

GATEWAYS TO MYTH

And strange at Ecbatan the trees  
Take leaf by leaf the evening strange  
The flooding dark about their knees  
The mountains over Persia change.  
  
And now at Kermanshah the gate  
Dark empty and the withered grass  
And through the twilight now the late  
Few travellers in the westward pass.

-- Archibald MacLeish  
"You, Andrew Marvell"<sup>1</sup>

The process of writing a poem or a book resembles that of constructing a mythology. First the author envisions the work. Second, he translates that vision into symbols. Third, the work comes into being. Then the Golem, Nose, Frankenstein, or Rubashov tries to assume an independent existence. Myth, as we shall see, is the mechanism by which power is converted into values through the use of symbols. Power itself may be a desired goal or value.

The reader then reads the book. He may believe that the author is reporting fact or creating fiction. In either case the structure and psychology of belief is important. What the reader is to the book, the constituent or subject is to the politician. The politician will use different myths to achieve different political,

social, and economic effects in the system. Sometimes his mythmaking is so artful and effective that it is unrecognizable as such. According to the modern system of belief, he then becomes a "political scientist." He will almost always engage in the demythologization of his opponent just as a critic may demythologize a book. Like a master magician or a master writer, the master politician is a consummate illusionist.

You and I will maintain the fiction that we believe what we want to believe, yet we uncritically accept some myths as true and reject others as "false beliefs," myth in the popular sense of the term. There is a certain utility of belief, almost Benthamite in its faith. Witness the confessions of the women whom Margaret Mead interviewed in Samoa. They said they giggled behind the anthropologist's back and made up "coming of age stories" to suit her theories. Why? Because they are a happy people and saw their stories made her happy. Atkinson cites a Wana source: "A lie, a falsehood . . . a deception I am making."<sup>1</sup> Not that there isn't "some truth" to the stories as the director of "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" said, but between truth and legend, "tell the legend" a la John Ford. When E.L. Doctrow was caught out in a little tale spinning with regard to the size of prairie dogs in the 1870's, he told the challenging "little old lady" that prairie dogs were bigger then. The next line is certainly apochryphal: "They were not, Mr. Doctrow, I was on the Great Plains then." But as J. Frank Dobie said about the sizeable Texas mythology of Travis' drawing the line at the Alamo: 'It doesn't matter if he drew the line or not. He should have drawn the line because that's the way Texans should have behaved.' So myth passes well beyond reason and truth which are located with Katmandu in a very uncertain wilderness somewhere west of Lubbock.

Just as we believe in and preserve myths which we enjoy or find useful, we tend to reject, or at least avoid, those which are not. Certain parts of our culture repress the unhappy endings of "Hansel and Gretel," "The Gingerbread Boy," and "Little Red Riding Hood" with responses which mimic post-traumatic shock syndrome. Likewise some historians and politicians deny and repress the facts of the Holocaust. Fear and paranoia, racism and hatred, however, are frequently used to justify the

Occultism and cultism are "stuff and nonsense" until they become "our nonsense," which in the old phrase is to say that "heterodoxy is someone else's doxy." Sometimes beliefs may be distasteful but provide an acceptable escape from seemingly worse realities created by politicians, princes, godfathers, bosses, or behaviorists.

Regardless of truth all myths have a certain utility in maximizing political and social goals. Indeed the appearance of resources may serve in the absence of any resources at all as the politician or culture may bluff a way into immortality or deceive its enemies by creating a different reality, taking advantage of their blind spots and weaknesses. Perhaps you should visualize Bart Maverick in a poker game holding no valuable cards but winning the pot. As we will see political myth is not totally rational or logical. Even if we were able to treat myths objectively, that "objectivity" threatens to elevate itself to the mythological structure that belief can be objectively analysed and that "scientists are objective" (not to mention that students of politics are "scientists.")

Before formally introducing Myth one further caveat is in order. We can describe what myths do, what utilities they have, and how they are formed. We can relate myth to art and politics. However, we cannot define myth exactly even though we know that the components are symbols and beliefs and that they preserve certain values in the community. The more we try to define, the more Protean myth's image. We can tell how myths "impact" upon the power structure almost in the manner that a quantum physicist can trace the path of a particle in the cloud chamber. Yet like the scientist we are not absolutely certain of the nature of the particle. Myths in fact resemble quanta.

