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MYTH AND THE CABALAS:

ADVENTURES IN THE UNSPOKEN

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I

When literary and philosophical discussion join today, the subject of myth must be placed high on the list of agenda. Intellectual interests seem to develop in clusters; and myth is not only the nucleus of one of the larger clusters today, but is a peculiarly amoeba-like nucleus which engulfs the discussions which gather around it. Questions concerning the nature of metaphor, image, and symbol, and of the very nature of poetry and of expression itself, tend to be reinterpreted in terms of myth. The cult of semantics which seeks to reform existence by a revision of symbols is a kind of projection of the mythological mind.

The voraciousness of myth in devouring related or adjacent subjects and converting them into its own substance cannot be better illustrated than by an actual occurrence at a scholarly meeting held not long ago. A professor in a well-known university had delivered a paper with the avowed intent of cutting under the question of myth to secure other bases for treatment. (He had described himself as "a

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kind of pre-Paul Elmer More humanist.") As the applause trickled away, the chairman of the discussion arose.

"This brilliant disclaimer of myth," he announced, "has only served to bring out the inevitability of myth in a new light. It contests the existence of certain myths in Shakespeare, but you cannot do this, of course, without automatically supposing others. The most you can say is that myth in Shakespeare isn't the kind of myth we thought it was. Does anyone have anything to add to my remarks?" No one had.

The literature on myth is extensive and growing. A convenient résumé and bibliography can be found in the invaluable new *Theory of Literature* by René Wellek and Austin Warren;¹ and some of the newer material is gone over in Stanley Edgar Hyman's "Myth, Ritual, and Nonsense" in a recent issue of the *Kenyon Review*.² Those who are familiar with the literature on myth worked over here, or with the discussion which weaves its way through avant-garde literary circles today, will know that the treatment given myth is often tortuous and groping, and occasionally loses its way. It is bewildered, and occasionally betrayed, by the confusion of interpretative theories which beset it on all sides. And yet, whether conducted under the aegis of the ritualist theory or as an attack on this theory, whether literary or antiliterary, the study of myth seems always to be pursuing pretty much the same game. If, as Mr. Hyman remarks at the opening of the article just cited, there is more than one way to skin a myth, it is also true that, no matter who does the skinning or how, myth skins all come from the same sort of animal. Beneath all the discussion and conflicting theory, there seems to be one central reality which has caught everyone's attention. There are regular hunting preserves over which the chase moves.

In terms of the conditions of the human intellect in its relations with the finite being toward which it is immediately faced, one can, I believe, plot the general area with which myth and mythology have to do. Such a plotting will not, of course, adequately settle all the questions agitated in the name of myth; but it will perhaps provide some insights into the question as to why the study of myth proves as intriguing as it does, and it will point to some of the connections between myth and current literary speculation. The attempt here will be to indicate a general framework for mythological discussion rather than to assign particular writers or theories to their place within the framework.

¹ New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949.

² Summer, 1949 (XI, 455-75).

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II

A prima facie response to the term "myth" today would take the term as applying to a story having to do with religion which is circulated as true and taken as such by people who unfortunately are not so advanced as we are. This prima facie meaning has a long history which need not be detailed here. It has evidently come far since the Greeks originally used the word *mythos* to signify a word, speech, or some sort of vocalized sound, and is only remotely related to Aristotle's use of the same term as signifying the plot of a play (but notice the parallel English *fable* for "plot").

Closely allied to this prima facie meaning is the use of the word "myth" to signify a story featuring preternatural persons or personifications which is historically untrue. With this meaning, there grows another more sophisticated meaning: myth is such a story, which does not represent any truth of history, considered in terms of what truth it can be said to represent—that is, in terms of almost anything but historical truth. This concept involves, it will be seen, dealing with truth by a kind of indirection. The myth is told in the form of history—it is said that Prometheus did steal fire from heaven for man—though it is precisely as history that validity is wanting to myth. What is not is here employed after a fashion as a surrogate for what is.

