

Myth and Other Languages: A Paedagogic Exercise, with a Preface on Interpretative Theory in the Undergraduate Classroom

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After an initial surge of interest in the contemporary development of myth theory, classicists appear to have entered on an interim period—a “Dark Age”, if you will—of stock-taking, bordering, I would suggest, on disillusionment. There is a sense that a Golden Age has passed, in which classical mythology could be taught in innocent disregard of interpretative theory, by the simple dissemination of the data, or at most with a conservative seasoning of Max Müller, Frazer, Freud, or, if one were really high-stepping, Jung. Unfortunately, this state of affairs is still reflected in the best available textbooks. On the other hand, many have felt that their involvement with more contemporary theoretical developments, especially structuralism, yields little that can be brought readily to the standard undergraduate mythology class, although at the level of scholarly publication American classicists continue to show interest in and influence from such developments.¹ This is due in part to the inherent difficulty of the method and the abstractness of its results; in part to the alarming and still mounting ignorance of the history of philosophy in our students, an ignorance which makes it nearly impossible properly to assess structuralism, much less to understand it; in part to the fact that Greek myth comes to us largely in a sophisticated, literary, self-conscious form, not in the primitive, anonymous, traditional forms for which structuralist methodology appears so far best designed and from which it has yielded its most credible results. It is hard to find the right metaphor for our present plight: should we—in an analogy Lévi-Strauss himself might approve—compare it to a case of post-coital *tristesse*, or more gloomily conclude that the honeymoon is permanently over, and maybe the marriage too?

Let me suggest what I take to be the greatest, and yet too rarely expressed source of suspicion or reserve among classicists when it comes to structuralism, semiotics, and the intellectual movements generated by them. Classical studies, especially at the undergraduate level, have always occupied a place near the center of a liberal arts education best characterized by its humanism. That humanism appears to be undermined by the dissolution of the human subject inherent in structuralism. At both the paedagogic and scholarly level, even those prepared to be open-minded about structuralism (not to speak of the opportunists) tend to concentrate on examples of its clever virtuosity, its pyrotechnics, without adverting to its (at least superficially) anti-humanistic implications, best summed up in these statements of Lévi-Strauss:

¹ See esp. *Arethusa* 10.1 (1977): *Classical Literature and Contemporary Literary Theory*; *Helios* 7.2 (1980): *Contemporary Literary Theory*; *Arethusa* 14.2 (1981): *Texts and Contexts: American Classical Studies in Honor of J.-P. Vernant*; *Arethusa* 16. 1-2 (1983): *Semiotics and Classical Studies*.

Men do not think in myths; myths think in men without their knowing it.²

Sound humanism does not begin with oneself, but puts the world before life, life before man, and respect for others before self-interest.³

Starting from ethnographic experience, I have always aimed at drawing up an inventory of mental patterns, to reduce apparently arbitrary data to some kind of order, and to attain a level at which a kind of necessity becomes apparent, underlying the illusion of liberty. . . . Mythology has no obvious practical functions: . . . it is not directly linked with a different kind of reality, which is endowed with a higher degree of objectivity than its own and whose injunctions it might therefore transmit to minds that seem perfectly free to indulge their creative spontaneity. And so, if it were possible to prove in this instance, too, that the apparent arbitrariness of the mind, its supposed spontaneous flow of inspiration, and its seemingly uncontrolled inventiveness imply the existence of laws operating at a deeper level, we would inevitably be forced to conclude that when the mind is left to commune with itself and no longer has to come to terms with objects, it is in a sense reduced to imitating itself as object; and that since the laws governing its operation are not fundamentally different from those it exhibits in its other functions, it shows itself to be of the nature of a thing among things.⁴

Parenthetically, we should note that along with the dissolution of the subject and of humanism goes a pair of critical terms dear to traditional humanistic literary criticism: *originality* and *creativity*. What, if anything, they can mean in a structuralist and post-structuralist context will require radical re-examination.⁵

If all this is not enough to chill the blood of traditional humanists, there is yet more to be apprehensive about. When all is said and done, Lévi-Strauss might be classified under the heading of "lost world" Rousseauvian romanticism—a tenacious mythic component of liberal academic thought, which views the world of "mythic man" as one in which every frustrated longing of the West is fulfilled and all its ills removed. But the grim logic of his position is carried a step further by Jacques Derrida, who articulates the uncomfortable implications of a form of interpretation which "affirms free-play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology, . . . has dreamed of full

² *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. by John and Doreen Weightman (New York 1969; French orig. *Mythologiques I: Le cru et la cuit*, Paris 1964) 12.

³ *The Origin of Table Manners*, trans. by John and Doreen Weightman (New York 1978; French orig. *Mythologiques III: L'origine des manières de table*, Paris 1968) 508.

⁴ *The Raw and the Cooked* (note 2, above) 10.

⁵ See J. Peradotto, "Originality and Intentionality," in G. Bowersock, W. Burkert, and M. Putnam (edd.), *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies Presented to Bernard M. W. Knox* (Berlin and New York 1979) 3-11.

presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and end of the game.”⁶ What this “free-play” will produce in the vacuum of discredited humanistic values causes even Derrida, the chief architect of deconstructionism, to set himself in the company of those who “turn their eyes away in the face of the as yet unnameable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the non-species, in the formless, mute, infant and terrifying form of monstrosity.”⁷

At the level of undergraduate teaching, can we (or should we) encourage students to transcend the unreflective, largely affective, aesthetic interest that brings them to a myth course, and in its stead to reflect critically on essentially philosophical issues surrounding individuality, freedom, the possibility of a universal logic of the mind—problems now the common domain of philosophy, sociology, psychology, linguistics, and anthropology—and in the process to face an intellectual and moral disorientation for which few people have high tolerance? Or should this be reserved for other kinds of courses, and at higher levels than the run-of-the-mill, massively enrolled myth course? As humanists, do we have the courage to address the question inevitably raised by other people’s myths: how are we to understand the beliefs and actions of others? Is the undergraduate myth class the proper forum for the kind of exciting debate which takes place in a book called *Rationality*, edited by Bryan Wilson—a debate between two camps, one claiming that any society’s general criteria of rationality are culture-dependent, the other claiming that they must be wrong, or at least that we could never know if they are right, indeed that we cannot even conceive what it could be for them to be right? Are our students sophisticated enough or are we sufficiently resourceful paedagogues for a debate in which one group insists that logical relations between propositions depend on social relations between people, while the other argues that any given society’s language must have operable logical rules not all of which can be matters of pure convention, that unless the laws of identity and non-contradiction operate in that language, how could we ever understand that society’s thought, inferences and arguments, or how could it even be credited with the possibility of inferring, arguing or even thinking?

