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ARMSTRONG



A SHORT
HISTORY
OF MYTH

'Visionary . . . a crisp and lucid exploration of myth-making'

DAVID MITCHELL



• THE CANONS •

What is

Human beings have a sense of mortality. Archaeologists have unearthed numerous burials containing weapons, tools, and other objects, suggesting that the deceased were treated as a sacrificed animal, all of which is evidence of a future world that was believed to exist. Neanderthals may have had a similar belief in the life that their dead could lead. They were certainly reflecting on their fellow-creatures die, and how other die but, as far as we know, with no further consideration. The evidence shows that when these early humans faced the reality of their mortality, they created a narrative that enabled them to cope with it. The Neanderthals who buried their dead with such care seem to have believed that the material world was not the only one, and that, at a very early date, therefore,

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always been mythmakers. Excavated Neanderthal graves and the bones of a sacrifice suggest some kind of beliefs similar to their own. They told each other stories about a companion now enjoyed. They thought about death in a way that animals do not. Animals watch each other die. If they know, they give the matter some thought. But the Neanderthal graves suggest that early people became conscious of death. They created some sort of counter-argument to come to terms with the fact that they buried their companions. They have imagined that the visible world is not the only reality. From a scientific perspective, it appears that human

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to light and to invent technologies immeasurably more effective. Modern science has enabled us to fly in space and walk on the moon, the only possible in the realm of nature. Science both extends the scope of human science and technology, and it is not about opting out of nature, enabling us to live more comfortably.

The Neanderthal graffiti tells us things about myth. First, the experience of death is inseparable from ritual. Second, the animal bones are accompanied by a sacrifice, inseparable from ritual. Myths are outside a liturgical drama, and are incomprehensible in a natural world. Neanderthal myth was in the grave, at the limit of human experience. Myths are about extremity, beyond our experience. There are no other way or another, have to do what we never seen, and do what we never seen.

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technology that has made us effective. The imagination of us to travel through outer space, feats that were once the realm of myth. Mythology and the scope of human beings. Like mythology, as we shall see, is not about this world, but about the human condition intensely within it.

Myths tell us five important things. First, it is nearly always rooted in the human condition and the fear of extinction. Second, they indicate that the burial was a sacred rite. Mythology is usually a reflection of human life. Many myths make no sense if taken out of the setting that brings them to life, and they are often set in a profane setting. Third, the most powerful myths are some way recalled beside a human life. The most powerful myths are those that force us to go beyond the ordinary moments when we all, in some way, have to go to a place that we have never before.

Myth is about the unknown; initially we have no words. Myth is the heart of a great silence, a story told for its own sake. It tells us how to behave. In the Neanderthal cave, a man sometimes been placed in a position for rebirth: the deceased has been buried himself. Correctly understood, it is the correct spiritual or psychological action, in this world or the next.

Finally, all mythology speaks to us and exists alongside our own world. The human sense supports it. Belief in a higher, more powerful reality, sometimes embodied in gods, is a basic theme of myth. The 'perennial philosophy' of Jung, the mythology, ritual and social practices of all societies before the advent of modernity, and continues to influence modern society today. According to the perennialist, nothing that happens in this world is not what can hear and see here below. It is a doorway to the divine realm, which is not

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enduring than our own.¹⁴ It is only a pale shadow of the original pattern, of which it is still a shadow. It is only by participating in the life of these fragile human beings fulfilled by the gods that we gave explicit shape and form to what we sensed intuitively. They did not behave, not out of idle curiosity. Their tales were entertaining, but they were also women to imitate these patterns and experience divinity themselves.

