

INTRODUCTION

What can one say about myth in 1993? Whether one evokes the notion as word, as narrative, as ritual or as something else entirely, the currency has been devalued by the mass media well beyond that old wayside halt for tired novelists that was already common parlance in the 1920s. At the very least our understanding of myth in the postmodern world has become proteiform in the extreme. For some, myth remains, tenaciously, fabulous, akin to legend and fairy-story; for others it is essentially historically explanatory; for a few... unalienably sacred. For those in the anthropological tradition of a Malinowski, it may be yet a justification of institutions and rights; for others, of a more Lévi-Straussian persuasion, it is necessarily embedded in narratives and is revitalised above all by the process of transformative and comparative analysis. For others still, whose affinities appear to be primarily sociological, myths remain - possibly dangerously - value laden:

C'est dans le mythe que l'on saisit le mieux, à vif, la collusion des postulations les plus secrètes, les plus virulentes du psychisme individuel et des pressions les plus impératives et les plus troublantes de l'existence sociale.

[It is in myth that one best grasps, in action, the collusion between the most secret and virulent assumptions of the individual psyche and the most urgent and troubling pressures of social existence.]

(Roger Caillois, *Le mythe et l'homme*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972, p. 11)

At the most elementary, most popular, and possibly most intelligent level, myth is merely a simple story which therefore, by virtue of its very simplicity, is endowed with a seemingly inexhaustibly dynamic quality. It has often become a well-known text, both transparent and opaque, but one which is layered with an infinite

virtuality of abstraction... a familiar terrain ever available for re-deployment. Indeed, there are those for whom - Joseph Campbell and his "monomyth" must be one - myth is above all the collective sign in an invertebrate world of a sense of continuity, a fragile clue to the precarious spiritual potentiality of human life. Whether one is considering the stories of Antiquity, others emerged from a newly secularised Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition, or those modern instances born since the Middle Ages, myth has then to be seen as the essential anthological text of the human predicament - our only surviving music of the spheres, however aleatory.

There are those too, of course, for whom the debate is pointless; myth means illusion. Modern man has long become a self-determining individual in a rigorous age of machines and scientific method, and myth has long been relegated to the rubbish-heap of deflated symbol and collapsed signification. And in this, Maurice Friedman tells us in *To Deny Our Nothingness* (New York: Dell, 1967) modern myth is especially vacuous!

The myth-monger asks us to accept a rich sense of everything having significant relation to everything else in place of any immediate insight into any particular event or reality. The modern myth that is created in this way is a confession of the absence of meaning: in the end, it betrays its own nihilism.

(p. 37)

But if affirmation is challenged, interrogation continues... And nowhere more vigorously than with regard to those myths that seem conspicuously to be of our own time, those that have been spawned by our most recent ancestors. The essays which follow explore from a variety of critical perspectives a broad sample of the most powerful and the most pervasive of modern myths. As such, they are, in some fashion, a spectral mirror to the enigma of the human condition in the late twentieth century.