INTRODUCTION

A PROVISIONAL DEFINITION

Poets have learned us their myths,
but just how did they take them?
That's a stumper.
W. H. Auden, *Archaeology*

Stories such as those of Orpheus, Oedipus, and Helen of Troy are generally recognized as myths—stories that belong to the cultural heritage of the West but that may have analogues in the mythical corpora of the Egyptians, Teutons, Indians, or Bushmen. That the term *myth* is of Greek origin is also generally known. It is easily forgotten, however, how deeply rooted in the Greek corpus our notion of myth is. Before the rise of ethnology, myth was studied mostly by classical scholars, and in particular by Hellenists.

It is still difficult to define myth satisfactorily, for all the intense scholarly attention that the problem of definition has received in the course of two and a half centuries. Many solutions have been proposed, only to be rejected. The most banal and least controversial of these may serve as a starting point: myths are traditional tales.[1] That a myth is a tale is indicated by the etymology of the word: for the early Greeks, a *mythos* was a "word" or "story," synonymous with *logos* and *epos;* a *mytho-*

logos was a "storyteller." Only when the traditional tales were called into question did the meaning of the word begin to be restricted. Herodotus, writing during the sophistic enlightenment, was the first to use the word in the sense of "implausible story" (2.23.1, 2.45.1). Thucydides distinguished his history, with its new claim to veracity, from "the fabulous" (*to mythōdes*), that is, mere storytelling (1.22.4). Plato set his new art of dialectic apart by using more sharply defined concepts, opposing *logoi*, propositions demonstrable with the aid of dialectic, to *mythoi*, which, for him, were often lies.[2] To Plato we may trace back the meaning that myth often has today: a thing widely believed but false (as the statement "love at first sight is a myth").

A myth is a peculiar kind of story. It does not coincide with a particular text or literary genre. For example, in all three major genres of Greek poetry the story of Agamemnon's murder and of Orestes' subsequent revenge is told: in epic (at the beginning of the *Odyssey*), in choral lyric (e.g., in Stesichorus's *Oresteia*), and in the works of all three tragedians. A myth is not a specific poetic text. It transcends the text: it is the subject matter, a plot fixed in broad outline and with characters no less fixed, which the individual poet is free to alter only within limits. Whereas a single variant, a single poetic work has an author, a myth does not. Myths are transmitted from one generation to another, without anyone knowing who created them: this is what is meant by *traditional*. (The same can be said of oral poetry in preliterate societies. The mythical variant in the oral poem, like the mythical variant in the written poem, has an identifiable author, and certain bards are more proficient or more popular than others. But this variant generally goes unrecorded; it vanishes along with the oral performance. An oral composition, it should be added, is no less "poetic" than a written one, for the language of oral poetry is no less artificial than that of the written poems that have come down to us from ancient Greece.) Those who record myths are fully aware of their traditional nature. Plato, for example, claims to have heard the tale of Atlantis, which he

himself invented, from Critias, his uncle, who heard it from his grandfather, who heard it from his father, who heard it from Solon, who heard it in Egypt and intended to use it as subject matter for a poem. Thus, the origins of the tale are so far removed in time and space as to be irretrievable (*Timaeus* 20e–21e).

One obvious consequence of this definition is that a myth can be translated without loss from one language to another (Lévi-Strauss has taken this to indicate that it is the structure of the myth alone that matters). Every plot summary is in this respect translatable, unlike a work of literature, which can never be adequately translated. In works written for a Western readership the myths of preliterate peoples are usually paraphrased. Recently, however, scholars have begun to record directly present-day African mythical narratives, and they have shown that it is hardly possible to record them without loss, let alone to translate them into a Western language, because they are syntheses of musical, dramatic, and narrative art forms.

The reason for the continuous mutation of myth—the motor of the tradition, so to speak (that which ensures that it will continue to be handed down from one generation to the next)—is its cultural relevance. A myth makes a valid statement about the origins of the world, of society and of its institutions, about the gods and their relationship with mortals, in short, about everything on which human existence depends. If conditions change, a myth, if it is to survive, must change with them. Its capacity to adapt to changing circumstances is a measure of its vitality. In preliterate, oral cultures such adaptations are amply documented.[3] The myths of ancient Greece also exhibit this adaptability. The crisis of Greek myth came at the moment when the cultural relevance of its narration was called into question by the critical advocates of the new rationalism—the moment when the fluid tradition, in which myths were told over and over again and, with each retelling, were adapted to the conditions of the present, was being replaced increasingly by the poetic ver-

sion composed once and for all time. The notion that myth was veridical, however, survived this crisis. Rhetoricians still defined a myth as a "fictitious story that illustrates the truth" (Theon, *Progymnasmata* 3),[4] and allegorists attempted, down to the end of antiquity and beyond, to find philosophical truths and truths about the physical universe beneath the surface of myth and in this way to uphold its cultural relevance. Even Plato, who resolutely excluded myths from the realm of truth, believed that, in the realm that could not be reached through dialectical reasoning, myths had at least some expressive power (see Chapter 8).