My answer to these questions is a frankly uneasy “yes”, and in what follows I offer a paedagogic paradigm as a rough suggestion of the direction that could be taken. It is a lecture delivered on twenty or so occasions at colleges and universities throughout the country, and I shall have to admit that part of my purpose here is to answer the many requests of colleagues for copies of this text (and to assure some of them that the written word has finally retired the oral performance!). I hasten to caution readers that it is not a piece of original scholarship. Far from it. Its

⁶ “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in R. Macksey and E. Donato (edd.), *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy* (Baltimore 1970) 264-65.

⁷ *Ibid.*

meager claim to originality is the formal arrangement of content derived from a variety of sources. Indeed, it comes close to being a pastiche of quotations, and attempts to give in the teaching arena a faint sense of the free-play mentioned by Derrida, without fully pursuing its vertiginous implications. It was designed with a general undergraduate audience in mind, particularly one which might be currently involved in a myth course, or at least one which might have had some minimal introduction to the study of myth. But I should add that, on the occasions when this piece was delivered, there was substantial attendance by faculty members, who tended for the most part to be appreciative, though it would be less than honest not to admit that there were some who considered it simplistic. One perhaps inevitably courts such a charge when faculty attend lectures designed for undergraduates, especially one that leaves so many questions unanswered.

In the way this mainly propaedeutic lecture mixes cognitive content to be mastered and affective, maieutic, performative stimuli of interest, there is an unabashed preponderance of the latter. It is the business of education to proceed through gradual stages of diminishing credulity, and unless there is genuine interest, especially at the beginning, the process can fail to overcome inertia through early overloading with theoretical abstractness or with subtle discriminations proper to more advanced stages. It is probably safe to say that not all of our students will be intellectually disposed finally to *enjoy* the more complex play of ideas at the cutting edge of this kind of discussion. Not all students ever truly *enjoyed* the traditional metaphysics and epistemology now thought to be threatened by structuralist and post-structuralist movements. But that can surely be no excuse for persisting in the kind of ascetic positivism which refuses to give our students some sense for the methods and models currently being brought to the study of language, myth, and other social codes. What follows rests on the conviction that there is much both to gain and to give, certainly little to lose, in openness to the work of our colleagues in other disciplines.

* * * * *

The study of the language of narrative—of stories, of myth—has in our time taken a radical turn. By the language of stories, I do not mean the words and sentences used to tell stories. I mean to suggest rather that stories—especially the oldest of them, myths—have grammatical rules governing their composition—grammatical rules something like those we use, whether consciously or unconsciously, when we compose sentences. As Walter Otto has said: “Language and myth cannot be separated from each other.” Language, he goes on to say, must be understood as myth, and myth as language.⁸

Myths and stories, in this view, are not then the product of a human imagination endowed with a boundless creative power, but rather the product of combining and re-combining a finite set of story-units, according to combinatorial rules as strict as those of linguistic grammar.

⁸ *Mythos und Welt* (Stuttgart 1962) 279.

Let us start with some concrete examples. Just as in any language there are restrictions on what can be combined with what, so also in any given mythology there are restrictions on what can be transformed into what. We all know the story of Apollo and Daphne—how the god fell in love with an unwilling girl, and how, as he pursued her, she changed into a laurel tree, as in this version of the tale by James Russell Lowell (“Fable for Critics”):

Phoebus, sitting one day in a laurel tree's shade,
 Was reminded of Daphne, of whom it was made,
 For the god being one day too warm in his wooing,
 She took to the tree to escape his pursuing;
 Be the cause what it might, from his offers she shrunk,
 And, Ginevra-like, shut herself up in a trunk;
 And, though 'twas a step into which he had driven her,
 He somehow or other had never forgiven her;
 Her memory he nursed as a kind of a tonic,
 Something bitter to chew when he'd play the Byronic,
 And I can't count the obstinate nymphs that he brought over
 By a strange kind of smile he put on when he thought of her.
 “My case is like Dido's,” he sometimes remarked;
 “When I last saw my love, she was fairly embarked
 In a laurel, as she thought—but (ah, how Fate mocks!)
 She has found it by this time a very bad box;
 Let hunters from me take this saw when they need it,—
 You're not always sure of your game when you've treed it.
 Just conceive such a change taking place in one's mistress!
 What romance would be left?—Who can flatter or kiss trees?
 And, for mercy's sake, how could one keep up a dialogue
 With a dull wooden thing that will live and will die a log,—
 Not to say that the thought would forever intrude
 That you've less chance to win her the more she is wood?
 Ah! It went to my heart, and the memory still grieves,
 To see those loved graces all taking their leaves;
 Those charms beyond speech, so enchanting but now,
 As they left me forever, each making its bough!
 If her tongue *had* a tang sometimes more than was right,
 Her new bark is worse than ten times her old bite.”

I shall ask you in a short while to recall your reaction to the punning in these verses, but for now we are concerned with the narrative line, the story. It has become so imbedded in the texture of Western narrative and art, so congenial to its thought, that we find it difficult to ask what its hidden, true import might in fact be, or to admit that it is no less outlandish or irrational than primitive tales of men changed into alligators or the giant frog who swallows the world. A more recent example still: the novelist, John Barth, who won a National Book Award with a trilogy of mythological tales called *Chimera*, in his earlier *Menelaiad* takes the tale of the Greek hero Menelaus clinging to the shy metamor-

phic sea-god Proteus and turns it into stylistic fun. As in *Odyssey* 4, Menelaus is telling the story to Telemachus and Nestor's son Peisistratus. Menelaus and his men, so his story goes, are disguised in seal skins on the beach, waiting to capture prophetic Proteus among his seals. Note parenthetically how the complex transformations of Proteus are matched by the Protean complexities of Barth's syntax: both equally hard to hold on to.