Scholars trying to delimit myth resemble Procrustes struggling against Proteus, yet few people have trouble understanding myth or even stating categorically "that's a myth." Most people recognize some mythic manifestations particularly those of another culture. At the end of this book perhaps the reader will be able to declare: "So that was Myth." On the other hand perhaps he will ask: "What was Myth?" Myth then has multiple meanings as well as uses. At times myth equates with a story,

which may be true or false, belief, illusion, fiction, collection of symbols, even an hypothesis or theory. Ideologies are "myth attractors." Myths usually relate to gods or heroes, some of whom may be secular. Myths always provide gateways to the human experience, but the story which opens the gateway in one culture may well be lost in translation in another. Myths are made to be<sup>b-</sup> believed in rather than to be defined.<sup>^</sup>

Easier than defining myth is a description of the uses or functions of myth, politically, morally, and psychologically, which the author has treated in detail in Political Myth and Epic, which examines the roots of political thinking in relationship to epic literature. Myths stabilize and destabilize. They legitimize, legalize, establish dominant social classes, educate, and serve as the basic bonding unit of the community. There are numerous other functions including safety valve mechanisms, culture defense, and the propaganda and illusions used to sustain political power. Myth exists at the interface of power and values and converts one into another. Myth serves as a catalyst in a transition phase. MYTH-POWER-VALUE forms the basic structure of all political systems. Elevated to an esoteric or cultic level, myth becomes a civic religion, the worship of civic heroes or guardians, or the cult of the state itself.

Myths may also serve to pose moral or policy dilemmas and to resolve political conflict. Let us enter a gateway by examining a myth mar<sup>^</sup>que. Trials and lawsuits always mark some sort of social or political breakdown. The issue is murder. Either of two men has killed a third. A's lawyer proves that B is guilty and committed the act with a chair leg. A jury acquits A. B's lawyer proves that A is guilty and committed the act with an axe handle. A second jury acquits B. A cannot be re-tried because of the protection against double jeopardy. Where is Solomon?

Students of the legal process are now invited to ask: "What is to be done?" For example, should a mob take the law into its own hands and lynch both of the accused. One or the other is definitely guilty. Should both be allowed to go free on the grounds that it is better to allow a guilty man to go free than to hang an innocent one -- the perplexing question of the Siamese twins, should Eng suffer for Cheng's acts? Do we need a whole new system of justice, or is this case merely an

aberration. Do all difficult cases pose exceptions: Menendez, Rodney King, O.J. Simpson? Unfortunately there is no Athena to arrive as *dea ex machina* to establish a new Areopagus and resolve the problem. The story poses some difficult legal and moral problems in which the audience is invited to participate, discuss, argue, theorize and tentatively resolve the issues just as in the Zen koans. Many of the best myths perform exactly those functions. They allow the community to participate and the hero to resolve as the storyteller proposes the problems.

The tale of the innocent-guilty murderers is neither widely known or believed in so in one sense it is only a nuclear myth, a myth *manqué*, which may develop as a paradigm or *conte morale*. Like the tale of the Colorado cannibal who over one winter disposed of all the members of the opposing political party and was eventually pardoned by the governor, it is a true story, but truth or falsehood is a matter of secondary curiosity. Even a myth *manqué* provides a gateway.

Now take a legalistic fiction, enter another gateway, a tailor-made or custom designed story, used to stimulate student interest, the "Case of the Speluncean Explorers."<sup>4</sup> The ambassadors from Speluncea (ignore the Diplomatic Immunity Act of 1790) are trapped underground in a mine. Although the tunnel has collapsed, communications remain open. Expert opinion states that a rescue party cannot reach them until they have all starved to death. They engage in a lottery to decide which ambassador is to be sacrificed *pro bono publico*. Have they committed murder? Is it an emergency exception? Have they reverted to a state of nature of a Hobbesian sort? Can fundamental rights including that of self-defense be waived? Have they entered into an illegal contract? How about the Donner Party and the Raft of the Medusa? The permutations of the questions raised are numerous. Some of them are actually relevant to modern law and classical political theory. Again, the story is not quite a myth although its wide repetition by educators might make students believe that the event actually occurred. Parson Weems might make students think that Patrick Henry said: "Give me liberty, or give me death" or that George Washington chopped down the cherry tree. The Speluncean story is not that improbable, indeed no more so than the guilty-innocent murderers. Usually "fictions" are recognizable as such and are separated from both myth and fact, but that separation can break down. Even if Pliny warns

"fama est," rumor spreads and may even generate hysteria. Take the Orson Welles' Martian broadcast as a case in point in which fear and the will to believe transcend rational analysis.

Both the tales of the innocent murderers and the Speluncean explorers serve as gateways to theorizing regarding our legal institutions. Like "modern myths" and "personal myths" they have not quite arrived. We will also see "scientific myths" and "constitutional myths" on the way to attaining respectability in the intellectual pantheon. We are later going to examine some "failed myths" in the areas of heresy and messianism. Our key problem is the examination of political mythology as a source of political theory. Politics is used in the broad, architectonic, Aristotelean sense, rather than with its modern restrictions to institutions and parties. Indeed myth has been the primary tool which all politicians and political theorists have used in creating governments and interpreting reality. It is not too startling to observe that only a few of them have consciously recognized the mythopoetic process, and some of these have sedulously disowned "myth" in favor of logic, reason, science, or objective reality. Some have become the deluded victims of their own illusions. Indeed "mythomania is a very dangerous thing." Others have become the subject of a cult of heroes and hero worship or an intellectual mythology which allows them to be cited on opposite sides of the same question, Machiavelli, for example. Politicians, scientists, and political philosophers dispel old myths and create new ones. They manipulate history and myth for their own purposes. They have "credibility gaps" and "credibility crises." They are martyred to correct or incorrect uses of myth and fall like Stalin and Ivan the Terrible into the paranoid fear of encirclement and conspiracy.