To be sure, the cultural relevance of a myth is quite different from the validity of a philosophical proposition. A proposition is considered valid by anyone who can either prove or disprove its veracity through the use of reason. The proof or disproof of a proposition is a logical operation; it is at all times and in all places possible for an individual to determine the validity of a philosophical proposition. A myth, by contrast, is considered valid only by the community in whose tradition it has taken shape—a community, it should be emphasized, that exists at a particular time and in a particular place. The cultural relevance of a myth varies with the social context in which it is narrated. Plato drew a distinction between "greater" and "lesser" myths. The lesser were told by mothers, grandmothers, and nurses, the greater by poets (*Republic* 377c). The difference between the two kinds lay above all in the occasion of the telling. Nurses and grandmothers told stories privately, whenever the opportunity presented itself, and were free to adapt them as they wished, whereas the truly relevant narration of myth, until the time of Euripides, was public and took place at times prescribed by the religious calendar: thus, only the "greater myths" were subject to group control. Originally, tragedies were performed only at the Dionysia, a city festival held in honor of Dionysus. Choral songs, too, were sung at festivals of the gods and victory celebrations. The Greek victory celebration was held not privately but by the clan (*genos*), tribe (*phylē*), or polis. Similarly, epic recita-

tion usually took place, at least in post-Homeric times, on set occasions. The Homeric poems were recited in Athens at the Panathenaea. Hesiod performed at the obsequies of a Euboean aristocrat. Even lyric monody was composed for special occasions. Archilochus and Alcaeus composed for symposia, which bore the marks of a religious event. Sappho's poems were recited at the rites of a *thiasos* (religious society) of maidens.[5] Often the performance took the form of a contest, such as the tragic or rhapsodic competition. In public settings such as these, the discrete, poetic variant of the traditional myth was liable to the scrutiny of the collective. It was the judgment of the group that limited the flexibility of the mythical subject matter. Euripides, who deviated farthest from the tradition, also gained the fewest victories. The prose book of Hecataeus of Miletus (active ca. 500 B.C.) marks, so far as we can tell, the beginning of the practice of retelling myths so as to historicize and rationalize them, and thereby to purge them of all implausibilities. Hecataeus's book was not subject to the direct censorship of the polis or group. The philosophers and postclassical poets similarly removed themselves from public scrutiny.

To clarify: what is being suggested here is not a revival of the old thesis, which has had its advocates even in the twentieth century, that myth is poetry, "an aesthetic creation of the human imagination."[6] It is true that among the Greeks, as among other peoples, an oral or written representation of mythical subject matter may be called an aesthetic creation in deliberately stylized language and form, so far as the representation lays claim to general validity (i.e., purports to reflect the beliefs of the listening or reading public). But this thesis tells us nothing about the origins of myths (as opposed to mythical narratives). It is just possible that myths were passed along in nonpoetic forms—in prosaic, quotidian narratives not bound to set institutions, as were the tales told by Plato's nurses and grandmothers. But these tales were told for private entertainment and occasional instruction and never had the social impact or cultural reverberation of

the poetic narration of myth. Admittedly, we can scarcely imagine in what form the mythical narratives of the archaic period were transmitted, except that they were, for the most part, oral. Still, a stray piece of information about Arcadia, the most archaic region in ancient Greece, offers a clue to the mystery. Polybius reports that even in his day Arcadian children "were accustomed, from an early age, to sing hymns and paeans in which they celebrated their local gods and heroes in accordance with ancestral custom" (4.20.8). Here the form in which the mythical subject matter was passed on from one generation to the next was a poetic one, and one that had institutional ties. For the youths did not just learn the hymns; presumably they also sang them within the context of the communal festivals of their gods and heroes.