Come shadeless noon, unless I dreamed it, the sea-cow harem flipped from the deep to snooze on the foreshore, give me a woman anytime. Old Proteus came after, no accounting for tastes, counted them over, counting us in, old age is hard on the eyes too; then he outstretched in the cavemouth, one snore and I jumped him.

"Got you!" I cried. . . My companions, when I hollered grabbed hold too: one snatched his beard, one his hands, one his long white hair; I tackled his legs and held fast. First he changed into a lion, ate the beard-man, what a mess; then snake, bit the hair-chap, who'd nothing to hold onto.

"Neither did the hand-man," observed Peisistratus, sleepless critic, to whom I explained for Telemachus's sake as well that while the erstwhile hand-man, latterly paw-man, had admittedly been vulnerably under both lion and snake and the hair- then mane-man relatively safely on top, the former had escaped the former by reason of the quondam beard-man's fortunate, for the quondam paw-man, interposition; the latter fallen prey to the latter by reason of the latter's unfortunate, for the quondam mane-man, proclivity to strike whatever was before him—which would have been to say, before, the hand-paw-man, but was to say, now, which is to say, then, the beard-mane-man, thanks so to speak to the serpent's windings upon itself.

To clutch the leopard Proteus turned into then, then, were only myself and the unhandled hand-man, paw- once more but shielded now by neither beard- nor mane- and so promptly chomped, what a mess. I'd have got mine too, leopards are flexible, but by the time he'd made lunch of my companions he'd become a boar. . .

Which bristle as he might couldn't tusk his own tail, whereto I clung.

"Not his hindpaws? [said Peisistratus,] I thought you were the foot-paw—"

"Just what I was about to—" [said Telemachus.]

Proteus to lion, feet into hindpaws, I answered. . . Lion into snake, paws into tail. Snake to leopard, tail into tail and hindpaws both; my good luck I went tail to tail.

Once again, the story seems so congenial to our taste in narrative that we are not driven to ask *what it means*. In our justifiable joy at Barth's story-telling we may grow restive with interpretations that roil their placid surface to discover, as the Freudians do, dark irrational drives beneath. Some of us may get annoyed to hear from psychoanalytic critics

that "Little Red Riding Hood" is "a menstruation-copulation drama about women who hate men and sex,"⁹ or that "Jack and the Beanstalk" is "a compensatory fantasy of phallic amplitude" followed by self-divestiture of phallic attributes.¹⁰

But what happens when we encounter a truly *alien* tale, one out of the mainstream of Western narrative traditions, one that does not appear to follow the same rules as the Apollo-Daphne or Proteus stories, one as meaningless to us as an utterance in a foreign language, one like this:¹¹

In the days when diseases were still unknown and human beings were unacquainted with suffering, an adolescent boy obstinately refused to frequent the men's house and remained shut up in the family hut.

Irritated by this behavior, his grandmother came every night while he was asleep and, crouching above her grandson's face, poisoned him by emissions of intestinal gas. The boy heard the noise and smelled the stench, but did not understand where it was coming from. Having become sick, emaciated, and suspicious, he feigned sleep and finally discovered the old woman's trick. He killed her with a sharp-pointed arrow which he plunged so deeply into her anus that the intestines spurted out.

With the help of armadillos he secretly dug a grave in which he buried the body, just where the old woman used to sleep, and covered the newly dug earth with a mat.

That same day the Indians organized an expedition to 'poison' fish and so obtained food for their dinner. The day after the murder the women returned to the fishing ground in order to gather the remaining dead fish. Before leaving, the hero's sister wanted to put her young son in the grandmother's care: the grandmother did not answer her call and for good reason. So she set her child on the branch of a tree and told him to wait there until she came back. The child, having been left alone, changed into an anthill.

The river was full of dead fish, but instead of making several trips back and forth in order to transport them as her companions did, she ate them voraciously. Her stomach started to swell, and she began to feel acute pains.

So she moaned, and as she uttered her moans, diseases were released from her body: all the diseases, with which she infected the village, sowed death among men. This is how diseases originated.

The guilty woman's two brothers decided to kill her with spikes. One cut off her head and threw it into a lake to the east; the other cut off her legs and threw them into a lake to the west. And both drove their spikes into the ground.

That story seems not simply to invite interpretation, but to cry out for it, in a way that the Daphne and Proteus tales do not. In fact, our imme-

⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths* (New York 1951) 235-41.

¹⁰ Philip E. Slater, *The Glory of Hera* (Boston 1968) 316-17.

¹¹ C. Lévi-Strauss (note 2, above) 59-60.

diate unreflective impulse may be simply to proscribe such a story as irrational and obscene, or to censure it as meaningless. That would be to make the same kind of mistake made by Jim, the black runaway slave in *Huck Finn*, when Huck tries to explain the reality of language difference to him:

That's the Frenchman's way of saying it.

Well, it's a blame ridicklous way, en I doan want to hear no more bout it. Dey ain no sense in it.

Looky here, Jim; does a cat talk like we do?

No, a cat doan.

Well does a cow?

No, a cow doan, nuther.

Does a cat talk like a cow, or a cow like a cat?

No, dey doan.

It's natural and right for 'em to talk different from each other, ain't it?

Course.

And ain't it natural and right for a cat and a cow to talk different from us?

Why, mos sholy it is.

Well, then, why ain't it natural and right for a Frenchman to talk different from us? *You answer me that.*

Is a cat a man, Huck?

No.

Well, den, dey ain't no sense in a cat talkin like a man. Is a cow a man? Or is a cow a cat?

