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IV. Wissenstransfer: Erfolge und Schranken des Austausches

In Search of the Key to all Mythologies

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In one of the most famous novels of the nineteenth century, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872), the central character Dorothea falls in love with the idea of scholarship, and marries an old bachelor clergyman, Mr Casaubon, whose life's work is an enormous and encyclopedic enterprise entitled *The Key to All Mythologies*. She imagines acting as his amanuensis in his library, reading learned treatises for him, and eventually herself becoming a scholar. The story of the relationship is based on a notorious misalliance of the century, when Mark Pattison, the most learned scholar in England (who was working on his famous biography of Isaac Casaubon, which was finally published in 1875), was in 1861 elected Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, and was therefore, according to the rules, allowed to marry without resigning his fellowship (only professors and heads of colleges at Oxford could be married at this time): in the same year he married a young and beautiful bluestocking aged 21, nearly thirty years his junior. The subsequent disastrous relationship continued in mutual hatred for 23 years, until Pattison finally died; as he lay on his deathbed, he called for books to be piled on his bed: «These are my only friends», were his last words.[1]

In the novel the first doubts about Casaubon's pretensions to scholarship are revealed to his young wife by her husband's estranged relative; his life's work is worthless:

> «[…] it is a pity that it should be thrown away, as so much English scholarship is, for want of knowing what is being done by the rest of the world. If Mr Casaubon read German he would save himself a great deal of trouble.»

> «I do not understand you», said Dorothea, startled and anxious.

> «I merely mean», said Will, in an offhand way, «that the Germans have taken the lead in historical inquiries, and they laugh at results which are got by groping about in the woods with a pocket-compass while they have made good roads. When I was with

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[1] The story of Mark Pattison and his wife later inspired the plots of two other novels, Rhoda BROUGHTON's *Belinda* (1883), and the more sympathetic *Robert Elsmere* (1888) by Mrs Humphry WARD, Pattison's former protegée.

> Mr Casaubon I saw that he deafened himself in that direction: it was almost against his will that he read a Latin treatise written by a German. I was very sorry.»
>
> (George Eliot, *Middlemarch* ch. 20)

George Eliot knew what she was talking about; for she had begun her literary career in 1846 as the anonymous translator of the most notorious of all these German works, David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (originally published in 1835; the English translation is of the fourth edition of 1840).[2] It was this work above all that established the reputation of German scholarship for theological unorthodoxy in the English speaking world. Indeed Strauss himself was *persona non grata* even in Germany; the scandal of his book prevented him from obtaining an academic post in any department of theology in the German university system; and when finally, at the third attempt, in 1839 he was offered a professorship in Zurich, the offer had to be withdrawn after a public outcry, and a referendum of the citizens had voted by forty to one against his appointment. He spent the rest of his life as a private scholar, seeking to defend or modify his views against almost universal criticism.

The basis of Strauss's argument was the attempt to apply scientific principles of the study of mythology to the Gospel narrative: of the three types of myth currently identified according to him, the historical, the philosophical and the poetic, the life of Jesus was to be regarded as a philosophical myth; it could not be interpreted as history, although that did not (he argued) impugn the validity of Christianity as a religion, since the foundation stories of most institutions were myths, which embodied spiritual or philosophical truths within a narrative structure. The important point was to recognise that the study of Christianity was no different from the study of any ancient belief system: all of them began in myth.

The idea that all cultures reflected a universal set of human characteristics which could be reduced to a system was an essential part of the Enlightenment world view, which came in a variety of formulations. Pagan mythology had long been held to provide evidence for a primitive stage in the general history of humanity. For Vico in 1725 humanity had once lived in an age of poetic wisdom: myth was the expression of this early age of man, the dim record of giant *bestioni* who developed into heroes, and then into men: only the Jews were exempted from the historical process by the benefit of divine revelation. There

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[2]   STARK (1997), 119–140. For this period of Marian Evans (George Eliot)'s life see ASHTON (2006).

were many other more or less half-baked universal theories, involving phallus-worship, pan-Egyptianism and the primacy of the worship of Isis.[3] The main characteristics of these theories were the beliefs that myth was a secret language disguising a universal earlier stage of humanity, that poetry was the chief literary vehicle for primitive societies, and that ancient art as well as the written record could be used as evidence in the decipherment of this encoded text of a universal lost past.

