

## CHAPTER 1

# The Absence of Myth

The absence of myth is hardly a radical notion. It antecedes the phenomenon called mythology insofar as a loss of myth makes theorizing about myth possible. A culture still living in myth would not need to theorize about that which fashioned the fabric of its existence. The narratives would be self-explanatory and sufficient. The collective that knows without needing to believe (or to write it down) that it is part of a living religion has no need for mythology or for myth, because when *mythos* or *muthos* comes into Greek language as a technical and philosophical term, a separation or rupture from a predominantly prereflective and ritualistic mode of being-in-the-world is already under way. Even the word *myth* itself, then, serves as a placeholder for phenomena that are lost the moment an attempt at capture (or recapture) is made. And any theory of myth posits itself in direct relationship to the loss of mythic and religious phenomena, whether or not such a loss is confronted in the theory.

When I say “the absence of myth,” my usage of the term *myth* refers to myth in its most original or archaic sense. It is defined neither as a true nor false story but as the total experience and expression (in narrative form) of life. An example of living myth can be seen in Carl Jung’s encounter with Pueblo Indians in New Mexico. The Indian chief told Jung, “[W]e are a people who live on the roof of the world; we are the sons of Father Sun, and with our religion we daily help our father to go across the sky. We do this not only for ourselves, but for the whole world. If we were to cease practicing our religion, in ten years the sun would no longer rise. Then it would be night forever” (*Memories* 252). For the Pueblos, God is

self-evident and embodied in nature. There is no distinction between the literal phenomenon of the sun rising and the religious meaning of the phenomenon. God is the sun. And without due worship, the reason for this god, for the sun itself, is changed. As the chief said, it would be night forever. This myth is not a story or hypothesis about God; it is the self-display, in nature, of the truth or reality of this particular culture.

For much of the world, the sun, or just about any other natural phenomenon, is not objectively understood as divine. Our relationship to the sun is scientific when we see a mass of energy, heat, and light. But knowledge of nature is made possible only when the conditions for myth no longer hold. Jung states something similar when recounting this story of the Pueblos: knowledge depends on the sacrifice of myth.<sup>1</sup> And yet—perhaps to say that one is not living in myth because it can be named as *myth*, or because natural events have lost their mystique, is too narrow and stuck in a literal-mindedness that does not consider the modern perspective that one of myth's multiple and evolving functions is to describe the ineffable. If myth is, at bottom, intended to facilitate a discussion and exploration of inexplicable and timeless truths, then, conceivably does it matter which form these truths take, whether ones of cosmologies or natural metaphors or scientific explanations?

Moreover, the assumption that a completely mythic or “primitive” mode of being-in-the-world is undifferentiated and unconscious balks when confronted with the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, which aims to show that the prehistoric mind is no less capable of intellectual thought than the modern one, albeit to varying degrees. The issue then becomes less one of trying to find a demarcation between myth and mythlessness than of addressing the implications of applying such nebulous terms to today's means for understanding and experiencing life. The need and desire that propel the labeling of current phenomena “myth” demands as much attention as the feasibility of the label itself. For the problem of an absence of myth is not only what one deems to be an indication of myth or not-myth, but that even such a naming is sought. Why would anyone living in what seems to be such a secular world say that there is myth, and what could one point to as evidence?

Adding to the confusion is that myth does not have a fixed meaning. Bruce Lincoln has shown that the prehistory of *mythos* and *logos* in Homer and Hesiod is marked by contradictory representations, where *logos* constitutes falsehood and *mythos* carries the authority of truth (18). This is in contradistinction to the generally assumed, modern definition of these terms, in which *logos* represents truth and *mythos* a fictional story. Thus, for the mind that fastens on contradictory connotations of myth, to say one is not in myth becomes as empty and meaningless as to say one is in myth. The truth or fallacy of such a statement is not only contingent on one's seemingly arbitrary position on or above this continuum encompassing mythology, but is also dependent on a foundation of knowledge that has come to resemble a mirror far more than the solidity of bricks and mortar. And although the emergence of critical interpretation and/or rejection of myth in conjunction with the development of philosophical thought initiated by the pre-Socratics and cemented in Plato is an attempt to clear the smoke obfuscating the mirrors, more often than not this demythologizing paves the way for modern interpreters to *re*mythologize, bringing us back to myth (where some say we have never left, which precludes the need to re-mythologize in the first place). Properly re-mythologized, we presumably face myth no longer as naïve participants but with a more complex understanding and appreciation of the world, its inhabitants, and the means of reflection.

Lest the fissures implicit in demythologization spread too deep, myth scholarship tends to include demythologization as a subsidiary to the larger concept called myth; even the word *demythologization* itself is contained within another theory of myth. Rudolf Bultmann coined the term and, though far from eliminating myth, its purpose (specifically applied to the New Testament) is to "extricate the true, existential subject matter of the mythology" (Segal, *Theorizing* 24). Demythologization, in this sense, becomes another means to retain myth when the narratives themselves can no longer be accepted literally. It is a way to hang on to the meaning of the same narrative, but the truth of the myth is now transposed from an embodied expression to an abstracted one. However, although an implied thread that remains unbroken even in its brokenness persists in linking human existence under the

rubric of myth, there is still this tacit gap or absence. Yes, humankind can be united throughout the ages by the sheer fact of human existential experience, but this unity is made possible by abstracting knowledge from the actual experience, and there is a significant gap between cultures living in myth and cultures living in modernity (to name only two historical periods).

This gap or difference is logical; it can be seen in the changing modes or forms of reflecting on the world. Wolfgang Giegerich points out one example of this in the differences between the dream-time narratives of Australian aborigines and the epics of Homer and Hesiod or the Old Testament. Dream-time narratives have no beginning or end or any distinction from the greater whole; they flow together to make one infinite narrative. “*All* images and narrative events *together* represent a living, ever-changing interconnected whole from which they cannot be separated into individual units” (“The Historicity of Myth” 2). One just dives into the narrative at any given point to pick it up. But when narratives are selectively edited to create a particular order and clearly establish “In the beginning,” as in Hesiod’s *Theogony* or Genesis, a separation from “the ocean of mythic knowledge” is already under way. Now there is a formal and historical “In the beginning,” rather than a mythic beginning that is not really a beginning as such, but a continual renewal and reentering of the whole myth. Consciousness is not immersed as deeply *in* the narrative; rather, consciousness has begun to distance itself *from* the narrative in order to craft and systemize the narrative toward a particular end already in mind.

The absence of myth is not only implicit in the nature of interpretation and analysis that demands a distance so as to obtain a better view of that which seeks to be elucidated (such as in demythologizing), but also in the lack of myth as an organizing and unifying center. This lack of center is by no means revelatory insofar as talk of mythlessness or the death of the gods has been acknowledged by many; no longer is one solely dependent on Nietzsche’s famous proclamation or Yeats’s loose anarchy or Eliot’s hollow men to declare modern Western civilization’s secularized and fragmented status.<sup>2</sup> The rise of postmodernism, situated on its lack of credible and mythic “grand narratives” (Lyotard) and virtual reality obviates the need for and resists any unifying center. And

Loyal Rue has even designated the term “amythia” specifically to describe the current mythless condition.

Even so, the Western importing of uprooted customs, watered-down religious practices, and pieces of philosophical systems from every appealing Other (e.g. “Tibetan Buddhism in Hollywood and Krishna Consciousness in airports” [Doniger, “Foreword,” Feldman and Richardson xii]) could be seen to betray the desire to alleviate the absence and to be anesthetized from the implications inherent in a void. Much innocence remains to be shattered, for whereas contemporary theories and discussions of myth may give credence to its intrinsic absence, myth in all its positivity remains as a cushion to fall back on. This is seen in the belief that mythlessness is itself just another myth, or that we are in between myths, which is to suggest that when the new myth arrives, the alienation that results from its absence will be eradicated. We will be rescued from our own emptiness. Life again will be meaningful and, if we are to believe Rue, we will stave off our impending annihilation. (Rue fears that in a state of *amythia*, “there is little chance that Western culture will survive very far into the twenty-first century” [3]. Terrorism, crime, the threat of nuclear destruction, deteriorating school and family systems are all indications of a way of life that may not have a future unless we can find a way to come together and reclaim or reestablish a cultural myth.)

To argue for myth’s presence (or, rather, myth’s *need*) amid its confirmed absence is far from a dialectical debate because in order to establish myth’s presence, its absence tends to be refuted. Despite its absence, myth persists. The absence or gap resulting from the shift in how humanity reflects on the world is ignored or covered up rather than allowed to penetrate into today’s reality or means of reflecting.

Rue’s observations into the state of modern affairs ring true. He knows the church is no longer satisfying or meaningful for many, and he knows that, for a culture to survive, it cannot remain attached to previous forms of life and thought. Things change, they evolve, and the old myths lose their vitality and necessity. “The demands of the present will not be denied, nor will they be well served by efforts to apply to them the solutions of the past” (4). And yet—at the end of his book Rue wants us all to go back to church! He thinks the myth we desperately need is not only possible, but will

manifest itself through radically changing the church from within. But he is still attached to the church, to an older vessel of religious consciousness. On the one hand, he accepts the philosophical reality of the death of God (the “impotence of God” [90]); on the other hand, it sounds like he is still looking for a way to have God. I agree that change comes from within, but it seems to me that the change has already happened, especially if the churches are emptying. He does not seem to accept that a true radical changing of the church could result in the death of the church itself, and in the death of the metaphor that he feels is still living and necessary, that of the Covenant. Instead he asks, “What is the Covenant for a world come of age?” (159). Though Rue’s focus is on human existence as it is today, and he is primarily concerned with establishing a root metaphor around which the culture can cohere, his choice of and home for the metaphor (the Covenant and the church) betrays the desire for a kind of religious meaning that is no more. Wanting a cultural cohesiveness is not the same thing as it happening, and wanting what we do not have only exacerbates the crisis he sees indicative of our time.

I believe any attempt to revive or recreate that which is no more is a regressive move and can succeed only in one’s imagination. Imagination freed from history may work at an artistic or personal level, but when applied to myth, which, for modernity, earned its place and status *in* history, such an application turns against the very phenomenon that is supposed to be respected, honored, and redeemed. And although it may appear that meaning is unearthed in the excavation of myth, more likely what is revealed is not meaning, but rather the desire for meaning. But myth cannot satisfy this desire; moreover, it was never meant to. In living myth, the desire was already answered before it could become aware of itself. The cohesiveness, the center, was already present in the phenomenon. When Jung asked the Pueblo chief if the sun “might be a fiery ball shaped by an invisible god,” the chief replied, “The sun is God. Everyone can see that” (*Memories* 250, 251). There is no need to answer any desire for God or meaning; it is self-evident.

Jung actually expressed the sentiment not so much to save myth but rather to be saved by it: “Our myth has become mute, and gives no answers. [. . .] Today we [. . .] stand empty-handed, bewildered, and perplexed, and cannot even get it into our heads that

no myth will come to our aid although we have such urgent need of one" (*Memories* 332–33). And a current Jungian analyst, James Hollis, taking up this lament, writes: "[A] greater intimacy with myth provides a vital linkage with meaning, the absence of which is so often behind the private and collective neuroses of our time" (8). That is, the solution to prevailing psychological problems (feeling lost and alienated) is to be found in myth, specifically personal myth, for that permits one to suffer the death of the gods but still cling to myth. So then, one might ask, why seek to shatter what innocence remains? Why take away myth if myth and a mythic consciousness provide such a reconciliatory and meaningful purpose? Why be a killjoy and criticize the attempt to restore what appears to have only positive benefits for the culture at large?