No, she ain't either of them.

Well, den, she ain't got no business to talk like either one er the yuther of 'em. Is a Frenchman a man?

Yes.

Well, den! Dad blame it, why doan he *talk* like a man? *You answer me dat!*

Twain's delicious irony here makes clear not only Jim's failure to understand the nature of language difference, but both Jim's and Huck's failure to understand that language is not *natural* (a word Huck uses three times), but *conventional*. Now while we may be sophisticated enough to rise above such naïveté, we may, some of us, find ourselves making Jim's mistake when it comes to modes of discourse other than language, but governed by rules analogous to it—modes of discourse or social interaction we are not in the custom of considering discourse at all: activities like eating, wearing clothes, choosing sexual partners, telling stories, so that we might say, not, like Jim, "Why doan he talk like a man?", but—just as bad—"Why doesn't he eat like a man?" or "Why doesn't he dress like a man?" or "Why doesn't he refrain from incest?" or "Why does he insist on telling such obscene and meaningless stories?". Most of us, I hope, will have risen above even that naïveté only to find ourselves harboring a more refined illusion—the view that,

after all, under all the conventional cultural differences of linguistic, culinary, vestimentary, sexual, narrative codes, there is a common, *natural* view of the physical world. Another name for this lecture might have been "Common Sense and Other Myths." Raised as we are in a society of Aristotelian category-users, and of scientific taxonomies of biological genera and species, the following categories of animals might strike us as queer indeed. (It is taken from a story of Jorge Luis Borges where it is said to be an extract from a certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* ¹².)

Animals are divided into:

- a) those belonging to the Emperor
- b) embalmed ones
- c) tame ones
- d) suckling pigs
- e) mermaids
- f) fabulous ones
- g) stray dogs
- h) those included in the present classification
- i) those which behave like madmen
- j) innumerable ones
- k) those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush
- l) et cetera
- m) those which have just broken a flower vase
- n) those which from a distance look like flies.

This set of categories is disturbing (our laughter is in this case an index of our disturbance), not simply because it represents an organization of animals that differs considerably from the basically Linnaean taxonomy we use, but more profoundly because each of these categories implies a grouping principle which we recognize (whether consciously or unconsciously), and which, when it is subverted by a contradictory grouping principle in another category, leads to constant cognitive disorientation and confusion. For example,¹³ the first classification—"those belonging to the Emperor"—we expect to be followed by either "those that do not" or any category in the form "those that belong to X," such as "those that belong to the Empress." But no such grouping follows. Instead, we get "embalmed ones," which further destroys our expectation of a grouping of animals without respect to their being alive or dead. The category "mermaids" forces us to adjust our expectation that this classification contains only "real" animals. The very next category "fabulous" forces a further adjustment, for if "fabulous ones" are different from "mermaids," then users of this taxonomy consider mermaids real. The real cognitive scandal occurs in the category of "those included in the present classification," which seems like an insane perversion of logical sets that are members of themselves, and which seems to collapse

¹² *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, trans. by L. C. Simms (New York 1966) 108.

¹³ Except for the observations on categories h) and m), what follows is largely inspired by Eric Rabkin's *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton 1976) 5-7.

all the previous categories into itself and to eliminate altogether the rationale behind this or any classification. But even that expectation is mocked, for the list goes on—with a category of animals “which behave like madmen.” By this time, we’re in the mood to re-label this group “those which behave like the inventor of this classification”! Finally, when we reach the group labelled “et cetera,” we expect the list to end—an expectation based not upon our own cultural arrangement of the animal kingdom, or even upon any hypothetical understanding of how the animal kingdom might be viewed by the author of the *Celestial Emporium*, but rather on the very structure of the list itself. When the list continues with two more categories, we are left with all our expectations dashed, even the most logically fundamental of them. Any further disorientation seems so anti-climactic that we may lack enough critical assurance even to ask of category m): how long do animals “which *have just broken a flower vase*” remain in that category?

And yet, this set of categories is a masterpiece: it is all-inclusive; it contains no anomalies; it appears to allow for easy migration from one class to another. But that is what disturbs us. In an instant, say Michel Foucault, who quotes this marvelous piece on page one of his *Les mots et les choses*, in an instant all the familiar landmarks of our thought are shattered by these categories, breaking up as they do “all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and Other.”¹⁴ The Chinese encyclopaedia disturbs us because the orderliness of our existence depends on neat mental categories, and neat mental categories depend upon the repression of the boundary areas between them. In a fascinating article, the anthropologist Edmund Leach makes this point:¹⁵ “If . . . we are only able to perceive our environment as composed of separate things by suppressing our recognition of the non-things which fill the interstices, then of course what is suppressed becomes especially interesting”—the focus of interest and anxiety. It is taboo. And whatever is taboo “is sacred, valuable, important, powerful, dangerous, untouchable, filthy, unmentionable.” Leach proceeds to give us a powerful concrete example:

The exudations of the human body are universally the objects of intense taboo—in particular, feces, urine, semen, menstrual blood, hair clippings, nail parings, body dirt, spittle, mother’s milk¹⁶. . . Such substances are ambiguous in the most fundamental way. The

¹⁴ From the anonymous English translation of *Les mots et les choses* entitled *The Order of Things* (London 1970) xv.

¹⁵ “Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse,” in Pierre Miranda (ed.), *Mythology: Selected Readings* (Middlesex, Eng. and Baltimore 1972) 39-67; orig. publ. in Eric H. Lenneberg (ed.), *New Directions in the Study of Language* (Cambridge 1964) 23-63. See also Leach’s *Culture and Communication* (Cambridge 1976) 61-62.

¹⁶ Leach (note 15, above) notes without explanation or hypothesis the exceptional nature of *tears* in the otherwise “dirty” or “contaminated” category of bodily exudations.

child's first and continuing problem is to determine the initial boundary. 'What am I, as against the world?' 'Where is the edge of me?' In this fundamental sense, feces, urine, semen, and so forth, are both me and not me. So strong is the resulting taboo that, even as an adult addressing an adult audience, I cannot refer to these substances by the monosyllabic words which I used as a child but must mention them only in Latin.¹⁷

And Latin, as we know, is the language of repression!