It was Christian Gottlob Heyne who first sought to present a more rational view of the role of mythology. Since he wrote in Latin not German he did not need to be translated into English, and he was of course well known in Britain because the University of Göttingen was considered to be a British university, since it belonged to the electors of Hanover who were also kings of England: a famous essay by Thomas Carlyle of 1828 praises «the labours and merits of Heyne» as «better known, and more justly appreciated in England than those of almost any other German, whether scholar, poet or philosopher».[4] It was Heyne who first used the word *mythus* to distinguish a particular type of story. These stories began as concrete representations of the needs of human beings in prehistoric times and in the childhood of mankind; their meanings should be explained by their double origins in the desire to explain natural phenomena or to praise great deeds. Since the childhood of man was universal, in order to understand myth it should be compared across cultures; on the other hand, since both natural environments and historical events differed between nations, each nation would have its own variety of mythical stories. This view therefore encapsulates three disparate tendencies, universalism, comparativism and myth as defining different societies.[5]

Nineteenth century ideas on the continent of Europe oscillated between these different attitudes to myth. The Romantic age was by no means exempt from the drive to explore mythology as the record of a universal past. The most controversial of such theories was that of Friedrich Creuzer in his *Symbolik und Mythologie*, first published in 1819 and given a French edition in 1825–1831, occasionally referred to in English writers but never translated into English. For Creuzer the explanation of Greek myth lay in its origins as a symbolic language used by Indian priests about a universal religion in order to communicate with

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[3] BALTRUSAITIS (1967).
[4] CARLYLE (1828): «The Life of Heyne».
[5] For the importance of Heyne see esp. the excellent account of GRAF (1993). Ch. 1, with bibliography, 204; for the relation between Creuzer and Müller see BLOK (1994), 26–52.

proto-Greek savages, who misunderstood its meaning: myth was grounded in symbolism, and should be explained in these terms. Despite its controversial nature (from Lobeck's *Aglaophamus* [1829] onwards) and the implausible account of the relation between Indian and Greek mythology, Creuzer's attitude to the symbolic connection between visual and literary evidence was to have a long future on the continent, but scarcely affected Britain until it was introduced by Jane Harrison at the beginning of the 20th century.

In Britain the first important development came with the realisation that there was no justification for Vico's theologically prudent separation of pagan from Judaeo-Christian beliefs. Already in 1830 Dean Milman had asserted that the Old Testament was a factual rather than a divinely inspired account of the history of the Jews, which necessarily involved interpreting many episodes as mythic expressions of historical events.[6] But for English readers it was indeed Strauss in George Eliot's translation who broke the barriers between classical myth and Christianity by asserting that the New Testament was a mythical account of the origins of Christianity. Judaism and Christianity no longer held a privileged position within the sphere of myth: comparativism and universalism were all the rage, and involved both pagan and Christian myths, which were regarded as equally founded in religious beliefs.