For one thing, there is an absence that cannot be ignored. Depth psychologists are not the only ones to address this absence, even if the acknowledgment is part of an attempt to find a cure, not realizing that myth itself may be the illness—as opposed to (only) mythlessness. A persistent focus on what is missing will naturally constellate the fervent yearning for whatever is perceived to have created such an absence. In this case, myth. But surely all the talk of mythlessness and death of God must have sprung from some truth, some profound and real experience of change and loss, thus begging the question, could myth even fulfill such a yearning without perpetuating talk of its absence and accompanying unfulfilled need? History prevents a return to an imagined time of myth divorced from mythlessness because mythlessness *is* part of the cultural awareness, regardless of the degree to which one concurs. Moreover, the concomitant search for meaning in the guise of myth unmasks myth's inability to satisfy such a need. But any current desire for myth to serve as an organizing principle around a center long debunked splits myth into two different phenomena, one ancient, the other modern, while purporting to reconcile the two into a continuous unity. Yet any attempted "reconciliation" between ancient and modern myth cannot be a true reconciliation to the extent that it must overlook the real distinctions between differing modes of being-in-the-world. And any so-called reconciliation further muddles the issue so that questions regarding the function or location of myth only serve to create a ceaseless circular reasoning—but not the kind of circle that could provide a center in a center-less time.

Michael Sexson's essay "Myth: The Way We Were or the Way We Are?" can serve as an example of this circular reasoning that ultimately finds in favor of myth. On the one hand, the steady, historical development of humankind's methods for analyzing and understanding the world, whether through philosophy, anthropology, science, psychology, and so forth, presupposes the loss of our illusions about the Gods—an absence of myth. On the other hand, insofar as human beings are "symbolizing animals and myth is a significant form of symbolic activity [. . .] the truth is that we can never be divested of myth" (42). Sexson's argument, which shares Ernst Cassirer's notion of the *animal symbolicum* but not his (Cassirer's) view that the mythical world is flat and shallow (see Baeten 63), seems redolent of this facile way to approach myth. At the core of the argument is a contradiction that can be linked to a prevailing modern definition of *myth* itself: myth is both true and false; we live in a mythless time and we are never without myth. Only, this is a contradiction linked not to any legal inheritance or experience of living myth, but to intellectual thought *about* myth.

It is important to note that not all theorists who study myth do so to demonstrate its incontrovertible presence. One example is Robert Segal, whose extensive scholarship is the result of someone clearly standing outside of myth in order to analyze theories spanning a wide range of mythology.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, one can posit few generalizations about myth today, given the lack of concordance among modern theories as dissimilar disciplines influence how myth is to be represented; for example, a linguistic view of myth (Eric Gould) is entirely different from a history of religions perspective (Wendy Doniger). And both of these views differ from the depth psychological perspective, which either appears reluctant to relinquish myth (C. G. Jung) or aims to see through myth into psychological reality (James Hillman). And, in turn, the mythopoetic approach (Harry Slochower), which shares with depth psychology the inclination toward analyzing mythic patterns, differs in its intent on consciously creating new myths that question and criticize a culture's rigid and potentially oppressive status quo. This does not even address an anthropological, sociological, feminist, or theological approach to myth, which are well beyond the scope of this book.<sup>4</sup>

The point of this all too scant account is to suggest that myth's amenability to extend into and give shape to varying schools of

thought is further indication that myth is primarily an empty *concept* and no longer a reality on the level of the literal or the phenomenal. Insofar as outer or literal phenomena do tend to be deemed mythic, more often than not, it is a fictionalized rendering of myth (e.g., calling a particular work of literature a myth) or it entails a conscious dissolution of the phenomena (discovering a hidden layer of meaning that may not be suggested by the phenomena itself). In both instances, myth is abstracted, analyzed, created—a product of mental activity whose contents are entirely interchangeable and reducible. And as a concept bearing the same name of that which once absolutely depended on a stable content *as well as* form (the unity of the narrative and the mythological mode of being-in-the-world, Giegerich would say), it is all too tempting to sustain the idea that myth translates over time and, through this translation, is able to provide a culture with a comparable existential meaning. But transformed to the purely conceptual level, myth can no longer retain any of its former status. Thus, any attempt to find meaning or God at a conceptual level of “myth” must realize that it depends on the sacrifice of myth.

Insofar as underlying all theories of myth, no matter how divergent, is an absence of myth, an exploration of the absence of myth serves as one inroad for understanding contemporary myth theory. My intention for this chapter is thus twofold: to present a brief sampling of modern myth scholarship while addressing how the theories respond to the question of myth’s presence or obsolescence. Some of the theorists reviewed are less well known and have not published as prolifically as others, but I chose them, not only as representative of modern thinking about myth, but because their arguments serve as good examples of what I perceive to be essential issues that either refute, permit, or redefine the absence of myth. However, to the degree that any recognition of absence is influenced by one’s definition of myth, it is useful to look first from a general overview at the problem of defining myth.

#### WHICH MYTH?

Although Bruce Lincoln’s exposition of the shift in meanings of *mythos* and *logos* may serve as a necessary disarming of any assumed

claims on truth for today's sensibility, one does not want to overlook that prior to theoretical and philosophical thought, myth was the truth. Lincoln expects the modern reader to be surprised on finding the "traditional" values of the terms *mythos* and *logos* reversed in ancient Greek texts, but this only reveals how far removed the modern conception of myth is from itself. Although Homer and Hesiod were already outside of myth insofar as they attempted to systemize mythology through crafted narratives and genealogies that presuppose some degree of critical thought and reflection, myth as truth still lingered. Lincoln notes that in their work, "*mythos* often denotes [. . .] a blunt act of candor. Nowhere [. . .] does it mean 'false story,' 'symbolic story,' 'sacred story,' or anything of the sort" (17–18). Moreover, Mircea Eliade would not even look to Greek poets and thinkers for an authentic definition of myth since "it was only in Greek culture that myth was subjected to prolonged and penetrating analysis, from which it emerged radically 'demythologized.' If the word 'myth,' in all European languages, denotes 'fiction,' it is because the Greeks declared it to be so twenty-five centuries ago." But living myth, "far from portraying *fiction*, expresses the *supreme truth*, since it speaks only of realities" ("Toward a Definition" 3).

Yet even taking pains to affirm the truthfulness of myth obscures the reality that original myth exists prior to any distinction between truth and falsehood, prior to the word *myth* itself. There is only the unmediated experience of one's life and world, which is truthful in that it is necessary and real. "Mythology is not simply a mode of expression in whose stead another simpler and more readily understandable form might have been chosen," wrote Karl Kerényi (Jung and Kerényi 3). A culture living in myth has no choice other than to live its myth, bound to serve its God and exempt from the alternative to live and worship anything else. The French sociological school (Marcel Mauss, Georges Dumézil) found that "[m]yth is above all *obligatory* in nature; it does not exist unless there is a sort of necessity to reach agreement on the themes that are its raw material and on the way these themes are patterned. But the constraint comes solely from the group itself, which tells the myth because it finds its own total expression in it" (see Detienne, "Interpretation" 7). And from Bronislaw Malinowski: "Myth [. . .] is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but

a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements. [. . .] These stories . . . are to the natives a statement of a primeval, greater, and more relevant reality” (qtd. in Eliade, *Myth and Reality*: 20).

With the distinguishing of true versus false gods in Hebrew scripture<sup>5</sup> and the differentiation between true and false speech beginning with the pre-Socratics, the door to myth shows itself to be closing, paving the way for the phenomenon called mythology. However, as a phenomenon, mythology is notably modern. Burton Feldman and Robert Richardson’s critical anthology of the historical development of modern mythology suggests that prior to around 1700 mythology was “rarely studied for itself and not considered important in its own right” (xxi). With the Enlightenment and the Renaissance, particularly Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), myth’s importance rises and assumes its place as a central object of interest and study, anticipating the primary modern approaches to myth that would follow. But why would myth come to the surface at this time, especially if it had been pretty much relegated to the background for well over two thousand years? Marcel Detienne argues that the new science of mythology emerges when a religious consciousness no longer holds, thus enabling someone like Jesuit missionary Joseph-François Lafitau, who found connections between North American savages and the ancient Greeks, to discover in the early eighteenth century a religion beyond Christianity. Mythology “appears when dogmas disintegrate and Religion is overshadowed. It appears with change” (*Creation* 4). Although Detienne argues that for Lafitau and other early mythologists like Bernard Fontenelle myths are seen as beastly, scandalous, or silly, a “result of ignorance,” it is “of an inquisitive ignorance trying to account for phenomena and for the world itself” (5).

Yet the loss that would compel one to seek truth and understanding begins much earlier, in ancient Greece, where the early Hellenic philosophers seek a “critical distance from such sinful plots” as well (43). Detienne quotes Thucydides: “Truth inherent in acts is so powerful that it has no ‘need of a Homer to glorify it nor of anyone whose tone of voice may charm momentarily but whose interpretations must suffer in the light of true facts’” (60). If the first mythologists, whether those of classical Greece or eighteenth-

century Europe, deem myth as scandalous, illusory, the “carrier of the irrational which leads to the decline of true religious feeling” (Wilhelm Schmidt qtd. in Detienne, *Creation* 17) and as threatening to truth (Pindar qtd. in Detienne 47), then myth as representing the living truth of a collective is no more. It would follow that the study of myth surfaces precisely when myths, and later Christianity, no longer provide this source of religious and existential meaning. One consequence is that humankind is left to its own devices and the mythologists are free to “discover” a new myth, even if disguised as an old one.

One responsibility toward a discussion of myth is to clarify what is meant—the time of living myth or the time after it. For once myth is no longer the presupposed truth, its role begins to expand and mimic those who examine its remnants. Even the distinction between two different periods of myth is absorbed into myth itself insofar as myth comes to represent both truth and falsehood. Beginning with Plato who used myth to mean both,<sup>6</sup> or considering Claude Lévi-Strauss’s approach, in which the meaning of the myth is secondary to a structure that contains and orders binary oppositions,<sup>7</sup> myth as holding the opposites comes to serve as an effective tool in public discourse and an analysis of culture. But the logic that apprehends myth continues to change. Myth begins to dissolve and deconstruct in the work of someone like Detienne, who interprets myth as empty, “consciously delimited fiction, deliberately exclusive [. . .], fragmented and empty; [. . .] a dead rumor” (128). With the progression of myth from truth to falsehood, while covering everything in between, it is little wonder that the definition of myth proves increasingly more complex and elusive.

Insofar as myth, in a prevailing modern interpretation, holds on to the truth while being widely understood to be fictitious, it, perhaps more clearly than any other form of expression, contains its own negativity and thus resists any stable definition or attachment. Jean-Pierre Vernant observes that, beginning with classical Greece, from whom modern Western civilization has inherited its concept of myth, “In one way or another myth, as such, is always exorcised. [. . .] Myth is either defined negatively in terms of what it lacks or fails to offer, as non-sense, non-reason, non-truth, non-reality or—if it is granted any positive mode of being—it is explained away as being something other than itself” (223). Yet in Greece this

negativity coexists with the belief in myth as providing an important cultural, social, and spiritual framework. If, as Vernant says, “It is as if [myth’s] existence depended upon it being transposed or translated into some other language or type of thought,” this simultaneously questions any existence of myth in its own right besides asserting its vitality in everyday life. Amid this paradox, however, the dialectic of myth stagnates—not necessarily within myth or within a particular story, but of myth itself. The exorcism of defining myth then resembles more a chipping away at a concept of myth where the shards land someplace else, only to grow and either subsume themselves under or consume in their own name what was trying to be differentiated.