At the level of language, puns can be considered in the same way—as verbal "dirt," if you will. Recall for a moment your reaction to the proliferation of puns in the Apollo-Daphne poem with which this lecture opened: on the one hand, you were amused—the puns are, after all, funny, the focus of interest. On the other hand, you doubtless felt socially obliged to demonstrate your disdain for them, supporting the conventional view of them as the lowest form of humor. But, we may ask, why are they or should they be considered the lowest form of humor? After all, that has not always been the case. Widespread disdain for the pun dates only from the so-called age of the Enlightenment. Before that, in the language of poetry and religion, it is generally held in the highest esteem. Much of the pun's interest appears to lie in its violation of strict linguistic categories—its ambiguous habitation on the tabooed border area *between* words, alerting us to the arbitrariness of linguistic categories and divisions. Religion and poetry generally thrive on that reminder. Enlightenment rationalism, with its stress on the rigidity of the categories through which we perceive and express the world, does not. It is no coincidence either that the first insane asylums also date from the Enlightenment.¹⁸ Reason, scandalized by madness and by the precariousness of the line that divides it from itself, refuses the dialogue with unreason, segregates, confines, forgets it, to achieve the dubious conviction of its own sanity. But as Dostoevsky would later say in his *Diary of a Writer*, "It is not by confining one's neighbor that one is convinced of one's own sanity." Neither do we for all our efforts sanctify the language of so-called common sense by vilifying the pun.

This admittedly hurried reflection on punning, madness, our taboos, on the uncomfortable interstices between our neat mental categories, prompted by Borges' Chinese encyclopaedia, however playful it is, conveys a profoundly serious truth: the fundamentally conventional, arbitrary, culturally shaped character of our most basic perceptions. That truth is a good propaedeutic to the serious study of myth.

What I am suggesting is based on a large assumption: that all human social behavior—the way we eat, dress, choose sexual partners, worship, paint pictures (and look at them), tell stories, etc., is patterned into codes with the characteristics of language. Now I hope you will begin to see the point of my earlier references to the Huck Finn dialogue, to the *Celestial*

¹⁷ Leach (note 15, above) 49-50.

¹⁸ See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York 1965; French orig. *Histoire de la folie*, Paris 1961); and George Rosen, *Madness and Society: Chapters in the Historical Sociology of Mental Illness* (New York 1968).

Emporium, and more particularly to something which may have struck you as unusual or unclear, because unexplained until now—that is, my references to ways of eating, dressing, telling stories, and so forth as *modes of discourse*, ways of communicating, analogous to language. It is only when you understand what is meant when I speak of these forms of behavior as discourse that you will understand what I should like to say about myth: that it too is a mode of discourse, *but not because it uses language*; that it has a grammar which is not the grammar of the language in which it may be narrated, although it is analogous to linguistic grammar. It also has its *taboos*, but they are not the taboos of other cultural codes; in fact, myth as a story about what happened in the strange and distant past provides a tool for openly inspecting and even for incorporating the otherwise uncomfortable and unspeakable border area, the tabooed interstices. Wherefore, the high incidence of sexual and excremental preoccupations in truly primitive myth, and its systematic expurgation in summaries like *Bulfinch*. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Our subject is discourse and its grammaticality.

“Whether a certain combination of words (of other semantic units) is or is not grammatical is a question that can only be answered by reference to a particular system of rules which either generates it (and thus defines it to be grammatical) or fails to generate it (and thereby defines it to be ungrammatical).” That is how a structural linguist conceives of grammaticality.¹⁹ To be in search of a grammar for the language of myth would mean to be in search of the smallest number of *rules* which generate *acceptable* combinations of whatever in stories are analogous to lexical units in language.²⁰ Let us begin by looking at grammaticality in language. Nonsense occurs when an utterance has neither recognizable lexical units nor grammatical connection, as in pure babble: “Ed’ pélut’, kondó nedóde, ímba ímbá ímbá.” Nonsense? Well, not altogether. A generation or two ago, a similar audience would have heard something in that phrase which probably most of you do not hear—the same rhythm as the first sentence in the Lord’s Prayer.²¹ But

¹⁹ John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge 1971) 153.

²⁰ A notorious problem of narrative analysis is determining the basic units of analysis. In the linguistic code this problem is minimal, for in the analysis of words, phonemic units are relatively easy to define, and at the level of the sentence, the units—words—are still easier to define. So also in the culinary and vestimentary codes, determining the units of analysis—meals, courses, helpings, mouthfuls in the one, and interchangeable units of apparel in the other—is not very difficult. But what are the units of a *story*? Analysis might profitably involve itself with gross units as, for example, in the *Odyssey* the encounter with the Ciconians, the episode of the Lotus-Eaters, the defeat of Polyphemus. But it is clear that each of these larger incidents can be reduced to smaller units until we finally reach the level of the word. See Robert P. Armstrong, “Content Analysis in Folkloristics,” in I. de Sola Pool (ed.), *Trends in Content Analysis* (Urbana 1959) 151-70, reprinted in Miranda (note 15, above); also Claude Bremond, *Logique du récit* (Paris 1973), and Marc Eli Blanchard, *Description: Sign, Self, Desire* (The Hague and New York 1980).