Two types of opposition to such universalist views of myth emerged, each related to a particular aspect of Heyne's interpretation. Carl Otfried Müller's *History of the Doric Race* was translated in 1830, with a second edition in 1839: the book was much discussed at the time; one of his most controversial claims was developed from the ideas of F. Schlegel that the myths of Dorian Sparta were centred on Apollo, and were fundamentally different from those of the Ionian world: they served to define the nature of Dorian society. Later in 1844 Müller's *Introduction to a Scientific System of Mythology* (*Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftlichen Mythologie*, Göttingen 1825) was also translated, though it does not seem to have had the same impact as the book on the Dorians.[7] For Müller, Greek myths were Greek, and expressions of racial differences between different tribes such as Dorians and Ionians; this was an extreme version of Heyne's and Herder's conceptions of myth as reflecting essential differences

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[6]   MILMAN (1830).
[7]   See MOMIGLIANO (1984), 271–286. On the English translation by John Leitch see KEN-NEDY (2001). My copy of the book has the bookplate of Darwin's friend, Sir John Lubbock (Lord Avebury) 1834–1913, banker, politician, naturalist, anthropologist and famous archaeologist, who coined the words ‹palaeolithic› and ‹neolithic›.

between national or racial groups. «The ascertainment of this *where*, the *localisation* of the mythus» (*Introduction*, 166) and the «*by whom* was the mythus originally formed» (169) are essential steps in understanding its meaning; for each tribe has its own deity (187) and myth is the particular expression of a general religious feeling: «the tendency to individualize, and the endeavour to comprehend the universality of deity, stand at antagonism with each other» (185). This whole emphasis on the origin of myth in the differences between ethnic groups has had a bad press, because of its reflection in arguments about racial superiority; but it has recently come back into favour with the emphasis on ethnicity and ethnic conflict as an explanatory force in Greek history (Jonathan Hall [1997]).

The other main opposition to a universalist approach is contemporary with the translation of Müller's *Introduction*: in the first two volumes of his *History of Greece* published in 1846 George Grote gave a long account of Greek «mythes» (as he called them); in his famous concluding chapter XVI he accepted that mythical thought was created by «the primitive poet or story-teller» in an age «full of religious faith», but denied the possibility of using myth to reconstruct either the history of the distant past or the philosophical ideas of earlier centuries; «Grecian mythes» should be regarded «as understood, felt and interpreted by the Greeks themselves»: «the mythopoetic faculty is *creative*» he insisted;[8] «[mythes] are the creations of the productive minds in the community, deduced from the supposed attributes of the gods and heroes».[9] Despite their traditional nature, the myths we possess are essentially an expression of the world view and the beliefs of the author who preserved them; they are neither more nor less historical than the stories told of the past in Herodotus or Thucydides. This insistence on fragmenting myth by period rather than place, and interpreting myth within a chronological context as evidence for contemporary beliefs rather than ‹semi-historical› traditions, is a pragmatic and ultra-rational approach which has, I think, no parallel on the continent, and was too radical and dismissive to find much following even in England;[10] although again it has

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[8]   GROTE (1846) (new edition London 1888) i. 366 note (a long footnote defending his views against reviewers). For a brief summary of his views see 401–405.

[9]   GROTE (1846), 396; Grote's text and footnotes show a careful study of the theories of Vico, Müller, Creuzer, Lobeck and the brothers Grimm among others.

[10] It was naturally endorsed by Grote's Utilitarian friend Mill in his article «Early Grecian History and Legend» of 1846 (MILL 1867); but it was already being dismissed by MÜLLER in his essay of 1856. Grote's theory was of course erroneously later thought to have been refuted by the discoveries of Schliemann.

close analogies with the modern interpretations by J.-P. Vernant and others of myth as expressions of the contemporary archaic and classical psychology of the Greeks.

Despite these alternatives, universalist theories were reinforced by the development of Indo-European studies, which were popularised in England, not through translation, but by a different form of transmission – migration. The German scholar, Max Müller, came to Britain in 1846 to study the manuscripts in the library of the East India Company, and settled in Oxford, where he became professor of Comparative Philology in 1854, and subsequently (having failed to become Professor of Sanskrit because of his suspected religious unorthodoxy) ended as Professor of Comparative Theology (1868). In a famous essay of 1856 Max Müller combined Sanskrit and Indo-European philology with Indian and Greek mythology to construct a view of mythology as an early form of speculation about natural phenomena:[11]

> But if we cut into it and analyse it, the blood that runs through all the ancient poetry is the same blood; it is the ancient mythical speech. The atmosphere in which the early poetry of the Aryans grew up was mythological, it was impregnated with something that could not be resisted by those who breathed in it.

