept that at the moment of his affirmation the Greek rationalism endowed with a negative tone, he underlines by that their belonging to the sphere of the oral. [18] Obviously, for an author that intends to carry out a theoretical research, everything that circulates in an oral way is fundamentally erroneous.

After that the researches of Milman Parry and Eric Havelock showed how since the 5th century B.C. vast sectors of Greek culture remained scarcely influenced by

written communication, the Hellenists recognized the originally oral nature of myths. A field of research that for a long time seemed to be indivisible from the study of the literary works was profoundly renewed, and the relations between Ancient Studies and Anthropology, always existing, became stronger. An already important problem like that of the "original text" lost any reason to exist. From the moment - a purely theoretical one - when a story enters the narrative circuit, only "versions" may exist that are all similar in essence, though they are still marked by the personality of the narrator and by the characteristics of the audience.

The questions that are posed to scholars today mainly concern the ways of transfer and transformation of culture. Putting aside the *Quellenforschung*, the problem is now to understand what conditions must be met by a story to overcome a filter, made up by what was defined by Roman Jacobson a "preventive censorship" of the group, and to be incorporated in social collective memory. Studying the Russian "magic" tales, the soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp noted - anticipating in certain aspects what would be known as a Levistraussian construction - that they always followed the same structure, based on a limited number of "functions" (or "motifs") in a fixed sequence. [19] His theory, exposed in a book appeared in Leningrad in 1928 (*Morfologija skazki*), but known in the West thirty years later, was taken up and perfected by many authors that applied it towards the traditional novels. From such researches a first answer emerges, an apparently tautological one: that becomes traditional - under the narrative profile - what conforms to the tradition. Below the peculiarity of the told facts, it is necessary for a story in order to be easily remembered, and the listener of today can become the narrator of tomorrow, that its structure is to be actually known already and, in the same time, to be able to make a strong impression.

So, at the basis of traditional narrative expressions there must be a sort of a "mother of all stories", maximally simple and captivating. Such circumstance, by no means obvious, still requires an explanation. Evidently, it's a matter concerning deep psychic levels. Among the attempts to find the answer, a particularly interesting one - mostly because being unfastened from any metaphysical postulates

similar to the Jungian collective unconscious or to the Lévi-Strauss'es *esprit humain* - seems to be that of Walter Burkert, who, recognizing in the sequence of motifs a "programme of actions" similar to the biocybernetical ones, traces back the structuration of the folk-tales at the eto-biological stage. "Go, seek, fight, take, run": boiled down to a series of imperatives (the "zero form" of the verb) the adventures of the Argonauts are in the core the same as those of a rat in a search of food. This seems to make account of the evocative function, possessed by many traditional tales, as of their universal spread and homology to the rite.[20]

Myths are traditional stories, but not all the traditional stories are myths. What distinguishes mythological narrations from fairy- and folk-tales, genres adjacent by form and by content? The post-structuralist stance on the point was well summarized by Burkert: "the myth is a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance".[21] This proposed evaluating criterion seems to be interesting, though maybe not truly useful. Many folk-tales also regard socially relevant aspects of reality. The most fine and significant distinction - despite the inevitable limits of the conceptual frame to which it refers - was advanced by Raffaele Pettazzoni in an essay dated 1948, unfortunately rarely quoted and never taken into account, *Verita' del mito*. What makes myths identifiable from other forms of oral narratives is the attitude which is maintained by the story-teller community towards them. Insofar apparently similar to many profane novels, for which it is allowable and natural to smile, "false stories" that can be acted out any time and in front of any audience, a myth is considered to be - regardless its verisimilitude - a "true story", which is not allowed to be put in doubt. Even if its sense is incomprehensible, it is perceived as something fundamentally important for the social group, and that's why it became an issue of a reverent attention and a prudent reserve.[22] Developed in relation to the materials of ethnological origin that are collected in the first volume of *Miti e Leggende* (1948), the theory finds its most significant confirmations in the heat with which, the original sense of the *mythoi* having been lost with the last bard, the Greek culture

and, subsequently, the whole Western culture continued to seek the secret of their meaning for another two thousands of years.

From the pettazzonian point of view, the division among myths and non-myths is, therefore, strictly intra-cultural. In this manner any extrinsic criterion drops and the notorious distinction "divine myths/heroic myths" is trespassed: a myth is "sacred" as it is, and not because it is explicitly connected to religion.

Besides fairy-tales and folk-tales, myths should be distinct from legends. In theory, the difference is clear: where a myth (and more generally a *Märchen*) is determined by particular recurring narrative schemes, a legend implies a narration based on an authentic historical fact, maybe somewhat deformed in a fanciful way, but still recognizable. However, in practice the distinction is not all the time easy due to the tendency of different narrative genres to infect each other, as well as due to the frequent historical implications of myths.