²¹ The line comes from one of six paragraphs in a piece called “Glossolalia” in John Barth’s collection, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York 1969). Each paragraph has the same rhythm as the Lord’s Prayer. “Ed’ pélut’ . . .” comes from the fifth paragraph, which appears to be pure babble (although Barth assures us it is the “Martian” language with which a nineteenth-century glossolalist, Mme. Alice Le Baron, claimed to be inspired!). The other

for present purposes let us treat the phrase as nonsense. However, there are grades of nonsense; add grammaticality without recognizable lexical items or only enough to tease the mind and one gets fascinating utterances that prowl about the perimeter of meaning, testing its outer-limits, as in Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky":

'Twas brillig and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
And mimsy were the borogroves
And the mome raths outgrabe.²²

(Much of primitive myth has the same effect on us: familiar enough to affect us, but with a meaning that continues to elude our grasp, like the effect of music, which, Lévi-Strauss says, forces us irresistibly to supply an absent sense.²³) Now consider recognizable lexical items without grammar: "furiously sleep ideas green colorless." Again, nonsense, but of a different order. Not even grammar as traditionally understood plus recognizable lexical items will always produce meaning: "Colorless, green ideas sleep furiously."²⁴ Grammatical but still nonsense. Modern theoretical linguistics seeks to re-define grammar not simply in terms of combinations of adjectives, nouns, verbs, adverbs, but of *classes* of adjectives, nouns, verbs, adverbs. In such a system the noun "idea" will

paragraphs have to do with the indirection of prophetic and poetic speech, itself the product of suffering and doomed to be misunderstood or taken for nonsense:

Ill fortune, constraint and terror generate guileful art; despair inspires. The laureled clairvoyants tell our doom in riddles.

The reader out of touch with daily recitations of the Lord's Prayer may find vague clues to the rhythmic form at the end of the third paragraph—"So be it," a translation of "Amen"—and at the end of the last paragraph—"The senselesst babble, could we ken it, might disclose a dark message, *or prayer*" (italics added). In despair, perhaps, that few readers were getting the point, Barth added to the 1969 Bantam edition of *Lost in the Funhouse* a less oracular hint. After identifying the six glossolalists, he notes "that their several speeches are metrically identical, each corresponding to what in fact may be the only sound pattern identifiable by anyone who attended American public schools prior to the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Murray v. Baltimore School Board* in 1963."

²² The unfamiliar words here present only a semantic, not a syntactic problem. Any child with a basic knowledge of English grammar could classify them accurately as parts of speech.

²³ *Mythologiques IV: L'homme nu* (Paris 1972) 579.

²⁴ In Douglas K. Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York 1979) 619-23, the author selectively displays the results of a computer program developed by him to generate English sentences "out of the blue." In the early stages the computer produced sentences very much like "Colorless, green ideas sleep furiously," for example:

A male pencil who must laugh clumsily would quack.
Must program not always crunch girl at memory?

With refinement it produced occasional lucidity, but its typical output was something "floating in that curious and provocative nether-world between meaning and no-meaning," for example:

Needless to say, during the upheaval which will have warranted the secrecy, the replies do not separate the Orient. Of course, the countries, ipso facto, are always probing liberty.

be located in a class of nouns capable of modification by a class of adjectives to which "colorless" belongs, but not by the class of adjectives to which "green" belongs, and certainly not by both at the same time.

When we get to what we may call the vestimentary code the same kinds of rules apply: rules restricting possible combinations of "vesti-memes"—if we can give that name to the "lexical" units of this system. It would be ungrammatical to wear a top hat with jeans and sneakers; blacktie on the beach would be as ungrammatical as bikini at the ball (although they might yet *communicate* in the way in which a socially proscribed linguistic utterance *communicates*). Roland Barthes has written a fascinating vestimentary grammar called *Le système de la mode* (Paris 1967).

The culinary code is more fascinating still because, while there is a relatively short limit to the number of clothing units constituting the vestimentary lexicon, relatively little variance from culture to culture, and relatively little psychological trauma experienced in crossing from one to another, cultures differ considerably over the question of what is *food*. It would be less traumatic to wear the loincloth of Lévi-Strauss' South American primitive than to eat the worms he considers a delicacy. Lévi-Strauss describes his first sampling of this food in *Tristes tropiques*:²⁵

Nor should I forget the *koro*, a whitish worm that pullulates in the trunks of certain trees when they begin to rot. The Indians now refuse to admit that they enjoy eating these creatures: such is the effect of the white man's continual teasing. . . All this makes it difficult actually to watch the *koro*-extractors at their work. We spent a considerable time plotting and planning how best to achieve it. One old fever-stricken Indian whom we found, all by himself in an abandoned village, seemed just the man to help us; we put an axe in his hand and tried to push or prod him into action. But to no avail: he feigned not to know what we were after. As a last inducement we told him that we were ourselves longing to taste *koro*. Eventually we got him to a suitable trunk, and with one blow of the axe he cut down to where, deep in the hollow of the tree, a network of canals lay waiting. In each was a fat white creature, not unlike a silk-worm. Now it was up to us; and the Indian looked on impassively while I cut off the head of the worm. The body oozed a whitish substance which I tasted, not without some hesitation. It has the smoothness and consistency of butter and the flavor of coconut-milk.

What *is* food? Not an easy question, says Edmund Leach: "The physical environment of any human society contains a vast range of materials which are both edible and nourishing, but, in most cases, only a small part of this edible environment will actually be classified as potential food. Such classification is a matter of language and culture, not of nature."²⁶ It is normally as unacceptable and unsafe to discuss at table other cultures' eating habits as to describe some particularly gruesome

²⁵ Trans. by John Russell (New York 1963; French orig., Paris 1955) 140.

²⁶ Leach (note 15, above) 44.

case of physical violence, and eating the food of another culture may not only be psychologically traumatic but physically impossible. What is more, the lexical units—“bromemes”²⁷—are more numerous and the grammatical or combinatory rules more complicated than in the vestimentary code. Consider the following meal and the effect even mentioning it, not to say eating it, has on your sensibilities; consider not only the things to be eaten, but also the *order* in which they are eaten:

Bowl of warm blood.²⁷

Salad of crabgrass and oakleaves
topped with a dressing of bird-saliva,
powdered fingernails and lice.

Choice of roast young Collie
or
poached flatworms au gratin.

Boiled sorghum.

Baked iris-root
or
boiled corn-stalk.

Choice of fresh hedge apple (= osage orange)
or
sow milk curds topped with mixed insects.