Max Müller postulated a common stratum to all Indo-European or Aryan religions centered on the worship of a sky-god, Jupiter, Zeus, Diyaus Pita, and a mythology based on the dawn and sunset of the sun-god. In principle this could have led to a distinction between the Greco-Indian religious tradition and the Judeo-Christian tradition as a product of the Semitic language-group, which would have allowed the sort of independence of Christianity from pagan mythology that Vico had postulated. But in fact Max Müller was keen to stress the parallelisms between eastern religions and Christianity, and the very influential 50 volume collection of *Sacred Books of the East* edited by him sought to emphasise the common elements in all religions and all mythologies. It was therefore his influence which in Britain fostered the widely-held belief that all myths and a considerable amount of history were in some sense «nature-myths»: the historian G.B. Grundy describes the history lectures he went to as a student at Oxford in 1888 thus:

> The Minotaur tradition was a solar myth – whatever that might be: the Trojan War was legendary, and so forth. Nearly all this destructive criticism has been proved to

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[11] MÜLLER (1856), 117.

be false; but at that time it was regarded as showing great mental acumen on the part of the critics.[12]

The most important influence on the study of mythology in the second half of the nineteenth century was common to all the human sciences, and had a far greater effect in England than elsewhere. The 18th century view of successive stages in the civilisation of man was held to have been scientifically justified by the ideas of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), which were themselves a biological expression of the Victorian belief in progress. A century before the fantasies of Richard Dawkins became fashionable, every aspect of social theory was contaminated with the «Whig interpretation of history» as a series of developments in social systems, in which each level represented a stage in progress to the present day. Almost all the social theories of the second half of the nineteenth century, from those of Henry Maine (the development of law from contract, 1861), Fustel de Coulanges (the development of the early city from Indo-European family religion, 1864) and E.B. Tylor (modern survivals of primitive beliefs, 1865, 1871) to those of the American L.H. Morgan (1877) on human social progress and Friedrich Engels (1884) on «the origin of the family, private property and the state», make use of the Darwinian scientific model to construct theories of the origin and development of human systems, from primitive religion or custom to modern law and human society.

Alongside the belief in this type of theory ran an acceptance that modern primitive societies were no different from the earliest cultures, and that even within more sophisticated societies there were primitive survivals. Tylor was especially important for his claim that primitive culture could be investigated through its «survivals» in the folklore of modern European peasants or primitive peoples: «there seems no human thought so primitive as to have lost its bearing on our own thought, nor so ancient as to have broken its connection with our own life.»[13] On this view, which represents the ultimate form of historicism, the present was always to be explained by the past, and was always there to explain the past. The folklorist and populariser of fairy-tales, Andrew Lang, went even further in claiming that behind the Aryan religions of sun-worship there lay a common ancestry of all religions in fetichism, which could still be detected in modern folktales.[14]

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[12]   GRUNDY (1946), 66.
[13]   TYLOR (1891), 452.
[14]   LANG (1887).

This search for supportive material in modern survivals was combined with the developmental model in an increasingly wide-ranging and systematic investigation into the origins of human society. Every mythological tradition was studied; classical, Indo-European and northern mythologies from the pseudo-poem of Ossian onwards were combined with more or less fanciful Celtic, Irish, Scottish, Welsh and Romany traditions by writers such as the fantasist George Borrow (1803–1881), to create the new comparative science of mythology; this was to include the materials gathered by folklore collectors and antiquarians, most of whom were homegrown:[15] although they were of course able to look back to the earlier and more international Romantic age of Sir Walter Scott and the Grimm brothers.[16]