This economy of indirection provides the real setting for what we may call the concept of myth in its quintessential form. As this term settles down in current discussion to a definitive meaning, it comes eventually to refer to the nonexplicit complement accompanying any body of expression, story or not, when this complement is considered as forming a whole. It is what is expressed indirectly precisely insofar as it is expressed indirectly. Myth in this sense is that which fills in the voids between man's abstractions.³ It is, more quizzically and pointedly, what one says when one says something else. Exponents of myth do not always put it so outspokenly as this; but if a person holds this description in mind as he trails along through mythological treatises, particularly those of the more heady kind, he will find himself able to identify most of the game which will be disappearing into the bushes around him.

The concept of myth here is shaped by a condition of human knowledge. Large bodies of more or less general statements roughly connected with one another carry with them a kind of substructure of suppositions, unexpressed and even unformulated, but more or less

³ Wellek and Warren, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-97.

definitely implied. For example, the more or less general statements centered about the "doctrine" of "progress" have beneath them a definite body of suppositions, many of them not yet conceptualized, not yet brought to light. So with the things that have been said in the name of democracy, of humanitarianism, and so on.

Such suppositions are hardly on the tip of everyone's tongue. They are discovered only slowly after a good deal about humanitarianism or democracy or what have you has been ventilated and acted upon. Before they are discovered and formulated, conceptualized, where are these suppositions? And what are they? They are not yet abstract statements, formally constituted truths. Yet one can consider them as forming some sort of whole, delimited by what has been explicitly said. Indeed, it is in a sense this whole which bestows on "democracy" what unity it has; for the formally enunciated tenets of democracy or humanitarianism often seem in themselves at odds with one another, hard to reconcile with one another as they stand in themselves, unsupported by further explanation. The student of such a thing as democracy has often as his task the discovery of the unifying element. He seeks to formulate the underlying, as yet unconceptualized, but somehow unified body of "suppositions."

The fact that his work is often styled a search attests the fact that the suppositions are indeed somehow there before he "discovers" or formulates them. They have been in some way a coherent thing even before their discovery or formulation—we need not wait on this formulation in order to apprehend democracy as a unified thing. These suppositions are the "myth," *so long, that is, as they are not formulated*. For myth, in this ultimate sense, is the unconceptualized undertrussing or complement supporting bodies of human statement and conveyed in them precisely insofar as this undertrussing remains an unconceptualized but somehow intrinsically coherent whole.

One might make this theorem absolute and say, instead of "bodies of human statement," simply "any human statement," for it would seem that suppositions of the sort here styled myth accompany any human utterance, even the most simple. For the present, however, it will suffice to restrict ourselves to the more obvious cases of myth, those implied and defined in bodies of human statement of some extent, such as the myth of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or the myth of democracy.

Those interested in myth in the sense just explained like to point out that such myth will never be completely formulated. There will always be a residue of unformulated myth after every formulation. Put another way, this sounds not so disquieting. It means that any body

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of connected human statement will, first, be limited, and, secondly, will have certain things implicit in it, no matter how far it is refined. Total human statement is impossible.

This does not at all mean that all human statement is enveloped in falsehood; much less does it mean that human statement—that especially which is concerned with ultimates—is devoid of content, although there is a temptation, often given in to, to falsify the records just a little bit and make things come out this way. What it does mean is that it is impossible to say something which does not run off at the margin into things not said. It means that it is impossible to put a statement so that nothing *about* it can be misunderstood. This is not the same as saying that I cannot make myself clear about anything; it is only to say that in making myself clear about one thing, I shall always be hinting obscurely at other things about which I am not clear.

Expression in human terms, in other words, it not all act, but is quite replete with potency. This is to say no more than that human statement, like all things finite, is not self-contained, not pure act, but is faced outward to other things—ultimately to God, who is not this way because he does not in himself admit of explanation, but is rather explanation itself.

III

The economy of indirection exploited by myth and mythology derives ultimately from a peculiar devotion to the potential coefficient as such in finite being.