If that meal strikes you as unthinkable, it is not because its contents are inedible, because they are not. It is not because they are lacking in nutrition, because they are not (insects, for example, are rich sources of protein!). And what is more to our purpose, it is not because it is “ungrammatical,” because it is not. It follows the prescribed rules for starting with soup, hors d’oeuvres, fruit, or fruit juice; provides a salad of greens, an entrée composed of meat or poultry, cereal, and green or root vegetable; and ends with a sweet dessert of fruit, pudding, or ice cream and a “savory” of cheese. The trouble is not in the grammar but in the lexical units or bromemes! Now consider the following meal, composed of recognizable lexical units or bromemes, but still intolerable because ungrammatical:

Chocolate ice cream, Stilton cheese, and marmalade.

Coffee with giblet gravy.

Roast Cantonese duck with cream and sugar.

Salad of endive and strawberries.

Bowl of beef bouillon.

Mashed potatoes and Brussels sprouts.

Add to the ungrammaticality by irregular use of the utensils: spear the

²⁷ Consider the effect of different kinds of blood (animal or human). Consider furthermore the relative acceptability of blood transfusions in our culture compared to the horror associated with *drinking* human blood.

Brussels sprouts with your knife, stir the coffee with your fork, eat the endive with your spoon. Do all this noisily, with mouth wide open, belching at will. So served, such a meal, though it contains units acceptable as food, would for many (perhaps most) people prove physically inedible, because ungrammatical.²⁸ Homer's Cyclops shows his savagery not only by eating unacceptable bromemes, but also by not cooking them first!

What about the sexual code? Had I the time (and the indelicacy), we could go on to this, the most fascinating and most prescriptive of codes,²⁹ and find that it submitted to the same kind of analysis, but I think my point has been made: forms of social behavior other than language have structures analogous to language, have lexicons and grammars that are only beginning to be explored, and messages only beginning to be decoded. Some of the codes are more prescriptive than others, and within each code some violations are considered grave, others not so grave. In their respective codes, for example, the following violations would be generally considered grave: for an American to drink blood (in a secular context, of course); to utter a peculiarly offensive blasphemy (there are, believe it or not, still some unspeakable things even among those who freely use so-called obscenities); to commit a highly publicized act of incest. Whereas, in their respective codes the following violations would be considered less serious: to serve boiled turkey instead of roast turkey on Thanksgiving Day or eat dessert before the main course; to use a singular form of the verb after a plural subject; to fornicate or engage in a homosexual union.

We are now in a position, I trust, to understand without confusion the use of terms like *discourse* and *grammar* when they are applied to myth, in many ways the most recalcitrant of codes to crack. The grammaticality of myth does not lie, as we noted, in the grammaticality of the language in which it may be conveyed. Consider the following phrases, for example: "The infant's lover was a bear. The sun therefore set late. And the snake paid tribute to the hummingbird." All these sentences make perfect sense lexically and grammatically, but *as narrative* they are analogous to the linguistic grouping "furiously sleep ideas green colorless." Not only is there lack of (at least conventional) narrative connection between the discrete states or events, but some of the relations between the personnel strike us as odd. But why should a love-affair between a bear and an infant strike us as any odder than a pursued woman changing into a tree? We are still in no position to give a reasonably adequate answer to that question. But anthropologists and others are hard at work trying to extrapolate narrative grammars out of the fund of each culture's

²⁸ See Michael Halliday, "Categories of the Theory of Grammar," *Word* 17 (1961) 241-91; and Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," *Daedalus* (Winter 1972) 61-81, reprinted in her *Implicit Meanings* (London and Boston 1975) 249-75.

²⁹ The very prescriptiveness of this code makes it a difficult one to deal with adequately and delicately in so short a lecture. Were one to pursue the topic, it would be by discussing the themes raised in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. by J. H. Bell, J. R. von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham (Boston 1969; French orig., Paris 1949, revised 1967); and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York 1978; French orig., Paris 1976).

mythology. One major point they have made is that much of ancient myth is an attempt to solve cultural problems, serious social, moral, political problems, problems which are stated—sometimes clearly and explicitly, sometimes less so, sometimes *not at all*—in the content of the myths themselves. In many ways, trying to discover the deeply embedded problem to which the myth addresses itself, and without which it seems meaningless, is like trying to unearth the true meaning of table manners or clothing fashions. But let me illustrate my point with two stories.

The first concerns a marine biologist who discovered that he could arrest the aging process in porpoises by feeding them a steady diet of seagulls. One day as he was returning to his laboratory with a fresh supply of gulls for his test porpoises, he heard on his car radio a news bulletin about the escape of an aged and quite decrepit lion from the local zoo. The bulletin urged that there was no real cause for alarm since the old lion was very nearly blind, but that its whereabouts should be reported to the police. As the biologist drove up to his laboratory, he caught sight of the old lion, sound asleep in the doorway. And as he tried to step gingerly over the lion, he was arrested by the sheriff. On what charge? "For transporting gulls across a staid lion for immortal porpoises." Pardon the puns again, but that tale, like others of its type, demonstrates in an extreme way the kind of story whose guiding principle is its conclusion. The beginning of this story is really its end; that is to say that every event and each choice of agent is motivated ultimately by the concluding "punch line." This conclusion exists prior to the story; it brings the story into being, and shapes its essence. "The end justifies the means" could not be truer than in the art of story telling. However, in the telling, the tale gives us the illusion, like all tales, of being motivated, like a historical account, in the opposite direction, from beginning to end—event A *causing* event B; event B *causing* event C, and so forth until—lo and behold—the chain has produced its remarkable conclusion. Let us assume that two or three thousand years from now, that story will have survived, but that the law to which it is a punning reference—and the vital fact that gives it all its being—will have been lost to human memory. In that case, the tale will strike the investigator as absolutely pointless—as pointless as the Bororo tale of the boy who kills his grandmother seems to us before analysis.³⁰

³⁰ Obviously, this is a very rough and propaedeutic example, for the Lévi-Straussian structuralist would argue that the problems and their attempted solutions, such as they are, in primitive myth are for the most part unconscious, while the fabrication of our tale of the marine biologist is a highly self-conscious process. That is true. What we are dealing with is often the difference between an easily accessible surface meaning, a matter of serial, temporal, teleological relations and of reduplications, as contrasted with a not so easily accessible "deep structure," a matter of atemporal, logical relations and transformations of such relations among a variety of codes (spatial, anatomical, astronomical, zoological, etc.).