In fact, it would be a mistake to believe that myths have - by definition - nothing to deal with historical reality; if that is true - at least in the first approximation - for the fairy-tale narrations (actually characterized by the extreme indetermination of the spatial and temporal indications), that is not the case for the mythological ones. The point of mythology has nothing to do with historiography, but in the measure in which the tradition unfolds in history, traditional tales can not be completely separated from it. Passed down through centuries by an infinite chain of narrators, mythical plots adapt to diverse historical situations. Their availability to be continually reused - taking always new contents and serving ever diverse interests - is, indeed, a prerequisite of their survival. And while, sliding from one epoch to another, their own structure tends to change, it is inevitable that - as, beyond the epistemological misconceptions, Karl Ottfried Müller finely noted[23] - the events mark them with their imprint. Therefore, each mythological text is, in a certain sense, a complicated palimpsest of resurging memories quite beyond the Mycenaean age, to which Martin P. Nilson traced back the major part of the Greek myths (*The Mycenaean origin of Greek Mythology*, 1932), and also far beyond the third millennium B.C., to which the theoreticians of the Indo-European diaspora refer. In

the intra-cultural point of view, moreover, history and myth tend to be inextricably intertwined. As is demonstrated in an exemplary manner by the interweaving of heroic and historical genealogies attested by the *Iliad* and the *Catalogue of Women*, or by the narration related to the comeback of the Heraclids, for a member of a closed in itself community it is almost impossible to perceive the difference between what share of the collective memory is mythical and what events really happened. Also after the two conceptual categories have been clearly defined, it is still impossible to separate them definitely: still, albeit reluctantly both Herodotus and Thucydides outline the dawn of history drawing on indisputably mythological sources.[24]

Recalling the historical development of the concept of myth, we have arrived to a minimal definition of it: a myth is a traditional story that is thought of by a specific community to be of a fundamental importance and, moreover, is considered - perhaps in contrast to the common valuation categories - to be a "true" one.

This one is a definition provided with a serious scientific basis, that in some particularly problematic fields of study, as for instance Roman mythology, can serve as a useful working tool. It is, however, quite natural that each scholar keeps using the term "myth" in a way that is more convenient to her/him. The only wish is always, for the sake of clarity, to specify the meaning that is being attributed to it.

Notes

[1] Cfr. PLATO. *Laws* 664a; *Rep.* 377b.

[2] A typical example of a medieval mythological textbook is the so called *Mitografo Vaticano II*, a collection of 203 *fabulae*, gathered in the IX-X centuries for the use of Gallic and Germanic schools. Its author - probably a Scottish monk that moved to the continent - drew upon a relatively vast number of texts (six works can be clearly identified: commentaries of Servius on Virgil, the *Mythologiae* of Fulgentius, the scholia of Statius to the *Tebaide* and *Achilleide*, the Isidore's *Etymologiae od Origines*, the scholia to Horatio), from which he takes not only the plots of different

myths, but even whole phrases. In spite of the scrupulous allegiance to the sources, the literary matter is bent under the Christian doctrine by a peculiar reorganization.

With regard to the Christian use of the Greek myths a study of H.Rahner, *Griechischen Mythen in christlicher Deutung,* Zürich 1957[3], remains fundamental.

[3] This position was expressed by J.SEZNEC in his famous book, *La survivance des dieux antiques*, (Studies of the Warburg Institute, 11), London 1940 . A contrary opinion is asserted by E.GARIN, *Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Roma-Bari 1984 [2], pp. 63 -67.

[4] On the religious character of the Renaissance Neoplatonism, see the penetrative observations of E.ZOLLA, *Il sincretismo fiorentino del quattrocento*, "Nuova Antologia", 2188, Oct-Dec.1993, pp. 327-334.

[5] B. DE FONTENELLE, *De l'origine des fables*, in *Oeuvres*, IV, Paris 1825, p. 310. On the ethno-anthropology of the XVIII century is really remarkable S. MORAVIA, *La scienza dell'uomo nel Settecento*, Bari-Roma 1978, pp. 143-168.

[6] B. DE FONTENELLE, *De l'origine des fables*, in *Oeuvres*, IV, pp. 305-306.

[7] VOLNEY, *app. au Tableau du climat et du sol des États-Unis*, in *Oeuvres complétes,* Paris 1860, pp.702-729.

[8] G.B.VICO, *Principi d'una scienza nuova*, 2, 1.

[9] On the influence exerted by the oriental texts on the European culture of the XVIII-XIX centuries see F. WILHELM, *The German Response to Indian Culture*, "Jour. of the Americ. Orient. Soc.", 81, 1961, pp. 96-118.