Myths provide multiple gateways to human understanding, some of them esoteric, some of them a bit dangerous especially without guides or guardians. Certainly there are all sorts of atrocity perpetrated in the name of one myth or the other. Sometimes myths are merely entertaining especially in the correct historical perspective. They can even be reduced to a pleasant antiquarianism. Pilgrims are again forewarned.

Next examine a profoundly mythological fragment of a case called "The Man Who Wanted Seven Wives."<sup>5</sup> Even the title seems appropriate to the Arabian 1001 Nights. The mother of a young girl, who has supposedly died after an accidental fall down the stairs, is visited by a ghost who reveals the details of the crime, the husband's guilt, and the location of some of the evidence. There is nothing especially paradigmatic about the tale unless it is to prove that justice will prevail and the dead will return to demand justice, not an uncommon mythological theme, incidentally. Wherever the supernatural intervenes we are rather clearly dealing with myth and, psychic detection aside, must suspend our normal perspectives on reality. The interesting thing about this West Virginia case is that it is reasonably well documented. The husband was convicted. The mother may have created the mythic ghost to achieve the desired result. She may also have based her ghost story on an article which had appeared in the local paper about a spectral manifestation in Australia. Whatever happened some mythmaking was at work in the process, and it does not require too many appearances of revenants to establish belief in the community. Belief operates in mysterious ways. The English murderess Edith Thompson reported in her letters that she had fed crushed light bulbs and poison to her husband. The letters created a sufficiently powerful fantasy to get her hanged although there was no forensic evidence that her husband had ingested crushed light bulbs.

Even stranger is the Waukesha, Illinois, case. In that instance the dead girl allegedly returned in another girl's body. Reason does not quite cover the evidence. Certainly in the area of legal spiritualism there is ample opportunity for knuckle-knocking ectoplasmic fraud, for teenage poltergeists, the Rapps, fraudulent media. Such cases tend to polarize the community into believers and non-believers with both groups working themselves into a fine emotional state. Whatever "facts" there are are distorted or even lost, and the issue is a suspension of belief or disbelief, and we have clearly passed over into the area of mythological controversy.

NOTES:

1. Archibald MacLeish, Collected Poems, 1917-1932 (1952), p. 50.
2. Atkinson, The Art and Politics of Wana Shamanship, p. 60; I have appended a somewhat longer footnote on the problem of the Batak books in relationship to the "truth" of myth.
3. Gilbert M. Cuthbertson, Political Myth and Epic (1975); it frankly does not appear to me that myth needs a long time frame or a large number of believers. Myths of that sort have either become commonplace and are difficult to identify as myths or have become so visible that they are easy to recognize (especially if they belong to political opponents.)
4. Lon L. Fuller, "The Case of the Speluncean Explorers in the Supreme Court of Newearth," reprinted from Harvard Law Review, Vol. 62 #4, February 1949. John O. Calmore, "The Case of the Speluncean Explorers: Contemporary Proceedings, offprint from George Washington Law Review, Vol. 61 #6 (1993).
5. Katie Letcher Lyle, The Man Who Wanted Seven Wives, Chapel Hill (1986). In the Stephen Boorn case information is obtained from a ghostly dream; the information leads to bones, but the murder victim returns in response to a newspaper ad, Cf. Negley K. Teeters with Jack H. Hedblow, Hang by the Neck (1967). Norval Morris in Madness and the Criminal Law (1982) contributes an interesting dream or fugue in the Orwellian style, pp. 88-128, "The Planter's Dream." The case has interesting implications for firmly held beliefs which result from hallucinations in relation to moral responsibility; Cf. also "The Brothel Boy," pp. 6-28; Janet Lewis' The Trial of Søren Qvist (1958) poses other problems as does the case of Martin Guerre. Artificially fabricated "ghosts" have been used in Texas to intimidate minority voters (the ghost of Bailey's Prairie) and to elicit murder confessions. Then we should note, Lillian de la Torre's The Heir of Douglas (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), p. 76 in which Countess Peggy claims that the ghost of Lady Jane had returned to demand justice for her son: "Crying out: 'Justice, justice, justice, for my innocent child!'" To this plea the Duke responded: "Tell me, Margaret . . . did you ever see my sister in her lifetime?" "You know I did not." / "Then . . . how did you know it was my sister?" (p.76) Duchess Peggy, however, was difficult indeed to frustrate once she had set out on her objective. Cf. William Roughead, Twelve Scots Trials, (Edinburgh and London: William Green & Sons, 1913), pp. 85-105, "The Ghost of Sergeant Davis," and note p. 63 on the use of the Bahr-recht. Cf also, William Roughead The Riddle of the Ruthvens and Other Studies, (Edinburgh: W. Green & Son, 1919) pp. 93-117, "The Pack of the Travelling Merchant."