Actually, classroom instructors might wish to use the tale of the marine biologist to illustrate this difference. It appears to be clear at first glance what controls the conscious development of the tale, i.e., the law governing the transport of women across state lines. The choice of animals is not arbitrary, but constrained by phonemic analogy with the words "girl", "purpose", and "line." Is it a mere coincidence, then, that these animals—gull,

Now let us look at a primitive Greek myth—the Athenian account of how their race came into existence.³¹ This strange tale is really an attempt to resolve a serious dilemma arising in many cultures when they try to account for their origins. It is this: experience shows that man is the product of bisexual union; but if a primal pair—parents of us all—came from the same source, then they must inevitably be related as brother and sister, making all their offspring products of an incestuous union. To escape the ghastly and wholly unacceptable implications of that, many cultures have myths of autochthony—mythic versions of man's origin from a single parent, himself born, like a plant, right from the earth itself. But that flies in the face of experience. There seems to be no means of mediating such a difficulty, for it requires having your cake and eating it too: honoring experience without positing a primal incest means being born from one *and* being born from two, a logical contradiction. That is the unstated problem that motivates nearly everything in the Erichthonius story, just as, in a far less serious vein, the law concerning the transport of women across state lines motivates the story of the marine

porpoise, and lion, for whose presence in the tale phonemic analogy seems a complete and necessary explanation—should also constitute analogous spatial and habitational structures?

gull—lion—porpoise
high—middle—low
air—land—sea

And that, as the actions are developed, further structures analogous to these are discernible?

gull—lion—porpoise
dead—aged (dead/alive)—alive
outside the laboratory—on the threshold—inside the laboratory

Is there, furthermore, an unconscious pre-occupation with mediating between life and death, with the fact that the maintenance of life requires killing, a common theme of primitive myth? With occupying or overstepping boundaries? With subverting "normal" or "natural" relations?

normal: birds eat fish
abnormal: fish eat birds

On the surface level, the marine biologist's arrest makes no sense *inside the narrative*; we are distracted from that fact by our delight in the multiple pun generated *by* the story but situated essentially *outside of* its diachronic narrative logic. But a structuralist might argue with good reason, I think, that the tale represents an unsuccessful attempt at mediation, and that the biologist's punishment *makes perfect sense* at the level of "deep structure," if read as the result of violating the border between life and death, or of attempting to achieve immortality by a certain kind of food—themes not uncommon in myth, even at the conscious level of narrative. In fact, there is a close association of sexuality, eating, and the achievement or loss of immortality characteristic of many origin myths (compare Gilgamesh, Adapa, Adam and Eve).

And yet, without question, the anonymous author of the marine biologist's tale would deny any conscious association with this reading. Lévi-Strauss would say: it is the myth thinking in him without his knowing it (see above, note 2).

³¹ For a less cursory form of the following analysis (as well as of the discussion in note 30 above), see J. Peradotto, "Oedipus and Erichthonius: Some Observations on Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Order," *Arethusa* 10.1 (1977) 85-101.

biologist. Observe how the story solves the seemingly insoluble. The inevitably discontinuous and unproductive character of autochthony is manifest in the beginning of the genealogy of the Athenian people. There are three false starts—three autochthonous characters, born successively out of the earth, the series showing progressively diminished reproductivity: the first has three daughters and a son who dies young and without issue;³² the second has three daughters and no sons; the third leaves no issue at all. He is expelled by a fourth autochthonous character, Erichthonius, with whom begins an uninterrupted line of continuity down to “historical” times. What makes this Erichthonius different from his unsuccessful autochthonous predecessors? Listen to the story of his birth—one of the most often repeated in the corpus of Greek myth—as it is told by the mythographer Apollodorus (3.15.6):

Some say that this Erichthonius was a son of Hephaestus and Atthis, daughter of Cranaus, and some that he was a son of Hephaestus and Athena, as follows: Athena came to Hephaestus wishing to have some armor fashioned. Hephaestus, who had been abandoned by Aphrodite, fell into a sudden passion for Athena, and began to pursue her; but she fled. When with a great deal of effort he closed on her (he was lame, remember), he made an attempt at intercourse. But she was chaste and a virgin, and would not submit. He ejaculated on her thigh. In disgust she wiped the semen away with wool and threw it on the ground. She fled away, and as the semen fell into the earth, Erichthonius was born.

What more could one ask for in a contradiction-mediating figure? Talk about having one’s cake and eating it too: Erichthonius not only resolves the old autochthony contradiction by being at one and the same time autochthonous *and* product of a bisexual transaction; he also permits his Athenian heirs to claim that they are offspring of Earth, of Hephaestus, whose cult was so strong among them, and even of Athena, and this without any damage to her virginity! And, as if to make the solution to the problem really air-tight, it has employed a male, Hephaestus, himself born from *one*, that is from Hera unassisted by any male partner, and a female, Athena, herself born from *one*, that is from Zeus unassisted by any female partner—male from unassisted female, female from unassisted male. Under the seeming triviality and mild obscurity of the tale is a logical elegance and a neat symmetry.

That is a relatively simple example. The vast treasury of ancient myth still remains, for the most part, a closed book, awaiting the elaboration of a grammar and a lexicon of story telling that will unlock its mysteries. Until then, I am afraid we are very much in the position of Alice when she read the tale of the Jabberwocky—bewildered, a little defensive, but undaunted by newness:

³² Parenthetically, in such a system daughters are considered unproductive to successful *lineal* continuity; they are rather meant for trade-off to produce and maintain *lateral* continuity with other groups.

'It seems very pretty. . .but it's *rather* hard to understand!' (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) 'Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are! However, *somebody* killed *something*, that's clear at any rate.'

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