Bruce Lincoln and Wendy Doniger are two mythologists who resist defining myth and prefer instead to demonstrate what a myth does.<sup>8</sup> This supports Robert Segal’s assertion that “theories of myth are always theories of something broader that is applied to the case of myth” (*Theorizing 1*), which echoes Vernant’s remarks that even the Greeks needed to translate myth into “something other than itself.” In this regard, myth’s amenability to extend into other fields can increase ad infinitum. “Myth is now so encyclopedic a term that it means everything or nothing. We can find in it whatever we want to say is essential about the way humans try to interpret their place on earth” (Gould 5). In its equivocal usage, *myth* lends itself to a superficial conformity that attaches itself to any referent or phenomena, whereby on interpretation, a new order of meaning emerges. However, any mythology now tends to expose a mythologist’s ideology rather than settling on an objective definition of myth and satisfying the problem of meaning. In order to extricate a more precise definition of myth, each of these referents would need to be defined and ideologies unmasked. But the boundaries of myth blur in the process and put into question the existence of such a boundary or limit, meanwhile forgetting that any need or ability to choose or settle on what myth is precludes an intact collective still living in myth. The fact that contemporary mythologists draw on current events or narratives to prove the existence of myth indicates not only that the absence of myth has been given little more than lip service, but also corroborates the “fabricated real,”<sup>9</sup> that the reality that is sought is easily found or created—made all the more viable in an abundance of phenomena from which to

choose. And today, with the technological erasing of cultural barriers, if only at a virtual level, one has an endless influx of cultural forms of expression to appropriate, including as well the capacity to borrow from historical or invented periods of time.

As previously indicated, part of the problem in defining myth is that what is deemed to be a phenomenon of myth is contingent on how one wields the word, often resulting in a conflation of two entirely different denotations of myth. The word *myth* or, more precisely, the experience of myth, is specific to one's own time and culture—this seems obvious given that a culture's myth is composed of its own particular, living narratives. And yet in much of contemporary usage, the concept *myth* remains attached to an *idea* of a phenomenon rooted someplace else and in the past, or outside of time—while simultaneously being transferred to modern phenomena. We examine ancient narratives to understand what a myth means or how it is structured, but then the mythic pattern is abstracted and applied to a newly created narrative that we then can call our myth or use as evidence that myth is still alive and well (e.g., interpreting the success of films like *Star Wars* as proof of the vitality of myth). To label modern phenomena mythic more often than not results in a new and even more comprehensive definition of *myth* that of course will be entirely relevant to today, given that today's events and cultural forms are what are being looked at. Although theories of myth may be recognized as a lens applied to something broader, often the reverse application is not performed: the phenomena that are being looked at (specifically those that are considered to “prove” the existence of myth) are not analyzed on their own terms and by means of their own forms—outside of myth. The problem is not so much that the word *myth* is ascribed to modern phenomena. Rather, it is the intentionality that infuses the word, the desire for what is identified as myth to provide a source of meaning and fulfill a comparable function as if science did not already render it obsolete.

Giegerich addresses this discrepancy in Jung: At the phenomenological or semantic level, Jung concedes the absence of myth, but at the formal or syntactical level, Jung's theory indicates otherwise, for when confronted with the implications of the loss of myth as a social phenomenon, Jung turns inward to seek his own personal myth. “Now you possess a key to mythology and are free to unlock

all the gates of the unconscious psyche.” But then Jung asks himself, “Why open all gates?” Jung knows there is no more living myth, that psychology requires the analytic dissolution of myth. And yet Jung does not unlock the gates; instead he asks himself, “[W]hat is your myth—the myth in which you do live?” (*Memories* 171). This, Giegerich says, reveals the “modern experience of the present. One moment, one now unfolds as the double movement of radical negation of the past and a longing for, indeed an insisting on, a new future.” Inasmuch as this envisioned future—complete with a new myth—“includes a debunking of myth in the first sense” (myth as the “religious tradition that precedes one’s personal existence”) then dissociation ensues, not only from one’s origins if a new beginning is mandated, but from the ability to experience the actual *now* as it is (Giegerich, “The Flight into the Unconscious”).<sup>10</sup>

#### APPROACHES TO THE ABSENCE OF MYTH

Although it may be assumed that the world is no longer animated to the degree that it is for cultures still living in myth (notwithstanding those who advocate the protection of “Mother Earth”<sup>11</sup>), the absence of myth, seemingly straightforward, provokes disparate responses. Four approaches to be discussed are briefly summarized as follows:

- **The refutation of absence.** The intentional confounding of form and substance is evident in thinking that strives to meld philosophy and myth. The boundary that marks the emergence of philosophy *from* nontheoretical myth is erased in an attempt to show that myth has always been present and, furthermore, remains the truth even at a conceptual level. Two contemporary theorists, Elizabeth Baeten and Milton Scarborough, draw on philosophy to resuscitate myth from ill-intended and false reports of its absence, redefining myth in the process and applying myth to one of modernity’s phenomena that resulted precisely from the end of myth: the split between subject and object.

- **The incorporation of absence.** The “myth of myth” can best describe the approach that assumes the loss of myth but subsumes it under a larger interpretation of myth that “sees through” itself to reveal its ideology. Two theorists, Bruce Lincoln and Robert Ellwood, allow myth to abide in its negative, fictitious status while uncovering the political ideologies shaping myth theory. Similarly, two representatives from the depth psychological perspective, Christine Downing and Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig, assume the infiltration of ideology into myth and one’s personal role in directing myth, but ultimately maintain the liveliness of the symbolic realm.
- **The necessity of absence.** The postmodern awareness of absence and the impossibility to settle on a solid meaning is projected onto an ahistorical reading of myth in the work of Eric Gould, which unwittingly removes myth from the grounding it *did* have and perpetuates its absence. The modern experience of a lack of grounding and meaning are unavoidable but necessary for creating myth, which must strive to find meaning anyway. Absence is the center, perhaps the only center. Exemplified in writings by David Miller and Joseph Campbell, emphasis is placed on a purposeful lack of meaning, for any posited meaning obscures direct experience as well as the larger context containing and unconsciously influencing any assured proclamations of meaning or truth.
- **The simultaneous acknowledgment and discrediting of absence.** Wendy Doniger’s approach to myth presupposes its absence insofar as myth is essentially a tool in the hands of humankind. At the same time, myth is redefined such that its fragments, whether to be found in popular culture or Eastern religion, point to an undeniable reality of myth. Not only a reality, but a necessity because myth, one’s stories, are all there really is in a demythologized (but actually remythologized) world to provide life with depth and meaning. While a comparative mythology is certainly instrumental in

enabling one to view his or her culture from the lens of another one, living by other people's myths carries the potential of overlooking the consequences of an absence of myth in one's own land.

As this is far from an exhaustive survey of contemporary myth theory, it bears restating that the reasoning behind these selections is such that I consider these theorists to be illustrative of primary approaches to an absence of myth, covering the range from denial to acceptance to even a celebration of sorts. To be sure, these theories overlap into other sections as I have outlined them and obviously address additional issues in regard to myth. But for the purposes of this discussion, I trust they will assist in magnifying the topic at hand.

#### THE REFUTATION OF ABSENCE

##### **Elizabeth Baeten: Myth as Mirroring Thought**

In *The Magic Mirror: Myth's Abiding Power*, Baeten writes, "Human history, the processes of culture, and the advance of our understanding of the workings of the world are seen, in large part, as progressively divesting human life of myth" (6). But through the examination of four very different theorists, Ernst Cassirer, Roland Barthes, Mircea Eliade, and James Hillman, Baeten aims to show how "theories *about* myth have come to play the roles of myth," thus precluding any real divesting of myth (19). She sees the same "dangerous myth" coursing through these divergent theories; namely, that the "*telos* of human existence is absolute and unbounded creative freedom." Yet rather than addressing existential issues of freedom and the boundary between what is human and what is not at the philosophical level at which they are raised, she wants consciously to guide philosophy's head back into myth. In her words, she intends to "remedy this relative dearth of serious philosophical investigation into the nature of myth" (19, 7). This then becomes an *idea* (and not a phenomenon) of myth that has to fuel the requirements of both structure and phenomena. The distinction between structure and phenomena or form and substance is

purposely effaced. This may make it easier to perceive how modern theories of myth function the same as myth itself, but this is an unspecific, unlimited view of myth. Not only does it already contradict her theory of myth of something that is distinctive, this view of myth ignores the fact that living myth (as opposed to the theory) requires a unity of—not an effacement—of form and substance. The myth is the narrative and the embodiment of the narrative, the mythic mode of being-in-the-world. But ideas of myth cannot stand in for both.

Baeten is a theorist who criticizes the lack of a concrete definition of myth in most scholarship. “To refuse to give definitions or set limits” prevents humankind from fulfilling its purpose of self-creation, an act that she believes is played on the stage of myth (212). This innate need for creation can only function amid constraints and boundaries; every telling of a myth, then, or a theory about myth is an act of “creating the boundary of human being” (39). Myth itself is the ultimate boundary. It is the demarcation between what is human and what is Other; what is not human but the “world for human being” (165). In this respect, opposing theories of myth can all be joined under serving this same function of defining and delimiting what it means to be human. Insofar as myths have performed this function since time immemorial, then not only can we never be without myth, but any theory of myth adds another outer ring to this circular thinking, with the circle broadening itself to allow for a conjoining among differing historical (and now thoroughly abstracted) usages of the word *myth*. Despite Baeten’s acknowledgment that mythlessness is part of our cultural inheritance, the continuity of myth must prevail; the bubble cannot be burst. Although the idea that we can never be without myth reveals its other, hidden face: that we, or Baeten, at least, does not *want* to live without myth. This underlying motivation allows a clinging to the hope that any connection between archaic myth and an analysis of myths exists somewhere else besides human intellect.

For Baeten, unbounded freedom will be seen as dangerous because it does not allow for one to be free from myth and to see that it is precisely such a release that could structurally fulfill a comparable purpose as to what is imagined or sought for in myth. Her argument overlooks that in living myth, having fewer options

may presuppose a lack of freedom, but it also renders the issue of freedom irrelevant. Joseph Campbell wrote, “[F]ormerly, for generations, life so held to established norms that the lifetime of a deity could be reckoned in millenniums” (*Masks of God* 677). The known gods and myths endured and with that endurance came the commitment to serve one’s god and myth. But in a time where “there is nothing now that endures,” where the “known myths [and] the known God cannot endure” (*ibid.*), where the established norms do not last for very long and are subject to human rather than divine intervention, it is impossible to return to a time when one had no need to speak of freedom because life was contained in the gods.

Furthermore, in myth there would not be any reason for humankind to fulfill any purpose of self-creation, for one believed this task fell to the gods. (Two examples from Egyptian cosmogony: at Heliopolis, the first couple and subsequently the world were born from the masturbation of the god Atum. In Memphis, the artisan god Ptah thought and felt the world before speaking the world and making it real [Derchain 91].) Baeten’s own creative and philosophical reading of myth bespeaks a higher degree of intellectual freedom unlikely to be experienced (or needed) by archaic societies. Yet the trajectory of her own method, an idea of unbounded freedom, must be thwarted. Her idea must be removed from its course and wrapped in myth, not just to absolve the need to answer for mythology as primarily a modern phenomenon, but also to support her theory that any theory of myth plays the same role of myth. She and the theorists she discusses are specifically mythmakers and not just regular storytellers, thus laying claim to myth’s “abiding power.” But myths were not theories, and if one is a theorist, one cannot be a mythmaker. Theories demand arguing, proof, and further define themselves through falsification. Myths, on the other hand, do not require proof; they simply *are*. To conflate theory with myth may be one way of trying to come to terms with philosophical issues for today, but this conflation unwittingly adds another boundary or layer of resistance and occludes the understanding that was presumably sought.

Baeten’s analysis also unwittingly reinforces the boundary between myth and mythlessness. “The mythical is a kind of gateway, hinge, turnstile or threshold [. . .] for myth to maintain its status as

myth it must continue in its function as the boundary between incommensurables" (166). But despite her saying that myth functions as a permeable boundary, myth acts more as a barrier to be consciously erected, a one-way turnstile going in reverse, toward some time protected from both myth and present-day reality. The split between the opposites is strengthened, because the "other" that is not-myth, the "other" that historically turned against myth and initiated great cultural and religious transformation, is not fully allowed into awareness. Whatever is not-myth must remain outside.