Scholars have often found it difficult to distinguish between myth and other kinds of traditional tale: saga, legend, folktale, and fable. It is not always necessary or even possible to draw such distinctions. For speakers of German the term *saga* (*Sage*) is more or less synonymous with myth (*Mythos*): the best known collection of Greek myths is Gustav Schwab's *Die schönsten Sagen des klassischen Altertums*, and the most influential treatment of Germanic sagas is Jacob Grimm's *Germanische Mythologie*. In Grimm's usage the two terms are sometimes synonymous, though occasionally he seems to want to restrict myth (*Mythus*, as he writes it) to antiquity. If distinctions are drawn, they usually have to do with the cultural context in which the tale was generated. Thus, local tales are called sagas ("Valaisan sagas," "Tyrolean sagas"), foreign ones myths. The same is true of the term *legend* (*Legende*). In the broad sense, legend is synonymous with myth; in the narrow sense, a legend is a tale about a Christian saint. Once again, what is local and Christian is opposed to what is foreign and heathen.

It is somewhat easier to distinguish myth from fairy tale or folktale (*Märchen*). At first glance the categories seem to be so elastic as to be interchangeable. Most of the volumes of the collection *Märchen der Weltliteratur* contain stories that elsewhere are called myths; classical myths turn up later in postclassical folktales and are even told as folktales in their own right. One such myth is that of the wandering and homeless "Swellfoot" (Oedi-pus, a speaking name that is typical of such stories), who liberates a kingdom from a monster, the Sphinx, thereby winning for himself throne and queen. The plot is in perfect accord with the structural schema developed for the Russian folktale by Vladimir Propp.[7] When modern scholars speak of folktale motifs in myth, however, they are simply skirting the problem of definition. The difference lies in the cultural centrality of myth. The folktale carries no pretense to cultural relevance, and that is why it is set outside the bounds of space and time. "Once upon a time there was a princess who went into the forest . . .": thus begins the well-known collection by the Grimm brothers. Myth, by contrast, tells of a particular place (Thebes, in the myth of Oedipus) and, at least among the Greeks, of a particular time as well (two generations before the Trojan War). The folktale is not bound to a collective and is not performed; we may call Plato's "lesser myths" folktales, if we like, but since no such folktales have survived in written form, we cannot say with certainty whether they were what we would call folktales. Apuleius's tale of Cupid and Psyche (*Metamorphoses* 4.28–6.24), although it does conform to the folktale type of the "animal husband," is nevertheless markedly different from what is usually meant by "folktale." Cupid, Psyche, and Psyche's daughter Voluptas stand for the Platonizing ideas of Hellenistic philosophers (these figures personify love, the soul, and pleasure, respectively), and yet the tale, like many myths, has a divine apparatus.[8] In speaking of ancient and non-European cultures, it is perhaps better not to use the category folktale at all, and to regard it, in its peculiar form and social function, as a product of later European social and intellectual history.[9]

The animal fable is a special case. The Greeks had a special term for it: *ainos*. Aristotle, however, speaks of *Aisōpou mythoi*,

the myths of Aesop; Philostratus (*Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 5.14) asked whether the Aesopic fable, with its simple moral lesson, was the best kind of myth or not.[10] A fable that does not offer such a lesson is difficult to distinguish from a myth. Ibycus (fr. 342 *PMG*) and Sophocles (*TrGF* vol. 4, F 362) told how Zeus once instructed a donkey to bring to mortals the herb of eternal youth as a reward for their assistance in his struggle with Prometheus. Along the way the donkey became thirsty and wished to drink from a spring, which was guarded by a snake. As payment for the water the snake demanded the load that the donkey was carrying. The donkey gave him the herb; hence mortals grow old, whereas snakes do not (they merely slough off their old skin). Although this tale, with a donkey and a snake as its main characters, looks like an animal fable, it has no simple moral. It does, however, explain a basic fact of human nature. It is not surprising, then, that the motif is found in a text as early as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. After a long search, Gilgamesh finds the herb of immortality, but loses it to the snake on his return (*ANET* 96). What sets fables apart from myths is not their use of animals but their immediate aim, which is to convey a moral lesson. Accordingly, fables are much easier to invent, as Lessing, among others, demonstrated. In addition, fables were not performed publicly, on set occasions, as mythical narratives characteristically were. There was no such thing as a fabular competition, a contest for reciters of fables—which indicates that the fable was not classified as a kind of myth until the old myths had lost their social function and were being moralized by most ancient interpreters.