The explicit and the implicit in human statement are related to one another as act and potency. Somewhat as man is what he is (his essence can be predicated of him directly), so a human statement is what is explicitly said. But this very "what" has a certain obliquity about it. What a man is (his essence) carries with it what he is not (for example, his intellect, which is a potency). Similarly, finite expression has about it an obliquity, an indirection. Each implicit statement carries with it something it is not, an implicit, which is a kind of potency. In devoting itself to this implicit something, to the indirect in human statement precisely as it is indirect, the study of myth is capitalizing on the potential coefficient in human expression.

Moreover, the study of myth exploits this potential coefficient in human expression in a curiously dramatic, all-out fashion. Myth admits of not only a scientific, but a mythological exegesis, an exegesis which is not explicit, as that of the philosopher would be, but implicit and nonabstractional. Asked what his myth means, the myth-maker

may well answer by another myth. In doing so, he not only attends to the potential component in expression, but does so in such a way as to honor this potential component in the very process.

There is a way to attend to the potential coefficient in terms of act after the fashion of philosophical explanation, which makes the implicit explicit and then deals in the explicit as such. Even so, of course, the philosopher has attaching to his explanation so executed certain implicit and still-to-be-explained areas. But it is to the others, to the explicit areas, that he attends. He seeks increased explicitness.

The myth-maker does otherwise. Aware of the implicit areas which attach to human statement, he prefers to keep clear as far as possible of explicit statement as such. To be sure, as he refines his implicit meaning, he must resort to statement in some way explicit; but he keeps the explicitness as far as possible irrelevant. Prometheus did not really steal fire from heaven, as he is said explicitly to have done, and Pandora's box, historically and explicitly considered, is a hoax.

Such a retreat into implicitness may conceivably be tantamount to a denial of the right to philosophize, but it need not be so. The myth-maker may be hinting that his is the only way to possess truth (the term "truth" being thereupon given a curiously introverted and tortured meaning)—that is, that truth can be known not expressly at all but only implicitly. This is modernism, or something pretty close to it. It seems to be the ultimate position not only of Gnosticism, but also of Protestantism, as well as of most unattached high-flown religious speculation today. As to whether it is doctrine or no, one can only say that in this matter it keeps a little o' the windy side of the law, being simply the assumption that there is no such thing as explicit truth, together with the refusal to state the assumption explicitly. Any deficiencies it may have are amply covered by sheer elusiveness. It rejects any sort of explicit statement, even of its own position.

But the myth-maker need not assume this pose and deny all right to philosophize. He may simply forego philosophical activity without denying its validity. If his retreat from explanation into further myth comes to this, it is of course unobjectionable. Everyone does not have to philosophize when requested to do so. And the myth-maker as such does indeed have access to reality in a fashion which the philosopher or other scientist as such is obliged to forego. Though it be good and even necessary, given the conditions of human intellection, explicitation is not an unmixed good, for human intellection is not perfect intellection. It might be remarked that whereas Christ explained some parables by making their reference explicit,

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others he explained by still further parables, and still others he let sink in without explanation.

Although myth as such dwells very much in the never-never land of potency between the *is* and the *is not*, and, although this land has its disadvantages and is, in its way, unreal, one must not pretend that it is a territory unknown to man or dangerous to him. It is the territory man has to do with directly; and if he has difficulty in exploring it, this is not because he has or should have nothing to do with it, but because it has limitations which he shares. It is not pure act, pure being.

IV

In terms of its preoccupation with the potential coefficient of reality, the connection of myth with philosophical and theological interests on one side and with literary interests on the other can be seen. One notes immediately that the study of myth rides along with the interest in evolution and development which has marked the philosophical thought of the past two centuries and which is an interest not directly in existence, but in potency and becoming.

Evolution may be considered as referred to the world of being or to the world of knowing. Within the latter world, one notes a close approximation between "myth" in the sense discussed here and the earlier, likewise baffling, expressions "spirit," "idea," or "ethos"—for example, the "spirit" or "idea" or "ethos" of progress, of democracy, of the machine, Newman's "idea" of a university or "idea" of Christianity or the other "ideas" which, in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, he instances as undergoing development. The term "myth" can be applied to all these items to which the earlier terms applied and today is actually so applied to many or most of them.