Baeten does argue against pluralistic thinking being reduced into dualistic thinking, given that underlying each examined myth theory is an ontological reduction that favors one category over another (e.g., Barthes's history opposed to nature; Eliade's sacred and the profane). Baeten herself is a proponent of the philosophical school of naturalism, which does not view "nature" as a category to be opposed to any other (194). And yet in positing myth as a boundary between what is human and what is other, although what is deemed other is flexible in its range, her entire argument rests on a dualism that she would strive to work against. Through myth, human beings are placed in direct opposition to what is other, but there is no room to allow that what is other (such as living without myth) might also be part of a larger domain that does not insist on a drawing of "a line between what is ours and what must remain outside" (193).

Without assuming responsibility for what Baeten has left outside awareness (mythlessness), then not only meaning but knowledge as well must safely reside in myth and, no, humankind will not be free. The need for a consciousness of absence to make itself known through humans will be repeatedly frustrated. The reflection in myth's "magic mirror" shows the other as something that must remain on the other side of the boundary in order to define the one who is looking in the mirror. Although what is other is "therefore what belongs" (perhaps because it defines those of us looking at the other), what is other is not to be invited *fully* in, into human awareness.

Furthermore, what exactly is this receptacle called "myth" in which knowledge is safely to reside? Baeten agrees that there is "no stable content to the concept of myth" and that the "meaning of 'myth' can only be determined by the work it performs" (176).

With a lack of stable content, the emphasis by default is placed on the form of myth, but here myth as a form cannot be considered entirely on its own terms, nor can it be allowed to transform into something else, such as a new form of consciousness. In this case, myth remains an old form in search of new content. It must continually be applied to something else, like contemporary psychological or philosophical theory, to bolster its so-called irrefutable existence. Myth as a form that has lost its own distinct boundary in its multitudinous definitions is attached without restraint to phenomena that intend to display “the work it performs” in the hopes of recovering meaning. But the meaning conveyed through present forms and phenomena that already dominate in an already established mythless time is obscured by such an attachment. Additionally, overlaying modern conceptions of myth onto an imagined immortal myth obscures the fact that living myth does not have a boundary to be lost or found. (Recall the dream-time narratives of the Australian aborigines: “Like an unending band they flow along, merge into each other, intertwine and disentangle again, break up abruptly, only to reappear, like a subterranean watercourse, at another place” [Uber qtd. in Giegerich, “The Historicity of Myth”: 2].) Baeten’s utilization of myth as a boundary mirrors the progress and expansion of *thought*, not myth. She might concur, given her philosophical approach to myth, although her agreement would differ in that myth would have to be swept up and carried along with intellectual development, rather than being left alone as just one, earlier form of reflection in the life of the mind.

Setting aside the question of freedom, it is important to note that the level of form or thought is the *only* level on which such different theories could be argued together. In abstracting a common pattern or function to these theories, Baeten has not only purposely removed this discussion from the level of substance, but in doing so has removed the theories themselves from the same level, notwithstanding her careful summaries of each theory. This follows the same pattern as her argument, namely, a mirroring of the ideas embedded in each theory with the theory itself. This is not to say that her insights into these individual thinkers are not worthy of consideration (although for the purposes of this discussion they are not relevant) or that she has failed in discerning philosophical issues in myth *theory*. But the distinction that needs to be made is

that not only does such a blurring between form and substance hinder or prevent one from seeing what wants to be known through absence, but that myth itself may not even be the ideal (let alone a possible) platform on which to discuss the existential questions posed. Is it not fair to suggest that other forms of expression or reflection besides myth, such as music, science, and art, could also define what it is to be human? When Baeten subsumes the modern need to define what it is to be human under myth, she not only suppresses the range of human reflection, but she also suppresses it under an inflated and generic usage of myth. And because a generic usage of myth loses all cultural specificity, it is less likely to define humanity adequately.

If, as Baeten argues, “the subject of myth is a mirror reflecting our intellectual concerns, our intellectual concerns mirror myth as well,” then questions about the *telos* of human existence will never get out of the confines which would give rise to such a question (163). The question will be thrust back onto the questioner. Even if questions of existence are ultimately unanswerable, this becomes a conversation that could best be served outside of myth, given that myth is so easily identified and conflated with conflicting means of understanding and apprehending not only the world, but human faculties as well. Baeten’s mirror metaphor is unspecific and, in one sense, does a disservice to myth. We know myth by what is not-myth; such a distinction is necessary to distinguish myth from intellectual concerns. Furthermore, as long as modern ideas of myth continue to look backward while purporting to look ahead, what could potentially provide a response to today’s intellectual concerns is hidden from view—philosophy’s dependence on a differentiation from myth denied. This is not to criticize or deny the wellspring of meaning available in studying myth as a historical text. The question is whether such a study is intended for its own sake or is an attempt, among many things, to show that the meaning couched in logically differing usages of the word *myth* is essentially the same.

Toward the end of her book, Baeten recounts a creation myth from the Snohomish Tribe in Washington State, in which scattered peoples came together and, raising poles made from fir trees, lifted the sky (which the Creator had made too low). For her, this myth resonates today insofar as “we have carved out a niche where we can live ‘without bumping our heads.’ We work, in concert and

in resistance, with other natural products and processes, to shape what we find in nature into a human abode. But the sky is now closed to us; this is the price we pay" (193). The price is the loss of the belief that by lifting a pole made from a fir tree, heaven and earth are literally separated, and equally the price is the loss of the living religion that accepts this as the truth. We cannot go back to a time when such a ritual would be common knowledge or practice. Although Baeten would not literally have us go back to such a time, she would keep the pole so firmly planted that it and her thinking are still utterly bound to an experience we now call myth (the ritual of the Snohomish creation), and, moreover, bound to a notion of myth that is collectively regarded as fictitious. By defining myth as a necessary boundary, she is bound to the idea that heaven and earth are irrevocably separated, never to be united in their separation and thus keeping the need for myth in its reconciliatory role burning. Baeten may be applying the logic of the creation myth to today's methods of understanding our world, but she only goes halfway.

The creation myth ritualizes in narrative form the simultaneous separation *and union* of heaven and earth. The divine progenitors of the world are joined in their sacred marriage and separated for the sake of creating life and consciousness. In Greek myth, Gaea (Earth) gives birth to Ouranos (Sky) who then covers her, and so begins the creation of the cosmos. With the loss of myth and ritual, the same dialectical movement between union and separation or same and other is still required for consciousness to come into existence. We have not stopped reflecting; we are still in the process of creating consciousness. Only now this movement is no longer enacted externally and concretely, as was formerly appropriate for cultures living in myth. Now this separation and union must be realized internally. For it is not that the sky is closed to us, as Baeten says. On the contrary, the sky has fallen—into moonwalks and space travel and reflected at the other end of the astronomer's telescope. Not a literal fall, obviously, but an internal and formal fall, the loss of the sky's mystery and divine inhabitants. The act of union and separation must be commensurate with this new, inverted, and negative status, with the form of reflection appropriate to *now*. This act must correspond to the same structure—only it is now centered in the mind and cemented in the progression of thought.

Even if fragments or traces of myth linger in our imagination, they cannot perform this role. Insofar as Baeten's efforts to continue the process of a differentiating awareness are tied to myth, the differentiating is caged in. The greater price modernity thus pays is not the loss of myth, but rather the loss of the now internalized dialectical movement between union and separation. With a philosophical myth, we get stuck in the space between union and separation. We get mired in the gap between heaven and earth, immune from both, and prevented from creating new life (consciousness).

### **Milton Scarborough: Myth as Overcoming Dualism**

For Milton Scarborough, another contemporary theorist, the boundary between inner and outer does not need to be steadfastly maintained *by* myth, but is "devastating" *for* myth, because myths or modern theories of myth are either about subjective experience or the outer world, not both. "Myth must be about one or the other." No longer can myths tell the whole story of the universe (12). Yet rather than accepting this as a necessity or truth of myth—really of modern experience, given that theories of myth materialize out of such experience—Scarborough intends to "overcome the inner-outer dichotomy and set forth a definition of *myth* which does not depend upon that dualism or the features of modernity that spring from it" (73). But if the split between inner and outer is our inheritance, then seeking to overcome it is a disguised rejection (although perhaps not so disguised in this case, given his apparent disdain for the state that myth is in) of the tradition we live in. This sets in motion another dichotomy between an idea of wholeness that cannot allow for the split and a worldview that has incorporated the split into consciousness.

The act of reflection, epitomized in the mirror that Baeten sees as a powerful reflection of myth, is for Scarborough an instrument of corruption. Or, rather, limiting myth to just one kind of reflection is what defeats myth. His book opens with a recounting of the disintegration that befell a small Stone Age tribe in New Guinea upon receipt of mirrors and photographs of themselves by the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, in 1969. When the anthropologist returned to New Guinea six months later, the sanctity of

the tribe's ceremonies was no more. Their sacred mysteries were now open to full disclosure, male initiation rites were no longer mandatory, and the most sacred ritual objects were put up for sale. Carpenter cited poet Matthew Arnold in his report: once a cohesive collective, the tribe now consisted of individuals who "wandered 'between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born'" (qtd. in Scarborough: 2). However, for Scarborough this implies less a loss of myth than the "embodiment of some larger cultural force" still at work behind the scenes (3). The problem, as he construes it, is not looking in the mirror. The problem is in identifying the images on the "visualist blackboard" with ourselves and succumbing to the misguided belief that self-consciousness and living myth are mutually exclusive. For behind the outer reflection is the always present "prereflective world" of myth. This is more than the true nature of myth, it is undying myth that is waiting to be restored to its rightful status (125).

Thus, in New Guinea, the fact that the "traditional myth [. . .] has not been replaced by a new one" indicates to Scarborough that "myth is not so much dead as it is broken, enervated, numbed" (6). Precisely because no new initiation rites were established and no new mysteries were discovered, because nothing came in to replace what was lost, he sees this as evidence that even when secularism presides over the sacred, myth persists. And not just any myth, but in essence the same myth that infused the life of this tribe, even if now in a fragmented or numbed state. If this particular myth were really dead, it would have easily given way to another myth, to another chapter of gods and rituals. Ignoring the possibility that perhaps nothing could come in to amend this rupture (meaning a real death) or that such a rupture not only necessitates modernity but is the only way an abstract, content-less myth can be imagined to perform the same unifying function of archaic (and decidedly concrete) myth, Scarborough tries modernity as the killer of myth. But he has a trap door, for myth has not really been killed. Modernity merely pushes it underground with what turns out to be just another myth. "Far from suffering from the absence of myth, the West has been and is now under the spell of a particular and somewhat peculiar myth—namely, the myth of origin in Plato's *Timaeus*" (48). Again, here is the intentional equivocation of the word *myth*. An absence of archaic myth, such as the loss of cult and ritual life

experienced by the tribe in New Guinea, is essentially disregarded and conflated with a philosophical discussion framed in an *idea* of myth, Plato's *Timaeus*, itself a product of demythologization. Although if one wants to believe, as Scarborough does, that any notion of an absence of myth is really a "retreat before the advance of myth," the equivocation is needed in order to maintain an allegiance to myth (33).

Following the school of phenomenology, Scarborough argues for the "world [as] the ultimate context for all human activities, including thinking." And myth "is the primordial and comprehensive grasp of this life-world and, therefore, is always present in the tacit dimension to orient and guide all reflective analysis" (94). Moreover, tacit knowing is rooted in the body, related to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "body-subject," that exists prior to the abstraction of subject and object. This "primordial [and non-dualistic] being-in-the-world" is not only still accessible, it is also what can overcome the dichotomy between inner and outer (qtd. in Scarborough: 80). The larger cultural force running behind the Stone Age village in New Guinea is the "true" and persistent myth that intends to recover a primordial and prehistorical mode of being-in-the-world. This is despite a definition of myth rooted thoroughly in modernity, and in a theory that exposes its ignorance about the real experience of living in myth, all attempts to exhibit otherwise notwithstanding.