This tradition was combined with the material from European folklore. But above all the evidence collected by the explorers, administrators and missionaries of the British Empire from Africa to Polynesia and the north Americas, created a world view of primitive man based on the indigenous peoples of the European empires. This muddy stream flowed into the new science of anthropology to produce the most famous work of all, Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion* (1st edition 1890; 3rd edition in 12 vols. 1915). Here the entire mythological and ritual tradition of the world was systematically categorised as a progression from magic to religion to science, with every item placed in its appropriate stratum as survival or part of a recorded culture. With the simultaneous appearance of Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), which asserted the primacy of ritual over myth, the Myth and Ritual School of biblical and anthropological research now reigned supreme, until it was dethroned between the wars by Malinowski's functionalist theory of culture and emphasis on field research.

Throughout the 19th century in Britain it had not been doubted that there existed a key to all mythologies, which would explain also all rituals and all religions, from magic to fetichism, totemism and tabus, nature worship, the higher polytheisms, monotheisms and finally science. This was the mythology created for the British Empire, for the progress it implied was the gift of that Empire to humanity. For such reasons mythology became a mainstream science

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[15]   DORSON (1968*)* (b)*;* DORSON (1968) (a).

[16]   Their collections of tales were often retold or translated, but the only systematic work to be translated was Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* (GRIMM 1835), which finally appeared towards the end of the century, translated by James S. Stallybrass from the fourth edition of 1875 as *Teutonic Mythology*. GRIMM (1880–1888).

in 19th century Britain, and the subject of immense popular attention: throughout the Victorian age books on the mythology of all periods were produced and sold in enormous quantities. The search for a key to all mythologies was even more alive at the end of century than it had been in the days of Mr Casaubon.

Reflecting on this development of the ‹science› of mythology in Britain throughout the 19th century, we can see the importance of German scholarship for its origins and the variety of channels through which German influence flowed, but nevertheless the subordination of this influence to the needs and attitudes of British culture: it is an excellent case-study in the complexity and limitations of cultural transference (*transferts culturels*) as it is defined by the French scholar Michel Espagne, that is, the manner in which one culture is transferred to another, the modes of transference and the effects on the receiving culture, the uses to which the import is put and the ways in which it is adapted to the needs of its new home. In the view of Michel Espagne there is no such thing as simple transference, appropriation or borrowing: every exchange involves change and adaptation. While normally the donor is not affected by this export, the receiving culture will always adapt and modify the material it accepts, incorporating it into existing ways of thinking.

Beyond that we might also reflect that at no time has the study of mythology been a truly independent science. As Arnaldo Momigliano pointed out in discussing K.O. Müller's *Prolegomena*, Müller was unable satisfactorily to define the notion of myth, and like all other researchers he ignored the problematic origin of the word in Greek. The Greeks regarded ‹myth› as an unstable and essentially negative concept: for them «myth, as a well defined concept, exists only in the context of a controversy conducted by certain poets, historians and above all philosophers against received notions.»[17] Myths are indeed traditional stories with a wide variety of functions; they are significant if at all by virtue of being repeated in a way that suggests they are central to society. Myths may exist: it is less certain that mythology does.

For every theory proposed has been determined not so much by the evidence as by the needs of the contemporary world to validate its own beliefs. The 19th century sought to create a mythology for its own age through the interpretation of ancient mythology: ancient myth re-enacted itself as modern myth. But is our world any different? Does the modern age offer a foundation any more stable for a science of mythology than that of the Victorians? The study of myth

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[17] MOMIGLIANO (1984), 284.

from Freud and Jung to Lévi-Strauss, Derrida and beyond is not a scientific study, but the story of the continuing contemporary search for our own mythic origins. We are condemned to the fate of Mr Casaubon.[18]

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[18] I would especially like to thank my former pupil Michael Konaris, author of an Oxford D. Phil. thesis on the history of Greek religion in the 19th century, for discussing some of these ideas with me.

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