A too innocent idealism might like to suppose that these "ideas" and the entire Hegelian world with which they connect are matters of pure intellectuality and intellectual formulation, that one is here in a world of complete abstraction and hence of complete formulation—of act in this sense rather than of potency. However, as it comes down to us from the mechanistic and mathematical philosophies through the associationists, the "idea" does not represent a full-fledged abstraction as such at all, but a semiabstraction, a concept with its accompanying phantasm, or perhaps a phantasm regarded as prolific of concepts.

Hence it is that the idea can evolve. Maintaining a special rapport with matter, it can have a history suggesting its close connection with

material beings, whose very essences are partly potency, a developmental history such as an entirely spiritual thing could not have.⁴ It is no accident that the editors of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* have made this sort of "idea," and not the concept, the object of their study.

Discussion of being in terms of "ideas" is discussion which fixes as its ultimate division of being not potency and act, but rather mixtures polarized toward one or the other of these two ultimates. The characteristic result of this procedure, observable in the tradition of Hegelian dialectic, is a series of exercises on the theme of becoming, exercises which can be started from any point whatsoever and protracted in a potentially infinite series, operations in the realm of the still-to-be-realized—legitimate operations, be it said, provided the operator knows what he is operating with and is prepared to pay for startling insights the high, but perhaps not exorbitant, fee of constant intellectual feverishness and overstimulation.

As much as this is the world of Hegel, it is also the world of current speculation in myth, where explanation is always big with promise which it never quite brings to term. It is also the closely adjoining world of Freud, where explanation is oriented—not perversely or arbitrarily, but inevitably—toward sex, which is a set not toward existence, but toward becoming. It is an annoying world, and by definition and intent an incomplete one, but it is not quite a fruitless world.

The "ism" mentality which rules much philosophical thought today finds in this same world its natural habitat. For the "isms" are of a piece with "ideas," putting in their appearance under the same auspices

⁴Hence it is, too, that the notion of "analysis" comes into play in the area around "ideas." St. Thomas Aquinas, considering things not in terms of "ideas," but in terms of concepts, described the origin of first principles as coming about in every case, in metaphysics as well as in the physical sciences, by a kind of induction, an insight into the phantasm—see Peter Hoenen, S.J., "De origine primorum principiorum scientiae," *Gregorianum*, XIV (1933), 153-84; Edmund H. Ziegelmeyer, S.J., "The Discovery of First Principles according to Aristotle," *THE MODERN SCHOOLMAN*, XXII (March, 1945), 132-43. But as the "idea" has gained in ascendancy within the past few hundred years, the tendency has been to explain first principles as produced by "analysis" of one or the other or both of the terms which constitute the principle. The inductive process—a process of emergence out of the material into the intellectual world—has been relatively neglected because the implications of an emergence of the purely intelligible out of the material have been passed over in favor of operations within a "mixed" order—a mélange of the intelligible and the sensible. "Analysis," which, like other things within the world of "ideas," involves a carefully sustained rapport with the material as such, seems to be an operation within such a mélange.

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and becoming discernible only as interest in "ideas" gathered momentum. It is hard to believe that ancient languages, and even modern languages up to recent times, could be so devoid as they are of terms and apparatus for handling "isms." The "isms" put in their appearance late, for they are simply "ideas" considered less in point of their reference to knowledge and more in function of an analogy with real being. "Communism" is a fraction more substantial than the "idea of communist society."

V

The economy of indirection and ultimately of potency which is exploited by myth and determines its relationship with philosophical thought also governs the connections of myth with subjects of current literary interest. Several such subjects were mentioned at the beginning of this article: metaphor, image, symbol, the nature of poetry and of human expression, and the cult of semantics.

The fact that current literary theory has been so dominated by interest in metaphor is highly symptomatic. Metaphor is the rhetorical device of direction par excellence, a kind of apotheosis of indirection as such (as its Greek etymology and the Latin term for the same thing, *translatio*, both attest), the use of a term which has been attached to one concept for another concept. The currency in all quarters of questions turning on metaphor has been both a symptom of the interest in indirection and a spur to develop the interest further.