Scarborough's definition of myth is severed from the gods and narrative details, no longer symbolic and seemingly no longer attached to any phenomena, whether historical or current. His is an idea of myth as a wholeness enveloping all, although another dichotomy is set in place in that the body, supposedly an instrument of unity but posited against other sources of knowing or subsuming other loci of consciousness under itself, for example, "mind is bodily," ends up as only part of the whole (81). As long as one regards myth as ahistorical and eternal, then one will undoubtedly find myth everywhere. Yet Scarborough's need to fight so hard at establishing the illegitimacy of an absence of myth betrays a larger cultural force that is not "true myth," but precisely the opposite.

His intention is explicitly for a postmodern notion of myth: "My aim is not [. . .] to attempt a comprehensive treatment of myth

but to concentrate upon the ways in which my view of myth goes beyond those of modernity” (84). In asserting a view that is not only to be unique to modernity but also a reflection of his own uniqueness, his theory smacks more of a personal agenda than a thorough grasping of any world. If the story of the New Guinea tribe can be isolated from the very real details that marked an irreversible change in their own apprehension of life and relation to the gods in order to demonstrate that myth either exists or can be recovered (despite the “hostility” of mirrors and photographs to myth), then it follows that any experience can be removed from its reality as well. An anachronistic sequestering carried out whereby reality—not myth—is pushed underground to mend a split that “is the defining mark of modernity” (13). Only it is a mending that in turn will have little bearing on reality and subsequently little hope for overcoming the dichotomy that is real.

Any understanding of myth requires a reflective process and thereby creates a split between subject and object, a loss of myth in order to see myth. Like the proverbial fish in water, we cannot know what we were once immersed in until we get out of the water. Yet for Scarborough, the loss of myth must be remedied by what has just been realized as being lost—myth. But it is far from the homeopathic method where like cures like, for his definition of myth is so far removed from itself that, like Baeten, his argument does the opposite of what he is seeking to accomplish. By virtue of ignoring or obscuring differences between conflicting usages of myth and contrasting ways of grasping the world (for one thing, numerous scientific and philosophical theories are reduced into either manifestations of the *Timaeus* or Genesis myth), the split itself is addressed only superficially. Therefore, how could it be successfully overcome?

The intentional equivocation of two logically distinct periods of myth functions like blinders that must be steadfastly held on to as long as one wants to maintain a current and vital presence of myth. Myth only needs to be updated; yet substituting myth’s old clothes for new ones effects a surface change at best. A new myth that seeks to replace and redefine the old one can never provide meaning for humankind at the level that needs it most. Otherwise, a successfully altered myth would render questions of meaning

and meaninglessness irrelevant. Given the excessive and at times despairing quest for meaning and purpose running rampant in the twenty-first century, I think it is safe to presume that myth, whether a new or re-dressed old one, is not fulfilling the function it once naturally upheld. And insofar as modern treatments of myth attempt to recover its status as truth, specifically via philosophic discourse, as a result neither myth nor philosophy is able to apprehend the truth. For the merging of the two disciplines endeavors to bring together two modes of expression that in order to be true to themselves, cannot coexist.<sup>12</sup> Whereas myth was previously the outward expression of self-evident truths, philosophy took on that role, now interiorized, once religion no longer carried the collective. Both are bound by a lack of choice—those in myth are bound to their gods and the philosophers are compelled to express the truth of their age. Yet what was unreflected only in the sense that it was assumed and accepted for the culture still in myth is, for the philosophers, contingent on critical questioning, reflection, and choice.

#### THE INCORPORATION OF ABSENCE

The awareness of one's subjectivity influencing one's theory of myth further removes the filter from myth's authority because any mirroring of myth and its theory is traced to the peculiarities of the theorist as opposed to proving the irrefutable existence of myth. Recognizing the power to affect myth rather than be unconsciously affected by it must presuppose a granting of the absence of myth, because the question is no longer, "what are the myths of a mythless time?"<sup>13</sup> but "which ideology is calling such-and-such a myth?" Yet even perceiving ideology in the place where myth once stood runs the risk of being overshadowed by a larger umbrella of myth, where myth must be inflated to see through itself—but still have something left over that can be called myth. The issue of myth's truth or falsehood becomes secondary to the consciousness of one's role in determining myth; a myth is "true" insofar as someone believes in it (what is important is to examine those beliefs) and a myth is "false" in that it is sustained by ideology rather than the gods.

**Christine Downing and Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig:  
Myth as Psychological Method**

Christine Downing is one theorist who argues that a given theory of myth reveals the methodology of the theorist. She writes, “In the study of myth the method of approach obviously largely determines what we find and is itself shaped by our deepest assumptions about what it means to be human” (3). Similar to Elizabeth Baeten, Downing advocates a closer look at the “underlying assumptional patterns” within each method in order fully to comprehend a theory of myth. Yet whereas Baeten seeks to unearth evidence that theoretical discussions of myth serve the same purpose as telling stories around a fire, Downing’s analysis remains contained within the particulars of the theorists and their theories (4). In a work analyzing Freud, Jung, and Lévi-Strauss, specifically in relation to the Oedipus myth, the method does not play the same role as myth—the method *is* the myth. There is a distinction between these two approaches: while Baeten’s approach can be likened to a perpetuating or rippling of concentric circles that define and emanate from myth, Downing enters a more personalized interior to show that an analysis of myths is “*never* disinterested, objective [. . .]. The analysis of myths, of primitive thought, is always in part self-analysis” (4).

For example, Downing views Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist approach against his personal failure in the search for “the primitive and archaic, for his progenitors” (60). His search for the primordial literally took him to South America, where he soon realized that what he desired most, authentic contact with the “other,” was removed from his reach by the very means employed to achieve it. Of the natives in the Brazilian jungle Lévi-Strauss wrote, “They were as close to me as a reflection in a mirror. I could touch them, but I could not understand them. I had been given at one and the same time, my reward and punishment. [. . .] I had only to succeed in guessing what they were like for them to be deprived of their strangeness” (*Tropiques*, qtd. in Downing: 62). Either it was impossible to connect with the other or their similarities proved that the otherness did not exist. Subsequently, Lévi-Strauss’s impetus to search *personally* for the other was no longer. But his loss and alienation deliberately became part of his method. Lévi-Strauss

returned to Paris to study other peoples and their myths from “a point of view sufficiently lofty and remote to allow [the anthropologist] to disregard the particular circumstances of a given society or civilization” (*Tropiques*, qtd. in Downing: 64). Lévi-Strauss still sought to forge connections with others. Only he looked beyond the myth’s narrative, beyond the mythmaker’s personal or emotional intent, beyond aesthetic dimensions, and entered the structure of the myth itself to find connections based on universal patterns of thought. So, for him, the myth of Oedipus was to be understood by breaking it down into binary oppositions and analyzing all of the myth’s variants. The “meaning” of the myth is to be found in the order and the pattern that emerges, a meaning that has little to do with one’s personal life or one’s feelings about identity. It is not an existential meaning but a logical one, and is, moreover, subject to change whenever the pattern changes.

Despite the realization that one’s beliefs determines one’s approach to and corresponding definition of myth, to name the method as myth, as Downing does, is to enliven a mythic consciousness in which myth itself is not entirely stripped of its power or necessity. The power of being lived by a myth is celebrated alongside the conscious usage of myth as analytical tool, as a lens for seeing through to something else. But—does it work to live in a half-baked form of myth, to subject myth to modification while simultaneously asserting that we are the subjects of myth? Here, the equivocal usage of the word *myth* comes into play again. A confluence between different approaches to myth is now found in a symbolic realm, where, Downing notes, even Oedipus himself was being lived by a myth, lived by the archetype with which his story would come to represent. “The bloody deaths, the incest, the calamities/You speak so glibly of: I suffered them,/By fate, against my will!” (81). To be sure, Downing’s assertion that “avoiding the myth is what got [Oedipus] into trouble” while connecting this with the need to live one’s myth consciously is not a naïve presumption that this has anything to do with archaic myth. Nor is it a call to live in a time other than this one. But using the same word and choosing the symbolic realm as the meeting place reveals the hope for a bonding between differing phenomena of myth, that a “mythic consciousness” is not an oxymoron as if modern consciousness did not depend on an absence of myth.

This particular equivocation of myth is indicative of a depth psychological approach in which psychology is equated with mythology. Jungian analyst Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig says a psychology with soul “necessitates the connection of the objective to the subjective” (*Old Fool* 39). The joining of the opposites is performed by myth and symbol; insofar as such a connection requires the discernment of unconscious or invisible motivations behind individual or collective behavior, “everything becomes mythology, because it is only through stories, narratives, and images that it is possible to come closer to psychological phenomena” (39). We need myth to know and see the workings of soul. Mythologizing and demythologizing are therefore struck together, one implying the necessity of the other. Our “ideologies, idols, models, policies, visions, demands, slogans, psychological theories” must be detected for the myths that they are, while at the same time the myths must continually be created, for they are the stuff that life is made up of (42). Even when the myths are recognized as fantasy, ideology (our own creation emerging out of the social climate and personal complexes), they, according to Guggenbühl-Craig, must continue to be created. “Nothing comes nearer to soul than myths and symbols” and soul is the depth psychologist’s container for modernity (41). But, I would contend, how can a choice of slogans or policies or models substitute for the kind of containment found in archaic myth? This kind of myth feels more akin to a game, a Ouija board in which the players want to hold all the pieces, but hope that something else is providing mysterious guidance.

A problem I find with this approach is that steadfastly keeping the symbolic realm as recourse dilutes and dulls the process of dissolving the phenomena so as to see what calls it into existence, supposedly the role of a psychology as mythology. Georges Bataille wrote, “because a myth is dead or dying, we see through it more easily than if it were alive” (*Absence* 48). But the death is aborted. Guggenbühl-Craig’s acknowledged mistrust and caution against the dangers of one-sided myths are important to consider in any discussion of myth, yet he also says, “we could avoid much trouble if we did not constantly transform our myths into ideologies” (77). This statement echoes the sentiment that, at bottom, we still have myth and ritual, no matter how diffused into modern society and no matter how secularized.<sup>14</sup> Despite the allowance for opposition and

the need for demythologizing, if *everything* is a myth, then everything sooner or later falls under this protective blanket that prefers to wrap the experiences of a meaningless or mythless time in symbols that belie the meaninglessness. And, in the meantime, the separation that allowed consciousness to begin to become aware of itself is smothered.

As Downing sees it, the question raised in the myth of Oedipus, as well as reflected in Freud, Jung, and Lévi-Strauss's approaches to myth, is that of genesis or origin, not merely the lineage from which one descends, but "the desire to be self-begotten [...] to overcome, misread, rewrite [our] predecessors" (2). Moreover, the question of origin "can never be recovered literally, only metaphorically, only mythically" (5). Again, there is no denying a richness afforded by a mythical perspective and the imaginal realm. But the call to speculate on one's origins, the need and ability to create oneself not only split the Now, as Wolfgang Giegerich sees as the state of modern consciousness, but also presuppose a lack—a lack of taking for granted or assuming that there is one story to contain it all, one way to live. How can this be construed as anything less than a necessary movement in human consciousness, given that this lack cracks open to reveal difference and multidimensionality? The expression of being alive is no longer limited to a collective dreaming for itself as a whole, but is reflected in endless refractions—unique, but shining from a fragmented mirror. For Downing, the analysis of myths is not only in part self-analysis, but "self-analysis is always also self-creation" (4). It is an act of creative living that must be wary of identifying with only one myth, of reducing one's life to a monomyth. The task, rather, is to know that one lives many mythic roles (85). However, this self-creation is standing on emptiness and loss. To have the option to create oneself carries within it a loss of knowing how to live and supplants it with a perpetual curiosity and urge to know.

A further dilemma with this depth psychological approach lies in the unresolved contradiction of wielding myth as an analytical tool or as a lens with which to read individual or collective phenomena—while insisting on an all-encompassing power of myth. This not only splits the present status of consciousness, like Jung's semantic concession of the absence of myth ("Evidently we no

longer have any myth”) but syntactic denial of the absence when he turns inwards to find his personal myth (“But then what is your myth—the myth in which you live?”). This double, contradictory usage of myth as psychological tool and immutable force also defends against the split that did occur in consciousness.