[10] With *Symbolik und Mithologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (1810-12), G.F.CREUZER shaped a theory that ascribed to a symbolic doctrine of Indian origin the roots of the Hellenic culture. Strongly questioned for its a-scientific character by J.H. Voss and C.A. Lobeck, it must have profoundly influenced J.J. Bachofen and the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

[11] "…If I were asked what I consider the most important discovery which has been made during the nineteenth century with respect to the ancient history of mankind, I should say it was this simple etymological equation: Sanskrit *Dyaus pitar*= Greek *Zeus pater*=Latin *Iuppiter*=anc.Norwegian *Tyr…*": F. MAX MÜLLER, *Anthropological Religion*, London 1892, p.82

[12] On the hermeneutic limits of *The Golden Bough,* Ludwig Wittgenstein expressed his severe judgment: "…Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages, for they are not as far removed from the understanding of spiritual matter as a twentieth-century Englishman. His explanations of

primitive practices are much cruder than the meaning of these practices themselves. ...” (L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Bemerkungen über Frazers “The Golden Bough”*, “Synthese”, 17, 1967, p.23. The fundamental ethnocentrism of the anthropological debate regarding religion is also denounced by E.E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Theories on Primitive Religion,* London 1965.

[13] S. FREUD, *Totem und Tabu*, Wien 1912-13, p.99. Freud never formulated a coherent theory of myth; that was actually done by his student KARL ABRAHAM with *Traum und Mythus*, Wien 1909.

[14] Romantic concepts can easily be noted also in the second volume of E. CASSIRER's *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Darmstadt 1958[3], in which the myth is seen as one of the primary “symbolic forms”.

[15] It is specified that, even if later “etiological myth” would become a synonym to “pseudo-myth”, Lang uses the adjective “etiological” without any derogatory intention.

[16] G. S. KIRK, *The Nature of Greek Myths*, Harmondsworth 1974, p. 33.

[17] The abundant bibliography of the two authors can be identified by a couple of particularly important works: M. DETIENNE, *L'invention de la Mythologie,* Paris 1981; W. BURKERT, *Myth and Ritual in Greece. Structure and History*, Berkeley 1979.

[18] Together with the stories narrated by poets, Thucydides (2,22) also rejects the works of the logographs; reorganizing a material borrowed from those stories, these works also show the same lack of evidence. The term *mythos* assumes the meaning of “implausible record” in the works of Herodotus (II 23; II 45)

[19] The writings of M. PARRY, published for the first time between 1928 and 1932, are gathered in *The Making of Homeric Verse* (edited by A. Parry), Oxford 1971. From the works of E. HAVELOCK must at least be mentioned *Preface to Plato,* Cambridge, Mass. 1963. RUTH FINNEGAN's *Oral Poetry. Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*, Cambridge 1977, is also very important. On the analogies among the Yugoslavian heroic songs and the Homeric poems see also A.B. LORD, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, Mass. 1960.

[20] V.J. PROPP, *Morfologija skazki,* Leningrad 1928. The anticipating importance of this text that served as a basis for the Soviet structuralism (or, more properly, for the Formalism) was recognized - even if, according to Propp, not in an adequate way - by Lévi-Strauss himself in his 1960 article, *La Structure et la forme. Réflexion sur un ouvrage de Vladimir Propp*, “Cahiers de l'Inst. de Science Econom. Appl.” M 7. Beyond the methodological analogies, the programmatic purposes of the two researches appear profoundly different. For Propp it is not the point to identify the profound structures, but to define - in view of the historic research that was later developed in *Istoriceskie*

korni volsebnoj skazki (Leningrad 1946) - the constituting elements of each fairy-tale plot: the famous 31 "functions" (or "motifs").

[21] Cfr. W.BURKERT, *Myth and Ritual in Greece*, p.38. On the relations among myths, fairy-tales, legends and folk-tales, see also the first two chapters of G.S.KIRK, *The Nature of Greek Myths* and F.HAMPL, *Mythos-Sage-Märchen*, in *Geschichte als kritische Wissenschaft*, II, Darmstadt 1950, pp.1-50. Also noteworthy are the observations of Propp and Lévi-Strauss published in the annex to the Italian edition of Propp's book, *Morfologia della fiaba*, Torino 1960.

[22] Cfr. R.PETTAZZONI, *Verita' del mito* , "S.M.S.R.", 21, 1947-48, pp.104-116 (=preface to the first vol. of *Miti e Leggende*, Torino 1948, pp. VI-XV).

[23] K.O.MÜLLER, *Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftlichen Mythologie*, Göttingen 1825.

[24] Cfr. HEROD. I 1-4; THUCID. 1,4. With regard to the relations between myth and history are very important the observations of F. GRAF in the sixth chapter of *Griechische Mythologie,* Zürich 1985.

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[16] H. Jason, ,*A Multidimensional Approach to OraI Literature*, "Current Anthropology",10,1969, pp.413-420

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