Development of this interest naturally extended to consideration of the symbol and image, concerning both of which there is so great a bulk of contemporary literature. The symbol and the image are not only, like metaphor, variants on the theme of indirection played by myth; they are also the products of a movement away from abstraction toward a kind of implicitness and hence have an affinity with myth on a second score. Coleridge, whose discussion of the symbol still lives in literary theory and practice, sees the symbol precisely as a flight from abstraction, a relief from the sort of thing encountered in allegory. Allegory is merely "a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language; which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses," whereas a symbol

is characterized by a translucence of the special [the others of the species] in the individual, or of the general [the diverse species of the genus] in the special . . . ; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible, and while it enunciates the whole,

abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative.⁵

In its ability to be representative while escaping after a fashion from being a genuine abstraction, the symbol can be regarded as a kind of universal concept in disguise. With its aid, the myth-maker can achieve a sort of universality by hinting, a universality a little less than explicit, just as he would wish it to be. When literary theory talks symbol, it is very much in the territory frequented by myth.

The relationship between myth and poetry which makes metaphor, image, and symbol standard equipment for both is established by the fact that poetry does not restrict itself to the conceptual ranges of human knowledge as such, but carries on a traffic with the infraconceptual as well. Hence discussion of the nature of poetry itself tends to cover the same sort of ground as discussion of myth.⁶ The resemblances between poetry as such and myth are, indeed, remarkably close; for, as against other types of art such as music, poetry carries on its dealings with the infraconceptual by a kind of indirection. The materials with which it operates, words, are quite different from musical sounds in that they are explicitly vehicles for concepts rather than for the infraconceptual, with which they are concerned only obliquely.

But the interest in metaphor and allied subjects which feeds back and forth between myth and poetry feeds on out even further from the consideration of the nature of poetry into the treatment of discourse as such and into the knotty field of semantics. I. A. Richards and others after him have made their chief point concerning metaphor the fact that it should be regarded not as an "ornament" but as a device natural and inevitable in speech.⁷ And so, indeed, it is. The result of Mr. Richards's insistence here has been to import into the entire field of communication or expression as such the emphases common to myth

⁵ *The Statesman's Manual*, Vol. I of *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York: Harper & Bros., 1884), pp. 437-38. Cf. Wellek and Warren, *op. cit.*, pp. 193, 330, where it is noted that Coleridge's distinction had been made earlier by Goethe. For a typical and discerning contemporary statement on the symbol, see Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), p. 194: "The symbol stands on both levels at the same time, on the level which it describes by suggestion and on the objective, real level, etc."

⁶ Mr. Hyman, in the article already cited (pp. 462, 467), objects, quite understandably, to Richard Chase's performance in the latter's book *Quest for Myth*, which Chase concludes with a chapter interpreting a half-dozen English poems as though they were myths. But Mr. Chase has had predecessors and will have successors. It might be observed that particularly when it is considered in terms of "poetic truth," poetry tends to be confused with myth.

⁷ Wellek and Warren, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

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and poetry—the emphases on indirection and, ultimately, on the potential coefficient in human knowledge and expression. As has been noted earlier here, some sort of indirection can indeed be discovered everywhere if that is what you are after. There are analogies between the indirection of poetry and myth and the limited, finite condition of other forms of human expression. If there has been a tendency in some quarters to make things exciting, but just a little too simple, by expanding analogies into equations, by hinting that even with Basic English the communications system at the level of explicitation is at root an illusion—maybe the Chinese simply *never* understand what we are saying—this sort of heady speculation can perhaps be written off as sheer overenthusiasm.