Recall the Stone Age New Guinea tribe that fell apart six months after the introduction of photographs and mirrors. In living myth, one’s reality and existence are tied up in the collective, in the narratives, rites, and rituals of the myth. There is no “subject” as modernity understands the concept, because one’s subjective thoughts, feelings, and so forth are integrated within the larger, objective life of the collective and practice of the myth (“We do what our sacred Ancestors did”). Yet the mirrors and photographs introduce a new self-consciousness and initiate the split between subject and object. In the process, the “new” subjects are expelled from the containment of the myth. “Suddenly the cohesive village had become a collection of separate, private individuals” (Carpenter, qtd. in Scarborough: 2). The tribe was no longer identified with their mysteries, initiation rites, and sacred objects (all objective loci of existence) because the mysteries were disclosed to outsiders, the initiation rites ended, and the objects were sold. The tribe was now made up of individual subjects, and though they may have appeared “detached, [ . . . ], lonely, frustrated, alienated” to the anthropologist observing them (3), their existence was nonetheless bound now to their subjectivity.

This splitting in consciousness is irrevocable. To keep the opposites held together in *living* myth (which is more an imagining of what living myth would be like) obscures the split from awareness. Accepting the split would require fully realizing the irrevocable loss of myth, or, to be more exact, the rupture that allowed myth and mythology to come into knowledge. Instead, the fragments of myth are pieced together into ideas about myth and reality. Yet an absence of myth ultimately prevents any new myth from cohering for any myth is now subject to revision, analysis, interpretation, criticism, above all subject to the choice of determining its mythic status. What Downing or Guggenbühl-Craig calls a myth, I could call something else. And with the inability for a new myth to adhere, the way is paved for ideology to fill in the gaps.

### **Bruce Lincoln and Robert Ellwood: Myth as Ideology**

Bruce Lincoln's treatment of myth is dryer than a depth psychological approach. His analysis is removed from a mythical or symbolic consciousness as he methodically reviews theorists who are also essentially removed, for his aim is to expose myth as "ideology in narrative form" (147). Narratives justify themselves, telling stories within their own stories "as a means to define, defend, reflect upon, romanticize, analyze, legitimate, exaggerate, mystify, modify, and advance its own position, not to mention that of its practitioners" (21). So that in the *Odyssey*, for example, praise for poetry and the poets presented in the form of a poem legitimizes and claims for itself the very powers extolled in and by poetry. Not just the poem that is the *Odyssey*, but reminders of poetry's virtues are peppered throughout the story as well, such as when Odysseus praises the poet Demodocus: "Truly it is a good thing to have heard a poet/Such as this, resembling the gods in voice" (21). Beyond moving Odysseus to tears and compelling him finally to reveal himself, Demodocus's song of the end of the Trojan war also serves to fill in the gap between the end of the *Iliad* and the beginning of the *Odyssey*, "a void so well-known as to need no narration but also too dreadful to permit any speech" (19).

Through this reconciliatory act, "poetry shows itself capable of filling in the inevitable gaps that mar any narrative, ideology or line of discourse," but again, this is only a story about poetry (22). "Although poetry has only limited capacity to effect such reconciliation in lives outside fiction, its real genius may lie in persuading audiences that this sort of healing is possible, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding" (22). The tension between the opposites, whether male and female or victor and vanquished, may be resolved through the pathos of a poem, but, Lincoln shows, this healing remains essentially a fiction, taking place in a fictitious domain, and presumably lasting only for the duration of the poem or story. Homer and Odysseus's poetic ideology may be more subtle and pleasing to the ear, but there are still politics at work that aim to convince the listener of the power of poetry.

The burying of fictions within fictions is by no means limited to Homer. Lincoln traces an ideological thread through myth scholarship leading up to modernity. His purpose is to demonstrate

that a myth or theory of myth is basically a story told about another story, tightly wound with the historical, social, political framework that influences and intertwines both story and theory. In a similar exposition, Robert Ellwood examines how the mythologies of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell originate “not from the perspective of eternity, but [are] as much a product of its times as any intellectual endeavor, and [are] interwoven with the subject’s own life and political context” (xii). So that, for example, Eliade’s experiences as a young political activist fighting for Romania’s identity, his association with the anti-Semitic and fascist-leaning Legion of the Archangel Michael, subsequent imprisonment, and later exile from his native land are linked to his theory of myth that, in seeking to return to the magical and primordial world, *in illo tempore*, strives to be free from the “terror of history” (Eliade, qtd. in Ellwood, *Politics* 99). Moreover, Ellwood also suggests that Eliade’s pluralizing and universalizing of the sacred is a result of totalitarianism, where “he could well have been led to perceive totalitarianism’s opposite and exile’s opportunity” (97).

For Lincoln and Ellwood, myth in its mirroring function clearly provides a useful reflection of the ideals that impress on culture and theory. The work is to see them for the ideals that they are and within the context that they emerge, not as a natural given or isolated and objective truth. Accordingly, they call myth a myth. But, in this context, to regard myth as a myth is to turn myth in on itself, as if myth is now only known in its negative, fictitious sense. Ellwood comments, “Myth is really a meaning category on the part of the hearers, not intrinsic in any story in its own right” (175). And yet even if myth is granted some vitality in its negative or fictitious status, to imbue this kind of myth with meaning, as Ellwood does, contradicts the terms by which myth is now endorsed. At bottom, it reveals the hearers’ and tellers’ *need* for meaning, along with the desire for an experience that could fill such a need.

If, following Lincoln and Ellwood’s lead, myth itself is a myth, then there is no end to the metanarratives that can pile up on top of each other in the attempt to offer new perspectives on myth or glean something of value. Inasmuch as this is an attempt to experience a corresponding truth of today’s collective and individual life, corresponding to the function of myth as informing both the surface and depth of life rather than as a source of information to be

picked through at will, then there are only more layers to dig through—not to find a new interpretation, but to find a comparable meaning for today’s “myths.” Ellwood holds no claims that we can be “saved by myth,” but he is willing to shroud the myth of myth in its now seen-through and tattered cloak. “In a semi-secularized and rampantly pluralized world in which the hold of objective religious truth is increasingly problematic, but in which religious questions and yearnings are certainly real, mythology is a viable and not ignoble alternative to a stark choice between dogmatic religion and sheer secularism” (177–78). Myth, by Ellwood’s standards, permits us to retain our status as both inside and outside of myth, perhaps caught between two worlds but unable to enter the next one as long as the implications of being caught in a gap are not accepted without keeping myth as an ace up one’s sleeve.

To the extent that myth is seen as a means for containing and transmitting ideological assumptions, then, yes, I would agree that we are never without “myth” (meaning ideology), given that one’s very act of living is itself a narrative infused with ideas of what it means to live. And to the extent that any text or scholarship carries the author’s proclivities in the choices made as to what to disclose or exclude, then anything can be construed as a myth, however repackaged. But in the case of myth, it is crucial to look inside the packaging. Both Ellwood and Lincoln are essentially saying we are in a story, even though this is what they call myth. Or, conversely, what has been generally and historically regarded as myth is really just a regular story, even if at various times weighing more politically and culturally. The continued use of the word *myth* amid discussions of ideology would therefore be an attempt to course-correct modern and romanticized ideas of myth. Although Ellwood still clings to some mythical dimension (“we need to make the world safe for myth and dream” [178]<sup>15</sup>), Lincoln prefers to tease out concurrent narratives, to bring the stories down from their mythic status and see them against the backdrop of human history and in light of any given story’s relationship to those who tell and receive it. Little is attributed to a transcendent power or archetypes. Matters of one’s personal soul are not relevant. What is relevant is the responsibility attributed to storytellers and hearers, not necessarily to impart the stories with meaning but rather to

gain enough critical distance from any meaning that might cloud the capacity to excavate the ideological and other assumptions forming the stories.

Even as a modern construct, even seen through to its ideology, myth cannot and perhaps should not articulate the truth of lived life, for life has become too complex and nuanced to be articulated in one grand narrative. Narratives may offer engagement or escape, but they can no longer satisfy the soul to the degree that they once did in living myth. Neither can religious dogmas. Collectively and predominantly, we want comprehension, proof, and explanations.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, any narrative that would purport to be large enough to speak for it all today, however unlikely, would be seen as functioning repressively and accused of gross generalizing that minimizes and obscures differences in race, gender, culture, politics, and so forth. Similarly with myth theory: “The hope for an elegant master theory has atrophied. Those twentieth-century thinkers who have attempted such a theory—Frazer, Jung, Freud, Lévi-Strauss, Eliade, among others—have kept the customary authority of intellectual ancestors, but their powers of persuasion have lessened. [. . .] [T]he process of change is well under way” (Patton and Doniger 2–3). Nonetheless, our intellectual development and creative prowess come at a price. Just as Demodocus’s song fills in a gap both created and relieved by Homer, our words and texts also seek to fill and erase the gap created by the loss of myth with myth. But it is a fictitious endeavor for us as well.

#### THE NECESSITY OF ABSENCE

In other theories of myth, absence is not only presupposed but is relegated to a more central status when the apprehension of absence or nothingness points to an essential reality underlying the basic means of encountering life. However, the experience of absence is not exclusive to the modern situation that becomes aware of it. Rather, absence is assumed to be an inevitable and integral part of human existence, and is projected backward onto pre-modern modes of experiencing life, namely, myth. From this perspective, absence *precedes* myth—not the other way around.

### Eric Gould: Myth as Language

“I do not believe that we must differentiate sharply between some pristine, original, and sacred myth of origins which has somehow receded from our grasp, and which we can only pessimistically hope to recover and, on the other hand, myth as a semiotic fact” (10–11). So writes Eric Gould, who does not pretend that true myth can exist in modernity but believes that “mythicness” or the nature of the mythic exists as long as language is used to understand the world. Although this potentially reads like a casual dismissal of the problems inherent in myth’s equivocal usage, it assumes that whatever loss did occur was so long ago that it merits little cause for concern or argument. It is as if the need to differentiate between religious and linguistic myth is a lingering in a world already exposed as fictitious. However, the level of Gould’s discourse is at a place at which a loss of myth is ostensibly irrelevant because language is given precedence over myth. Inasmuch as myth is determined by language “and not the reverse, [. . .] mythicness is no less modern than it is ancient” (12). The mythic link between antiquity and modernity has little to do with the actual experience of the gods enacted in ritual, although by no means does Gould discount myth’s role in attending to the numinous. The link that is emphasized is language. Myth exists through the ages by way of using language as a metaphorical means of finding truth and the attempt to recover the sacred—regardless if the attempt is actualized.<sup>17</sup>

The absence of myth is not the issue for Gould. Absence in relation to myth is, for at “the heart of myth” itself lies a gap that can never be completely filled. But this gap finds an approximate expression in myth as metaphorical language because language “describes what is *not* present.” Language is inherently gappy, it is “the *lack* presupposed by our speaking anything at all, rather than a direct presence” (Gould 7; Doty, *Mythography* 203). In semiotic terms, it is a gap that results from “the perpetual tension we find in any sign, between the signifier (in all its arbitrary indifference) and the signified (which depends on our intention to locate meaning in language)” (Gould 7).

I have been suggesting that theories of myth are connected to the extent that they can be seen as resulting from the loss of myth. For Gould, myth is a result of the loss itself, of the inevitable gap

that surrounds meaning. Myth is not merely a result of but a direct response to absence or nothingness, for myth “reminds us strongly today that without a sense of Nothing, there is no selfhood or freedom” (10). Following Heidegger, Gould believes that myth is “the history of our inability to authenticate our knowledge of Being, and yet it is at the same time a history of our attempts to understand that inability” (10). The loss that gives rise to myth may be temporarily appeased by myth (language), but the absence cannot be overcome by myth. If myth is identified with language and, furthermore, language cannot escape the semiotic gap and is built around “an absent center” that “cannot contain its own origin,” then this is an absence that cannot and should not be mistaken for any kind of presence, least of all myth (138).