In our scientific culture, we have developed simplistic notions of the gods. The gods of the 'gods' were rarely depicted as beings with discrete personalities and separate metaphysical existences. In our age, about theology, in the sense of the ancient human experience. People of the world, humans, animals and nature were all up together, subject to the same forces of the same divine substance. There is an ontological gulf between the world of men and women

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And every earthly reality has its archetype, the original of which is simply an imperfect copy. It is this divine life that mortal men have and their potential. The myths are a form to a reality that people have not seen. They told them how the gods lived out of curiosity or because these myths were useful, but to enable men and women to become powerful beings and experi-

ences. In our culture, we often have rather a shallow view of the divine. In the ancient world, the gods were regarded as supernatural personalities, living a totally different kind of existence. Mythology was not about a different world, in the modern sense, but about a different way of life. People thought that gods, like men, were inextricably bound by the same laws, and composed of the same substance. There was initially no sharp distinction between the world of the gods and the world of men. When people spoke of

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by talking about an aspect of the existence of the gods was a storm, a sea, a river, or emotions – love, rage or and momentarily to lift men from the plane of existence so that they could see new eyes.

Myths are designed to help us to understand our human predicament. It tells us our place in the world and why we are here. We all want to know where we came from. In our earliest beginnings, before the dawn of history, we have created myths that are not historical facts but attitudes about our environment, our customs. We also want to know why we are here so we have devised stories that explain our existence – though, as myths envisage immortality, we want to explain those who seem to be transported to other worlds. The gods helped to explain the transcendent. The peren-

nial philosophy expresses
is more to human beings
than meets the eye.

Today the word 'myth' means something that is simply not true. A man of a peccadillo will say that something happened. When we hear of dead men striding out heroically parting to let a fallen comrade pass, their enemies, we dismiss it as a myth and demonstrably untrue. In the nineteenth century, we have developed a scientific view of history; we are concerned with what actually happened. But in the past, people wrote about the past not so much with what an event had meant, but with which, in some sense, had happened. It also happened all the time. We have a chronological view of history, but not such an occurrence, but more of a sense of points beyond history to a deeper existence, helping us to grasp the meaning of random events, and glimmers of light.

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our innate sense that there
and to the material world

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An experience of transcendence is a part of the human experience. It is an experience of ecstasy, when we feel deified, lifted momentarily beyond our ordinary self. It seems that we are living moments when all cylinders are firing, and we are living our humanity. Religion has traditional ways of attaining this experience, but no longer find it in temples, churches, or mosques, they look for it in poetry, rock, dance, drugs, and music, mythology shows us even in the face of death and at the prospect of annihilation. To do that, it has died and our

It is, therefore, a mistaken inferior mode of thought, when human beings have attained. Mythology is not an early form of art. It does not claim that its tales are a novel, an opera or a ballet. It is a game that transfigures the world, and helps us to glimpse

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asking ‘what if?’ – a question that has led to some of our most important discoveries in physics, science and technology. We are prepared to sacrifice our lives for the sake of perhaps, engaged in the same quest. I don’t believe that is common to all cultures. If this world were not all that we know, would it affect our lives – psychologically, emotionally, socially? Would we become more or less? And, if we did find that there was something that would that not show that there was something true in some way, that it was something important about our humanity, would it not prove this rationally?

Human beings are unique in their capacity for play.² Unless they are in conditions of captivity, or in a state of sense of fun when they are in a state of life in the wild. Human beings are able to enjoy playing with difficulties. When children, we go on creating new worlds liberated from the constraints of the world. We conceive and combine new

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a world, mythology was
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of their lives but also remind us of the human mind that would otherwise be forgotten. It was an early form of myth, with gods or heroes descending from the sky, threading through labyrinths, and slaying monsters, brought to light the hidden depths of the psyche, showing people their own interior crises. When Jung first charted the modern quest for meaning, he turned to classical mythology for inspiration and gave the old myths a new life.

There was nothing new about this. In every single, orthodox version of myth, as circumstances change, we need to reinterpret it in order to bring out the meaning. This is the short history of mythology. In every time men and women took their myths and reviewed their mythology in light of new conditions. But we are living in a time when the nature of myth does not change much. The myths, devised in societies very different from our own, still speak to our primal fears and desires.

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