Interest in the implicitness of language feeds also into most of the views which seek to find salvation for man in linguistic operations or attitudes and which ride the current of literary speculation rather high today. Such would be the views of Alfred Korzybski and his disciples, who propose the semantic solution for personal and cosmic problems, or of the earlier Richards, with his hopes in poetry as the instrument of salvation for man. Views such as these are generated by an awareness of the disorder which often lies not so much in explicit expression as in implicit suppositions. Korzybski proposes to operate rather directly on the suppositions.⁸ Richards had looked for a more indirect approach: good poetry was to do away with the disorder at the infraconceptual level.⁹

VI

For all the wealth of insight it provides and for all its usefulness, it is quite possible for preoccupation with myth to become sterile and degenerate into an elaborate hoax. This it does when it pretends to preclude or to overrule the abstractive disciplines. When it does this, it will not do so explicitly, let alone theoretically, for the reason that there is no explicit mythical theory available *in terms of myth*. When myth precludes or overrules the abstractive disciplines, pretending that it is only the myth as such that can be true and/or ultimate, it will do so by implication, mythically.

This is the way the cult of myth operated in Nazi Germany. It is the way it operates in the Soviet Union, where an aberrant science is

⁸ Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity* (New York: Science Press, 1933), *passim*.

⁹ See Walter J. Ong, S.J., "The Meaning of the 'New Criticism,'" *THE MODERN SCHOOLMAN*, XX (May, 1943), 208-9; Wellek and Warren, *op. cit.*, pp. 147, 201.

quickly brought to heel. It is the way it tends to operate in America when the myth of "Americanism" rather than fact is made the basis of the Ku Klux Klan or something like Paul Blanshard's recent tirades. (It might be noted that the explicitation of its dogma and, even more basically, the fact that it is, and conceives of itself as, a concrete body of persons keep the Catholic Church as a reality essentially independent of any myth of "Catholicism" which might develop.¹⁰ Significantly, the Apostles' Creed does not read, "I believe in Catholicism," but "I believe in . . . the Holy Catholic Church.")

Too complete devotion to myth which decries all explicitation is based on an obsession with a half-truth. It is one thing, however, to know that nothing is absolute, complete act, but God. And it is another thing to hint that no explicitation of expression can be a *participation* in the absolute, that it must be an illusion.

Myth should, to be sure, serve as a kind of corrective to those who want to make too much of explicitation. The foes of myth have been at times guilty of false emphases here. An insidious rationalism has wanted more ultimates than God himself. Under the spell of this rationalism, it is possible to make too much of "eternal truths"—which in fact, only insofar as they are identified with God, are strictly eternal. There is no rack of "eternal principles" alongside God where one can shelve the various sciences and all reality. Certainly, there are explicit principles; and these are true exactly as we know them. But it is not *as we know them* that they are eternal. They are eternal as God knows them. God knows the principle of contradiction in its cause, namely himself. He does not see his existence in terms of such a principle, as we do. He sees the principle in terms of his existence, which is his essence, which is *the* eternal. Before creation, there was God and that was all.

When, in honoring the limitations and enigmatic character of our dealings with reality as this is carried out on the finite plane, the pursuit of myth works against the tendency to make a set of abstractions do for God, it does well. But it does entirely too well when it hints that all explicitation, any explicit participation in the absolute, is an illusion. Insofar as it so hints, the study of myth is a hoax; for,

¹⁰ One might mention that there could be a Christian "myth" in the sense of what is implicit and as yet unformulated in Catholic teaching and practice insofar as this implicit and unformulated complement constitutes a coherent whole apprehended (implicitly) in Catholic teaching and practice. Although, as applied to Christianity, the term is not often given this generous sense and, of course, tends to invite misunderstanding, still the state of current discussion can leave it open to such a sense.

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whatever it may pretend, myth does employ explicit statement and thereby attests to the presence of the explicit in the world. For, just as there is no total human statement, no total explicitness, so *there is no total myth*, no total implicitness.

The total or pure myth would be a story, not without words, but one in which the words were devoid of any explicit meaning—each word, that is, quite undifferentiated from the others. This would be a sort of pure intellectual potency posing as expressive of something—in short, as act. Popularly, it might well be described as universal intellectual balderdash.

It is a lie to pretend that all the myth-maker does is hint, that in any given case *all* can be indirection. The myth operates in a world apprehended in terms of explicitation as well as of myth. The story of Prometheus is not a little influenced by explicitly apprehended truths about fire—for example, that it cooks things—though the influence of these truths is not felt in the same way as it is in scientific statement. Indeed, it is in function of the residue of abstraction of which it can never rid itself that one myth will fall back upon another for “explanation.”