Though Gould assumes the absence of myth, his argument still depends on myth’s equivocation. He sees myth as materializing from a lack of grounding and not-knowing, but this is a reading of myth that overlooks the embeddedness and grounding in nature and the world that *was* the reality of myth. Kerényi writes that the one who lives in myth, the *Begründer* (founder) “dives down to his own foundation, founds his world. He builds it up for himself where everything is an outflowing, a sprouting and springing up—‘original’ in the fullest sense of the word, and consequently divine” (9). The point of myth was precisely an act of grounding. It represented the solidity that comes with knowing one’s place in the world, and knowing that one’s being is inaugurated from a common divine origin. It is the questioning of this knowledge, questioning the answers that are already presented simply by virtue of existing, that slowly loosens the foundation. Gould’s abstraction of myth (to his term “mythic”) permits him to posit a certain vitality and continuity to myth, but then myth *as* grounding is made to bear the brunt of modern experiences of nothingness while simultaneously being usurped of the role it once served. Despite an “absent center,” myth is cloaked in a definition that forces it to find a foothold in a world whose ground has been receding.

Gould argues that in the attempt to make events known and thereby meaningful, myth strives to do the impossible: close the “ontological gap between event and meaning” (6). However, the gap can never be closed, only repeatedly interpreted and reinterpreted through which myth makes the “imaginative leap over the

gap” (134). Without the gap, the impetus to interpret any symbolic language would cease and without interpretation, the meaning would remain hidden, an attempt at knowledge and truth thwarted before even having a chance to realize its limits. The gap is necessary—and unavoidable. The distance between event and meaning can never be completely overcome, yet myth as language and interpretation reaches into the absence to bring forth a meaning no less relevant to ancient than to modern mythmakers and myth-receivers. But the ensuing meaning is essentially a fiction compensating for an implicit and undeniable absence. Myth as language that aspires to make sense of the world is fictitious, an inversion of reality. “By definition, all fiction, however much it looks like reality, is a refusal to accept that the real world is ever quite enough. We need it in more vicarious, even abstracted forms, for it to be fully alive” (138). The perceived insufficiency of reality (perhaps resulting from a loss of living myth despite Gould’s statement that one need not distinguish between original and semiotic myth, especially if language precludes the possibility of directly participating in and being held by myth) thus compels one to find meaning in fiction, and for Gould it is specifically in modern literature that the mythic intention is preserved.

The narrative of life once contained in nature is now contained in the narrative of modern literature. It is an abstracted and fragmented myth that exposes how the mythic nature is merely “dissipated” rather than “weakened” in the modern (134). The author and potential mythmaker (Gould focuses primarily on James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and D. H. Lawrence) occupies “the borderline place,” becoming more mythic when he “realizes the impossibility of closing the gap” while the reader, through interpretation, attempts to shorten the gap (254, 44). Although the gap is never fully closed, the attempt to close it anyway serves to provide meaning and some relief to the ontological question, even if any meaning or answer is essentially couched in fiction.

If, as Gould suggests, humanity is linked by the need to interpret the world around it, whether through spoken language in prehistoric (or “without writing” as Lévi-Strauss prefers [*Myth and Meaning*, 15]) cultures or with the written word of modernity, the gap between event and meaning will remain a permanent fixture. To that extent, a severing from an undifferentiated world would

not have taken place because such a world would never have existed for humanity. The whole concept of myth would have been founded on an imagined loss of itself. Myth, then, or more precisely the modern inheritance of myth, would serve to differentiate not its own existence, as Elizabeth Baeten would argue, but to measure everything else against its absence. “‘Myth’ is born illusion. Not one of those fictions unconsciously made up by the earliest speakers, one of those shadows that primordial speech casts on thought, but consciously delimited fiction, deliberately exclusive” (Detienne, *Creation* 128). Moreover, if we were truly in myth, how would we know to answer in the affirmative or the negative until the *idea* of myth had already come into consciousness? But once myth produces itself as an idea or concept, it has replaced the experience that perhaps it can never fully speak for.

Gould would agree that myth today could never speak for the entirety of experience, given that the language of myth is only an approximation. But a problem I have with his approach is that he seems to overlook the fact that the experience of living myth would have been prior to any concerted efforts to find meaning. In archaic myth, humanity did not need to interpret the world; humanity lived and celebrated the world’s already given “interpretation” (its myth). Once myth is no longer self-evident and reduced to semiotic terminology, it shows itself as dissipated *and* weakened, contrary to Gould’s belief. His argument is confusing because on the one hand, he says we do not need to distinguish between “some pristine, original” myth and modern myth. And yet his argument depends on this precise distinguishing.

As long as it is *myth* that is meant to suffice for a reality that is not enough, the gap that myth tries to bridge can only widen and the need for meaning intensify. Furthermore, myth’s attempt to close the ontological gap between event and meaning unwittingly sets up another gap, one between meaning and the gap itself. Despite Gould’s argument for an a priori nothingness and the impossibility of ever closing the gap, absence is deprived of its own truth as long as the fictional attempts to eradicate it are what is meant to provide the meaning. He speaks of gaps and nothingness, but that is not enough—a layer of meaning must be added. To say that mythicity “is preserved in the gap which has always occasioned it” implies the inextricability of myth and absence (12). Only in this

case, myth and absence are staring at each other across another gap, a gap occasioned by the need to try and fill the first one in order to have meaning. We need myth to mollify the real, negative implications of absence.

The consequence of this kind of reasoning is that the cycle of meaning and meaninglessness will continue unabated. As long as it is *meaning* that is perceived to be absent (rather than myth), then the need for meaning remains activated but never entirely satisfied, just as Gould says the ontological gap can never be closed. A meaningless reality is not only insufficient, but insofar as there is “a risk of becoming obsessed with this ontological gap as the fatal condition of myth, [it] can pessimistically force us to acknowledge our incompleteness and drive us to apocalyptic theories” (7). Apocalypse and its implications are to be avoided in favor of attempts to “preserve a sense of the numinous today”—however, *not* through today’s phenomena (some of which are decidedly apocalyptic), but through “a renewed awareness of ancient mythology” (7–8). Gould would perhaps agree that today’s phenomena are not being considered as vehicles for the numinous, given his assertion that we need reality in more vicarious and abstracted forms for it to be sufficient. But whether the numinous is to be recovered in fiction or in something past (itself a problematic endeavor), the same issue remains: whether the means for recovery is called myth or language, the very process of such a recovery is trying to reclaim something that is no more, now through means determined as fictitious—and therefore unlikely to succeed at such a reclamation. Furthermore, the absence that would compel one to search for the numinous in fictitious phenomena is neither fully comprehended nor accepted. The impossibility of directly experiencing meaning today (which would require an *entering* of the gap itself as opposed to an entering that really tries to close it) keeps the need for meaning alive but never quenched.

### **David Miller and Joseph Campbell: Myth as Mythoclastic**

Myth’s movement *into* absence is exemplified in David Miller’s discussion of myth as “mythoclastic,” where it is the purpose of myth *not* to settle on any meaning or to try and fill any gaps. Identifica-

tion and coherence are to give way to difference and disidentification. “Serious dogmatism in religion, the ideology in culture, and the literalism in historiography are smashed by myth, which, through dealing with powerful ideas and meanings, is after all merely myth. It is fiction, story, and hypothesis misread as biography, science, and history” (“Fire” 89). Myth as mythoclastic serves to smash any fixated meaning and reveal it for the myth (fiction) that it is, a meaning that taken too seriously or literally runs the risk of functioning repressively and oppressively—a different connotation of mythoclastic that smashes people rather than ideologies. This is a damaging function of myth that, Miller argues, has been exposed in much of contemporary myth scholarship (86).

Myth as mythoclastic (in the first sense) is, for Miller, illustrated in the work of Joseph Campbell, particularly in his 1957 Eranos lecture, “The Symbol without Meaning,” in which Campbell argues that in a progressively demythologized and scientific world, religious meaning can no longer be found attached to any symbols. Symbols that engage or attach are a trap, trapping the “energy-evoking and directing agent” of the symbol itself (178) and trapping those who would cling to such symbols for an idea or truth of something (such as God). Ultimately, Campbell says, this kind of attachment obstructs any direct experience of meaning. But it is in a symbol that *disengages*, purposely withdrawing meaning from itself, and like a bow, propels itself repeatedly into the unknown that “meaning” is to reside. The point is to evoke a state of being and a reality beyond meaning. “What is the meaning of a flower?” Campbell asks. “And having no meaning, should the flower, then, not be?” (188). We may have lost our mythic centers, but this opens us up to the depths and horizons of existence, of the soul. “The circle has been broken—the mandala of truth. The circle is open, and we are sailing on a sea more vast than Columbus.” Today’s circle is one “whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere; [. . .] our meaning is now the meaning that is no meaning; for no fixed reference can be drawn” (189–90).

However, the problem of a symbol without meaning is that despite the intention for a withdrawal and disengagement of meaning, any discussion of “no meaning” carries its opposite, the desire for and a positing of meaning. Campbell is still concerned with meaning; he is just defining it negatively. Moreover, any

symbol perceived to be living (even if it has no meaning) presupposes if not a living myth, then at least the wish for one. Talk of no meaning is not really *no* meaning, because this is another way of providing meaning. Now the attachment is to silence and space, to a lack of meaning that, if we could just learn to live with, it might make life once again meaningful. Although to be fair, Campbell would argue against attachment in favor of the unknowable, and against meaning in favor of experience: “People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive” (Campbell and Moyers, *Power* 3). And Miller points out that Campbell’s work “implies a hermeneutic beyond meaning and meaninglessness” insofar as he (Campbell), as a “prepostmodern,” holds no false pretensions that myth or religion can hold of its own accord without being propped up by ideology or being dissolved by intellectual thought, thus presupposing the futility of satisfying questions of meaning (“Comparativism” 175).

“Myth is mythoclastic, when it is functioning truly as myth” (Miller, “Fire” 89). Absence is to be sought, rather than bridged. “True” myth is to look for the holes and find the myth in and of any proclaimed certainty. Whereas fragments of myth might be perceived as surviving despite an absence of myth, in the mythoclastic view, it is fragments of *mythlessness* that remain. As mythoclastic, myth in its negative, fictitious sense persists. It is like shards of itself hardening around an empty middle, unable to see through itself with the same force that it sees through ideologies. The circle may be broken, but new ones keep being created in the attempt to know what is recognized as unknown and to talk about what is out of the reach of language. And in the process we reveal ourselves first and foremost. This is not unnoticed by Campbell and Miller in their awareness that “all statements about myth and religion betray the provincialism and ideology of their authors [. . .] that includes this statement, too” (Miller, “Comparativism” 172).

Yet if myth is to be regarded as fictitious, then by implication one is really talking about mythlessness—even if using the word *myth*. One is just speaking of myth negatively. The mythoclastic

function of myth can only apply to modern experience and modern ideas about myth, for living myth as “absolutely true” would predate any notion of fixated ideologies and dogma. *We* are the ones who see the dangers of dogmatic thinking. The rupture received by myth is thus exposed. No longer capable of standing for the truth of a collective (or interested, for that matter), the mythoclastic myth is now used to deconstruct any rigid claims on truth. But if one truly means to talk about mythlessness, then myth needs to be dropped from the discussion. Otherwise, the hook is still held out to myth, even if the hook is thrust into the void. Looking to myth in its negative form for a negative meaning betrays a hope that myth will provide *some* meaning, even amid ostensible notions of meaning pointing otherwise (or nowhere). Although a postmodern definition of myth attempts to have some consciousness about the theories (fictions) living us, thus making it impossible ever to be divested of “myth” (meaning: theory), it is precisely because of myth’s easy identification with “theory” and “story” and “ideology” that it is all the more necessary to see through *that*. In the final analysis, an understanding of the absence of myth must leave mythlessness behind as well, before it, too, becomes solidified and codified into yet another myth or ideology.