Practically speaking, literary study of myth today is often inclined to succumb to a self-intoxication, hinting that all explicitation is an illusion and that ultimately in myth alone is any meaningful apprehension of reality to be found. In this land of indirection, to steer clear of this position, it is hardly sufficient to avoid stating it explicitly—for here it is to what is *not* stated that one particularly lends ear. To keep clear of the implication—and, indeed, to keep oneself clear of the supposition—it is rather necessary once in a while to state the opposite.

Mythological study is in a peculiar position with regard to anthropology and psychoanalysis. These two disciplines have not only in various ways pursued the study of myth, but, in the popular mind, have become myths themselves. In the land occupied jointly by anthropology and psychoanalysis, it is felt that there sits some court of ultimate appeal, vaguely presided over by the dimly luminescent figures of Sir James George Frazer and Freud, flanked perhaps by Jung and Lévy-Brühl. Before this court of appeal, the popular myth has it, all human activities are somehow to be arraigned—those which have not been already tried and found wanting.

Current exploitation of myth is often, one senses, a response to the drives set up by this myth concerning anthropology and psychoanalysis. To precipitate discussion in terms of myth becomes, for

those under the spell of this myth, largely a means of purchasing intellectual standing. Talking the court's jargon is reassuring. Moreover, the anthropology-psychoanalysis myth is peculiarly charming in the way in which such things are. It is a myth having to do with the very subject of myth itself and thus exhibits the curiously involuted character which myth assumes as one myth is validated by another ad infinitum.

But, as can be seen from the state of affairs here, to succumb to the self-intoxication of myth so as to seek to live by it alone is to give carte blanche to all sorts of drives indiscriminately. For myth, as myth, is blind and uncritical. Only insofar as truths are made explicit can they as such be put to the test. Without some explicitation, the question of truth and falsehood cannot even be broached, let alone settled. False myths cannot be told from true ones; and one is likely to end, as the Nazis and others have done, enslaved by an unreality which ultimately one has to set about enforcing.

When it yields to the self-intoxication and narcissism which constantly threaten it, the study of myth becomes a mere drill in the age-old antics of Gnosticism. Begging the question of truth and falsehood without ever being so gauche as to own it is doing so, such study can be merely an exercise in frustration. The key to the cabala is kept in a box locked with another key kept in another locked box, and so on.

One recalls how the Gnostic Manichees of St. Augustine's day kept putting him off: he would understand better when he had heard the exegeses of the next exegete, who was soon to speak his piece. Augustine finally heard him, as he writes in the *Confessions*, but all he had to add to the endlessness of former explanations was his rhetoric, which, Augustine had to admit, was superb. In the Gnostic chase, it is only the pursuit which intrigues. As the quarry digs in and the hunters delve deeper and deeper without stop—for to potency there is no bottom—one comes to forget after a while that there is a quarry, until, sooner or later, death or something similarly definite intervenes to pull us up with the realization that myth is not all.

For all this, the value of current discussions of myth is not to be made light of, let alone scornfully dismissed. Our knowledge runs off into the depths. Human intellection is spotty. Islands of conceptualized knowledge are joined by dark seas of knowing which, in one way or another, are still laid up in the senses. These seas have their beauty, too. Their content should not be suspect, nor should interest in them

by Walter J. C.

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by Walter J. Ong, S.J.

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be so. And since they are dark, one can certainly be excused for talking about them a little darkly.

But, once aware of the submarine elements in the human pursuit of truth, let us not deceive ourselves with false hopes. Scrutinized by means of the narrow beam of light thrown from a discursive intellect such as man's, however piercing it be, however fast it move, these seas prove endless. The explorer will indeed always find plenty to do here. We need not grudge him a lifetime of work. But if he does not take his bearing occasionally by explicit, recognizable landmarks, he is liable to be lost, and his discoveries with him.

There are false hopes which interest in myth, as well as in many other things, may breed. There is not only the myth of industrialism or the myth of imperialism or the myth of democracy. There is the myth of the myth, too.