THE SIMULTANEOUS ACKNOWLEDGMENT  
AND DISCREDITING OF ABSENCE

**Wendy Doniger: Myth as a Tool**

For Wendy Doniger, a loss of archaic myth and ritual may be part of our inheritance, but rather than something to be mourned or rectified, it is, in a sense, to be taken advantage of and celebrated. Now we are free to look at and enjoy *other* culture’s myths, which are not only enriching in and of themselves, but can in turn shed light on our own surviving myths. Defined partially as “a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it,” myths for Doniger are seen everywhere, alive and kicking even in a demythologized world—“reports of the death of mythology have been greatly exaggerated” (*Implied* 2 [Doniger O’Flaherty] *Other* 135). Myths are found in popular fiction as well

as classic literature and religious texts. Even if thinned out into mythological “kitsch,” the traces thrive in theater and films and television; they are in the details and messiness of everyday experience and cultural expression, in and of itself meaningful and truthful. Even if any given myth cannot bind a collective or guide an individual, if the myths are received in fragments, if there is no ritual to accompany the myth, as long as stories are told to frame human experience and meaning, the myth is real. Universal experience binds humanity, not necessarily a particular myth or god. Experiences such as pain or joy, that while invisible and irretrievable once the experience is over, repeatedly “generates [...] the stuff that myths are made on” (*Implied* 61).

Myth may be the reality, but it is not an immutable or biological reality. Myth may speak to religious questions, but it is not a divine reality. “Myth is not an active force in itself but a tool in the hands of human beings” (2). It is the transparency of such a tool that may mistake itself for an unquestionable reality and a meaning in its own right, but, as Doniger stresses, the transparency and meaning come from the human experience behind the myth. Myth has merely proven to be a highly effective and multifocal lens with which to view and interpret the experience (80). The fact that Doniger believes that human experience gives meaning to the myth rather than the other way around—that human experience is meaningful *because* of the myth behind it—could be taken as further proof that we are living within an absence of myth. No doubt, this facilitates the appropriation of myth as a tool. Although Doniger defines myth as a tool, I think she would be less likely to contextualize this within an irrevocable absence of myth, for one can always pick up or set aside a tool. Two metaphors Doniger employs to describe this mythic tool are the microscope and telescope: one lens shows the particular and personal while the other pulls back to look at the universal and abstract. Both perspectives are contained in myth, which, in simultaneously engaging both ends of the continuum spanned by binary oppositions, uniquely supports this double vision.

As a tool in our hands, Doniger implores us to be aware of which perspective we exercise or exclude as we use this tool. She wants us to be wary of the fact we “are always in danger of drawing our own eye” when we think we are drawing the world, and to

“apply the methods without the ideologies” (11, 151). How is this possible? Through a comparative mythology that in its own unceasing rigorousness acts as a sort of dissolution, made possible by the freedom from myth while simultaneously taking its own liberties with myth in an eclectic gathering of material with which to work. As exemplified in the Indian myth of the hunter and the sage whose lives become intertwined and physically altered on entering the heads and dreams of each other,<sup>18</sup> Doniger would have us enter a dizzying display of myths until we forget the level of consciousness to which we have become stultifyingly habituated (but without forgetting ourselves). She would have us give up our illusions of control and certainty and find ourselves completely in the myth, in someone else’s story that also contains our own and, if all goes well, in the heart as well as the head of the story. The “hunting sage” is how she would envision the historian of religions or mythologist, to have in one’s study as much objective awareness and understanding as possible without denying the emotional and experiential, all-too-human component (*Other* 12).

To bestow our myths with the appellation *myth* is, for Doniger, ironic, given that the word comes down to us from ancient Greece, “one of the very few cultures in the world from which we have almost no example of real, live myths, of myths as part of a vital tradition” (*Other* 25–26). And as far as she is concerned, any imagined golden age in which the classics were alive and shared by the community was not all that golden, so why look backward? Moreover, by her own personal account, Doniger’s inherited religious tradition, Judaism, was unable to provide her with the depth of meaning that Hindu mythology came to serve. All of this bespeaks a loss of myth and meaning. But although she would look for meaning in other people’s myths, the search (for her) is not futile for she finds remnants of it in the presence of nearly any story, it seems, so that any loss or rupture is tacitly accepted but by no means a deterrence or a barrier for leading a myth-full (meaningful) life.

One old story Doniger tells in favor of comparative mythology is of the Sufi Nasrudin searching for his lost keys, not in the place where he lost them, but outside, where it was lighter.<sup>19</sup> “An eclectic who searches outside of his own house has many lights with which to search, and finds many keys (not only his own) to many enigmas” (*Other* 146). But does he find his own keys? Does this overlook

the obvious, the need to look in the darkness, where the loss occurred and therefore the best place to find the “key” to the loss? Doniger recognizes that in her own culture, the “symbols [. . .] have become degraded,” that “the rejection of the religious community into which they were born, their given ritual community, has left the majority of secularized, demythologized Americans with myths that have been stripped of their power to shock” (133, 131). And while it is not possible casually to borrow rituals from other cultures to go with the empty shells of our lost or degraded myths, “we still can be shocked by the myths of other people” (135).

Only to have to go to other cultures to be shocked into recognition—shocked into life—one role Doniger attributes to traditional myth and ritual, assuages having to really experience and take in the emptiness that would inspire such a crossing over to other cultures in the first place. Is it possible to be shocked into recognition by our losses or have we become immune? This seemingly carefree approach to myth, though held in all seriousness and necessity by Doniger, suggests an imperviousness to the reality and meaning of *this* culture, to deny events (some of which are extremely shocking, e.g., school shootings enacted by progressively younger gun-toters<sup>20</sup>) of their own intrinsic value and what they call into recognition—without having to be a symbol or myth.

Doniger does not deny her inherited religious tradition. She references a well-known Hasidic tale, the story about the rabbi who repeatedly dreams of a hidden treasure in another country. After staking out the area where he was to dig, the rabbi tells an officer guarding the area the reason for his arrival, and after hearing the rabbi’s dream and decision to act on it, the officer laughs in his face and reveals that he, too, has had a dream, that of a treasure buried in a rabbi’s house. This, of course, turns out to be the very same rabbi, so he returns home to retrieve his treasure.<sup>21</sup> The “treasure” is our myths *and* other people’s myths. Why deprive oneself of such a veritable resource, especially given not only the capacity to access but also the increased and unavoidable intermingling of other cultures? Taking other people’s myths seriously is no light endeavor, and Doniger more than meets her own rigorous standards for a comparative mythologist, which includes mastering the language of the culture whose myths one intends to study (enter). And whether she is finding an abundance of meaning or intensely

looking everywhere *for* that meaning, her process of doing so nonetheless shows how, as a tool, myth is highly effective in shedding light on culture.

By Doniger's methods, comparative mythology keeps one from becoming complacent or lazy with myth or asking myth to perform a role that it no longer can, because no myth is given preference. No single myth is responsible for solving any lack of meaning or answering a religious question. No myth is removed from its contextual layers and no myth stands entirely on its own for too long before it is faced with another different but similar manifestation of itself, fragments giving way to other fragments as one falsifies the other, or brings into focus what the other one cannot see. "Comparison is our way of making sense of difference. [. . .] Silence too is a statement, but one that we can only hear when we compare it with other sounds" (*Implied* 28, 40). Even when a collective can no longer function as a collective (at least in the traditional sense), comparative mythology maintains a dynamic relationship, a call perhaps to balance the scales between oneself and other, same and different, a relationship that Doniger would liken to the very act of living. And in today's world, rather than quibbling over an absence of myth, it would do better to receive the myths as they are, where they are.

The historians have demonstrated that there is no such thing as an even theoretically impartial observer, and the anthropologists have cynically undermined our hopes of getting inside the heads of other cultures, relativistically or otherwise. The linguists and philosophers have, finally, hopelessly defamed the character of language as a possible vehicle for mutual understanding. So we are stripped down to our naked myths, the bare bones of human experience. They may be our last hope for a nonlanguage that can free us from these cognitive snares, a means of flying so low that we can scuttle underneath the devastating radar of the physical and social sciences and skim close to the ground of the human heart. (*Other* 166)

At heart may lie human experience, and that experience may be inherently narrative—but, I would point out, that does not

diminish the fact that when the film ends, curtain falls, book shelved, most ordinary people who are not so facile at using other people's myths are still left with the loss of their own. Maybe Doniger is different; she even says about herself that she has "come to be more interested in the imagination than in what other people call 'real life'" (*The Bedtrick* xxii). The problem is, real life cannot be denied, no matter how active an imagination, and the existential malaise enveloping many still seeps through. No longer assured by the community and no longer sustained by myth and ritual, nations like the United States are composed mostly of individuals, a large percentage of whom are looking more and more to a plethora of self-help books and workshops, to gurus in the form of television celebrities and talk show moderators for direction and guidance on how to live, how to find their personal "path." But, Doniger asks, how "can an *individual* have a myth at all? How can an adopted myth remain a myth when it is no longer the property of the group that validated its status as a myth?" (*Other* 142). A critical question, no doubt, but one that disappears into the gaps as long as individuals try to squeeze myth into current social phenomena without sacrificing their prized individuality.

In a twist on Socrates's dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living, Doniger says, "it is also true that the life that is not lived is not worth examining" (24).<sup>22</sup> But we are now in a culture that is obsessed with self-examination as if that could either make a life worth living or show that life was worthy enough to merit examination. Doniger's emphasis on the *experience* of living resonates with Joseph Campbell, but what is essential to note is that having to talk about or remind others about the basic experience of living shows a lack of knowing how to live and is a further removal from experiencing *this* life, as it is, whatever it is. The emphasis on experience over meaning is a further abstraction—now it is not enough to know that one is simply alive. One needs special experiences to authenticate life, to prove that one is really living, as if a common and even mythless existence were somehow less than.

To the extent that Doniger is concerned primarily with human experience and all the myriad imaginings of experience, then her approach to myth—or rather, storytelling—is certainly valid. Her emphasis on myth as a tool rather than a transcendent force curbs the myth from grandiose claims of truth and meaning, which, I

have been arguing, is no longer possible. Doniger clearly loves and values a good story, in all the forms stories come in. Of course one can learn from and be tremendously enriched by stories. But are they myths? That would depend on the definition. Yet it is clear that one consistency among differing and equivocal usages of myth is the concern for meaning, whether to posit the presence of meaning or to deconstruct any certified meaning. The ability to decide on meaning indicates, if nothing else, that we are no longer in the phenomena that once answered to this. If we were immersed in myth and meaning, there would be little need to look for or talk about it. (Do people go to therapy if everything is working well?) If with the loss of myth comes the loss of knowing how to live, perhaps the question to live by should not be, what or where are the living myths now, but, rather, can an absence of myth teach me how to live?

On the other hand, holding resolutely to an absence of myth can become the next trap, when myth is not really accepted as absent but continues to provide fodder for debates on whether or not the absence is real or to what degree it permeates existence. Then the more appropriate question would be, can we forget about myth so that we may learn about life through our own phenomena? Myth may be transparent, but it is still an overlay, as is mythlessness. The moment one places it over something else, the experience that called for such a placement is covered before it can be apprehended. A relatively small moment, perhaps, and therefore easily overlooked, but nonetheless it is what we are standing on.

This simultaneous acknowledgment and discrediting of an absence of myth that I find within Doniger's approach (she herself says, "Where 'either/or/ was, let there 'both/and' be" [*Implied* 154–55]) underlines the focus of the next two chapters. Equivocal usages of myth form the belief in personal myth, a notion of myth that depends on an absence of collective myth but insists that a personal myth can carry the same degree of vitality and purpose. This is the subject of the following chapter, and a postmodern approach that similarly requires and rewrites the absence of myth is explored in greater detail in chapter 3.